LA BEAUTÉ

EST DANS LA RUE

Atelier Populaire
Poster from Paris '68
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UPSURGE IN MOVEMENTS AROUND THE GLOBE

1) The World Class Struggle: The Geography of Protest

When times are good, and the world-economy is expanding in terms of new surplus-value produced, the class struggle is muted. It never goes away, but as long as there is a low level of unemployment and the real incomes of the lower strata are going up, even if only in small amounts, social compromise is the order of the day.

But when the world-economy stagnates and real unemployment expands considerably, it means that the overall pie is shrinking. The question then becomes who shall bear the burden of the shrinkage—within countries and between countries. The class struggle becomes acute and sooner or later leads to open conflict in the streets. This is what has been happening in the world-system since the 1970s, and most dramatically since 2007. Thus far, the very upper strata (the 1%) have been holding on to their share, indeed increasing it. This means necessarily that the share of the 99% has been going down.

The struggle over allocations revolves primarily around two items in the global budget: taxes (how much, and who) and the safety net of the bulk of the population (expenditures on education, health, and lifetime income guarantees). There is no country in which this struggle has not been taking place. But it breaks out more violently in some countries than in others—because of their location in the world-economy, because of their internal demographics, because of their political history.

An acute class struggle raises the question for everyone of how to handle it politically. The groups in power can repress popular unrest harshly, and many do. Or, if the unrest is too strong for their repressive mechanisms, they

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can try to co-opt the protesters by seeming to join them and limiting real change. Or they do both, trying repression first and co-option if that fails.

The protesters also face a dilemma. The protesters always start as a relatively small courageous group. They need to persuade a much larger (and politically far more timid group) to join them, if they are to impress the groups in power. This is not easy but it can happen. It happened in Egypt at Tahrir Square in 2011. It happened in the Occupy movement in the United States and Canada. It happened in Greece in the last elections. It happened in Chile and the now long-lasting student strikes. And at the moment, it seems to be happening spectacularly in Québec.

But when it happens, then what? There are some protesters who wish to expand initial narrow demands into more far-reaching and fundamental demands to reconstruct the social order. And there are others, there are always others, who are ready to sit down with the groups in power and negotiate some compromise.

When the groups in power repress, they quite often fan the flames of protest. But repression often works. When it doesn’t and groups in power compromise and co-opt, they often are able to pull the plug on the protesters. This is what seems to have happened in Egypt. The recent elections are leading to a second-round runoff between two candidates, neither of whom supported the revolution in Tahrir Square—one the last prime minister of the ousted president Hosni Mubarak, the other a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood whose primary objective is instituting the sharia in Egyptian law and not implementing the demands of the those who were in Tahrir Square. The result is a cruel choice for the about 50% who did not vote in the first round for either of the two with the largest plurality of votes. This unhappy situation resulted from the fact that the pro-Tahrir Square voters split their votes between two candidates of somewhat different backgrounds.

How are we to think of all of this? There seems to be a rapidly and constantly shifting geography of protest. It pops up here and then is either repressed, co-opted, or exhausted. And as soon as that happens, it pops up somewhere else, where it may in turn be either repressed, co-opted, or exhausted. And then it pops up in a third place, as though worldwide it was irrepressible.

It is indeed irrepressible for one simple reason. The world income squeeze is real, and not about to disappear. The structural crisis of the capitalist world-economy is making the standard solutions to economic downturns unworkable, no matter how much our pundits and politicians assure us that a new period of prosperity is on the horizon.

We are living in a chaotic world situation. The fluctuations in everything are large and rapid. This applies as well to social protest. This is what
we are seeing as the geography of protest constantly shifts. Tahrir Square in Cairo yesterday, unauthorized massive marches with pots and pans in Montréal today, somewhere else (probably somewhere surprising) tomorrow.

2) 1968 Redux

We're all living a very special moment. A couple of years from now you'll think of this as the Occupy moment, and it's been a remarkable experience because it's a world experience. It has spread incredibly, and you have to link it in with an awful lot of other things that have been going on the last year, two, three years, across the world. Relatively a lot in North America, Latin America, and Europe, a little in the Arab world, a little but thinner in Asia, pretty much in Africa too. This is obviously the heir of the world-revolution of 1968. Of course, this is forty-odd years later and the world has moved on and the present upsurge is different in some significant ways. So I would like to start by talking a little about what I think 1968 was, and then talk a little bit about what has happened in the world since 1968, and then get us to where we are today and where we may be heading.

First of all, 1968 is a symbolic year. What I am actually talking about went on from about 1966 to about 1970 and it went on everywhere. It was a world-revolution. In those days we talked about three worlds: the First World, which was the pan-European world (western Europe, the United States, Australia and so forth); the Second World, which was the Communist or socialist world, or

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whatever you want to call it; and the Third World, which was Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We talked in those terms and we thought in those terms.

One of the remarkable things about 1968 and the world-revolution is that it occurred in all three of these worlds, which is something that almost no one at the time expected or really understood. Of course, to say that it occurred in all three worlds depends on what you include in the world-revolution of 1968. I think of what went on in western Europe (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and so forth) and of course in the United States. I was personally in the middle of the Columbia uprising in April of 1968. I keep reminding my French friends that this was one month before they started things in Nanterre. So some of us think of the French as having copied the US, and not the other way around. I also think of the cultural revolution in China as part of the world-revolution of 1968. And there was a long list of countries in the Third World which had uprisings at that time. Nearest to home were the very dramatic and tragic events in Mexico.

What was remarkable about the world-revolution of 1968 was that it was a double revolution. It included a double set of demands, almost everywhere. The first was the denunciation of US hegemony in the world-system, with special reference to the fact that we were in the middle of the Vietnam War. It was a denunciation, however, not only of US hegemony but, for virtually everyone who was involved in the world-revolution of 1968, what was considered to be the collusion of the Soviet Union with US hegemony. So, when the Chinese talked about the split in world politics, they pictured it as the US and the Soviet Union on one side, and everybody else on the other side. It is hard to get your mind around that these days.

The second central theme derived from something we have forgotten, which is how strong the antisystemic movements were in the period of 1945 to 1968. They suddenly came to power everywhere, albeit in different forms. What does that mean? A third of the world was the so-called socialist world, in which there were Communist parties in power. These parties had been part of the historic antisystemic movements. If you look at North America, western Europe, and Australasia, what you see is that the Social-Democrats were in power, alternating power to be sure, but dominating the scene. I include New Deal Democrats as Social-Democrats. They didn't use the same name for themselves, but they pursued parallel policies. In the Third World, you had the national liberation movements, who for the most part also came to power in Asia and Africa, and comparable populist movements in Latin America.

It was a remarkable situation in which, out of nowhere, all these movements suddenly achieved this objective of coming to power. What the revolutionaries in 1968 said to all these movements who came to power—the Communist movements, the Social-Democratic movements, the national
liberation movements is: “You promised us that when you came to power, you would transform the world. And you’ve come to power, but you haven’t transformed the world.” So there’s something wrong there.

In sum, there was a double revolt on one side against US hegemony and Soviet collusion, and on the other side against the Old Left. The Old Left was composed of, in our language of today, vertical movements. That is to say, they argued that only one movement was allowed to exist per country and it had to control everything else. If you weren’t part of that, you were counter-revolutionary. The movement was structured from the top down. Whether you were dealing with Social-Democratic, Communist, or national liberation movements, they were vertical movements. The 1968 revolutionaries came and said: The women have been forgotten. The ethnic groups have been forgotten—Black Power, etc. The people with other sexualities, they’ve been forgotten. The Old Left movements had always said, “You have grievances, but just wait until the revolution comes and we’ll solve that problem later.” The 1968 revolutionaries said “There is no later it’s now. We have legitimate demands, as legitimate as the claims of the so-called central actors or subjects of history. We’re subjects of history too.”

These were the themes of 1968. And 1968 blew up very powerfully everywhere. Then it died out or got repressed, and by about the mid-1970s it was to be seen almost nowhere. Nowhere but everywhere, because it transformed the situation in the world. And that’s what’s important to see.
So, what happened? The revolution undid some very important things. One, it undid the singular legitimacy of centrist liberalism. Centrist liberalism had emerged in the nineteenth century as a dominant theme asserting that yes, everything has to change, but slowly, in controlled ways, rationally. The changes had to be led by sophisticated people who knew how to do it correctly. They marginalized both the conservatives and the radicals, making them accept the legitimacy of this centrist path. 1968 exploded that, and it liberated the conservatives, who went back to being real conservatives.

The people you see today as conservatives weren't around in the 1950s. Just take a simple thing: Milton Friedman was an academic joke in the 1950s. No one took him seriously. By the 1980s, he's the legitimating figure of the economics profession. Now that's a real transformation. That's the re-legitimation of genuine conservative thought. And there was as well the re-legitimation of genuine radical thought, which we're experiencing strongly today.

The second was the widespread rejection by those active in the movements of verticalism. It was widely replaced by what we now call horizontalism. Horizontalism is the view that there are multiple kinds of justice movements and these movements should speak to each other, deal with each other, without any one movement on top. They should be legitimating each other, rather than denouncing each other. Such horizontalism is what you see very much now in the Occupy movements.

The movements of 1968 thus transformed not merely the world-system, but the social movements as well. The heirs of the Old Left movements have changed their language, adapting themselves to the new language of the movements of the forgotten peoples. Read any newspaper put out by an Old Left movement in the 1950s, and compare it with that same newspaper in the 1980s or in the 2010s. You will notice a transformation in the language. They discuss the issues insisted upon by these other movements such as gender or race or environment, issues they used to deprecate as secondary, and suddenly they acknowledge that they are indeed legitimate issues of the present.

The next thing that we have to put into this picture is how a world-system works. All systems fluctuate. So does the modern world-system. There are two very important kinds of fluctuations. One has to do with the expansion and contraction/stagnation of the world-economy. Some people call them Kondratieff cycles (I do), and others give it other names. It doesn't matter. The second one is hegemonic cycles in which one state manages to set the rules by which the interstate system functions. Kondratieff cycles have tended to last 50–60 years. Hegemonic cycles are much longer, perhaps 100–150 years.
The expansionary phase of each is made possible by a quasi-monopoly—in one case of leading products, in the other of geopolitical strength. But quasi-monopolies are necessarily self-liquidating. Those who are not the beneficiaries of these quasi-monopolies work very hard to break them, and eventually succeed, leading to the downturn or stagnation. Resuming the upward path is always possible at first, but it always requires some concession to the transformations. The moving equilibriums take the form of a ratchet (two steps up, one step back). Therefore, over time, there are structural trends moving towards asymptotes.

We’ve learned a lot from the people in complexity sciences. All systems—from the universe as a whole, to supersmall subatomic systems, to medium-size historical social systems—have lives. They are not eternal. They come into existence at some point. They have rules which govern their normal lives, and then they begin to move further and further from equilibrium. At a certain point, the system moves too far from equilibrium and it bifurcates, and when it bifurcates the system is in structural crisis, which is a chaotic situation. When a system is in structural crisis the only thing that is certain is that the system can’t survive as a system. Bifurcation means that there are two quite different possible ways of ending the chaos and stabilizing a new system. It is intrinsically impossible to predict which alternative will prevail. Our present world-system of capitalism is in precisely such structural crisis since at least the early 1970s.

What happens when you’re in structural crisis? First of all, structural crises are not crises of a day, or a year, or even a decade. They last fifty, seventy-five years. There is a struggle between groups pushing alternative visions of the future world-system or systems. At some point, the collective “choice” tilts definitively, and one or the other of the two kinds of new system wins out.

The language I use to describe the politics of the struggle between the two visions of the future system is this: I say one of the alternatives is “the spirit of Davos” and the other is “the spirit of Porto Alegre.” I talk of “spirit” since the particular organizations that are emblematic of the two spirits may or may not survive much longer.

What do I mean by that? What is capitalism as a system? It’s really a system that is hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing. Over the 500 years of its existence, the difference between people on top and people on the bottom has grown bigger and bigger in every way. Now, finally, we’re really talking about that. That’s the language of the Occupy movement, when they spoke of the 1% versus the 99%.

Capitalism is not the only way you can construct a system that’s hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing. There are many other ways, and what “the spirit of Davos” is looking for is precisely this other way, since they know that capitalism can’t sustain a system that’s exclusively hierarchical, exploitative, and polarizing.
alternative, and this alternative isn’t necessarily better than capitalism as a system. It might be much worse than what we have now.

What then is “the spirit of Porto Alegre”? It is the search for a world-system that is relatively democratic, and relatively egalitarian. Don’t ask me “What does that exactly look like?” I don’t know what that exactly looks like, and you don’t know what that exactly looks like.

I always say to people, “Look, suppose in the year 1500, or 1450, or thereabouts, you were sitting around in a small group, and you were saying, ‘The feudal system in Europe is in structural crisis, and we’re in the middle of a bifurcation.’” And one possible outcome is a capitalist system. It’s not the only possible outcome, although it’s the one that actually won out. It’s a long story of why it won out, but it doesn’t matter in this analysis. Who, in that small group, in 1450 or 1500, would have been able to describe the institutional structures that have developed over 500 years in a capitalist system? Nobody today can work out the institutional parameters of a future system. All one can do is outline the main thrust that you hope will underlie the future system.

Now the question is, “What do we do?” That is our problem, and that is our issue. I have no simple answers to that. It is a matter of keeping a balance between being too narrow, in terms of who we pull into the movement, and too broad. And that’s a very, very tricky question. Not easy at all. It’s constant work on everybody’s part. And will things happen in the next two years, four years, six years? No, you’ve got another twenty, thirty, forty years of struggle ahead of you before it clicks, before enough momentum shifts in this direction rather than in that direction. You don’t know who’s going to win. But you do know that you affect who’s going to win by your actions, by your reality. But you’ve got to think in the long haul, think thirty or forty years ahead, because that’s what it’s going to take for us to come to “the spirit of Porto Alegre”—the relatively democratic, relatively egalitarian world-system that we’ve never seen before. It will be a new thing in the history of the world.

There’s no model for it. There’s no previous model to learn from. We don’t know what’s going to go right, and how we do it, but we’ve got constantly to do three things: analyze the options, choose our preferences, and develop a winning political strategy. So it’s a triple demand: an intellectual-analytic, a moral judgment, and a political-tactical set of decisions. It’s not easy, but it’s doable, provided that you don’t assume that history is on your side.

The last thing I want to say is this: history is on nobody’s side. There’s nothing in this situation that is inevitable. We may end up, by 2050, in a much better world, or we may end up in a worse world. No one can say now which of the two will win out. It’s up to us. We’ve got to work hard, unceasingly, and with no illusions.