

The Legacy of 1848 and the Dilemmas of Democratic Revolutions¹

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1 MOGGACH, Douglas; BROWNE, Paul Leduc (eds.). **The Social Question and The Democratic Revolution: Marx and the Legacy of 1848**. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2000, pp. 43-46.

The principal legacy of 1848 is the forceful intervention of the working class (and in more general terms: of the popular masses) in shaping historical events, highlighting some insoluble structural deficiencies of the established social order and thereby forcing onto the sociopolitical agenda many unresolved problems for the future.

The Second Republic (1848) in France at first aspires at being a “Social Republic,” by instituting major reforms. Armand Barbes formulates the demand that political reforms should be only means to social reforms. This remains a great dilemma ever since, in that political reforms are often used simply to strengthen the established order, without any serious intent for introducing significant social change. Indeed, often the social reforms which had to be instituted under popular pressure are later undone by conservative or restoratory political acts. For example, in the middle of the revolutionary ferment in Paris, February 25, 1848, sees the proclamation of the “Right to Work” and the establishment of a National Network of Workshops in order to do away with the curse of unemployment. Hardly four months later, however, on June 21, the measure is annulled and the National Network meant to help the unemployed is abolished.

The structural problem of unemployment is more acute today than ever before, despite repeated programmatic efforts to overcome it, as formulated even by some genuine liberal democratic politicians (e.g., Lord Beveridge in his famous book: *Full Employment in a Free Society*). The “Right to Work” seems to be an elusive ideal, but a stubbornly recurring one.

Ironically, although no democratic revolution is ever able to conquer even

the most limited objectives without the most active involvement of the popular masses—this is so not only since 1848 but ever since the working classes assumed a major role during the French Revolution of 17 89 as part of the "Third Estate"—their demands are as a rule frustrated and ignored, and even completely reversed, once they have made the required sacrifices.

The class aspirations of the popular forces participating in democratic revolutions tend to push them beyond the traditional political confines and transform them into *social revolutions*. Even a political figure like Mazzini recognizes this dilemma when he declares that "the war of rulers must be turned into the *war of the people*." As time goes by, more and more radical forces take the historical stage, with their specific demands. Often the most *savage repression* is the answer by those who want to keep matters within well manageable political limits. The defeat and even the liquidation of the most radical forces which try to push their demands into the foreground and thereby extend the limits of the ongoing revolutions is all too frequent in history, from the execution of Babeuf and followers to the repression of the workers' uprising in Vienna in October 1 848 and to the bloodthirsty revenge of the Habsburg Monarchy against the Hungarian revolution in October 1 849. Even Palmerston condemned the Habsburg bloodletting in Hungary by saying that "the Austrians are the most savage beasts among all those who ever raised their false claims to being considered civilized men," although, when in December 1848 some diplomatic help was called for by Kossuth's envoy in London, Laszlo Szalay, Palmerston's Ministry declared that "the British Government has no knowledge of the existence of Hungary except as a part of the Austrian Empire."

The inherent logic of revolutionary upheavals, with their inexorable

tendency to become radicalized—due to the antagonistic class interests with which they are pregnant—is clearly acknowledged by the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels. Subsequent historical events—Paris 1871, Russia 1917, Hungary 1918, the anti-colonial movements and revolutions, the overthrow of Allende, the demise of the Soviet system, etc.—show not only that it is impossible to confine the pressing social problems and contradictions to the sphere of traditional political solutions, but also that capital's power for reasserting its rule is much greater than originally thought.

A crucial but much neglected question that requires serious discussion is that the realization of *substantive democracy* (based, of course, on *substantive equality*) is an *absolute must* for socialists, as painfully demonstrated by the failures of the past. This burden cannot be alleviated by the fact that in political discourse the concept of “democracy” is as a rule used in a *formal/reductive/legalistic* sense, and advocated at times with genuine conviction and frequently as a cynical camouflage of the most exploitative vested interests—as an *end in itself*, always in support of the prevailing social order. A related question: whatever happened to “*equality and fraternity*” in the original threefold determination of the revolutionary objectives, of which only “liberty” remains respectable, and even that more often than not for the purpose of lip-service only? Why is it that the social outcome of democratic political revolutions had to exclude all concern with substantive equality, at first by condemning “equality of outcome” in favour of “equality of opportunity,” and later rejecting even the most watered down notion of the “equality of opportunity”?

One of the most embarrassing issues which is studiously avoided by traditional political discourse concerns the relationship between political

democracy and the successful *imperial powers*, like England, France and the United States. The question becomes even more embarrassing once we notice the “*double book-keeping*” practised by such imperial powers in reconciling the concession of *political democracy at home* with the imposition of the most ruthless measures of *oppression (including military repression)* in countries under their control. Remember in this regard not only the colonial systems run by them, but also the way in which they instituted and supported vicious dictatorships in the postcolonial decades as integral parts of the “free world.”

We must recall in this context also the way in which in 1918 in Hungary Mihaly Karolyi's democratic revolution was sabotaged by the “democratic allied powers,” England, France, and the United States, which in 1919 did not hesitate to back, and impose on the country, a proto-fascist dictator, Admiral Miklós Horthy.

A more up-to-date variant of the same line of policy and pseudo-democratic legitimation is the way human rights concerns are nowadays cynically exploited in the interest of imperial domination, primarily under US hegemony. This has been recently called, with full justification, “human rights imperialism.”

The last point to discuss is the question of *internationalism*. Again, it presents itself in the form of an acute dilemma. On the one hand, the demands are spelled out in terms of particular *national* communities, since they must be directed against the nationally given ruling class and order. On the other hand, the condition of success of the uprisings is some form of international solidarity and help, in that the ruling order can safely count on the support of its fellow

rulers and oppressors in other countries, as the fate of the 1848 revolutions amply demonstrated, as indeed others later on, from 1871 to the present. Although the 1848 upheavals were predominantly national in aspiration, they manifested many common elements. This is why one could witness the international spreading of the uprisings with the speed of a forest fire (February 24, Paris; March 13, Vienna; March 15, Budapest; March 17, Cracow; March 18, Milan; March 21, Lemberg; March 22, Venice; March 25, Zagreb.) Also, the workers' uprising in Vienna in October 1848 was openly expecting help from the victorious Hungarian troops; an international help which, for a variety of reasons, did not materialize, and thus Viennese workers had to suffer defeat against overwhelming military force. The difficult relationship between national aspirations and internationalism has been greatly neglected in Marxist literature, to the great cost of the socialist movement. The original neglect became immeasurably worsened by the assertion of the hegemonic state interests of the Soviet Union under Stalin and his successors. Another dimension of the national question concerns the problematical strategy followed in anticolonial struggles. For they assigned the leading role of liberation to the national bourgeoisie, with the all too well known consequences of failure and the willing submission of the former colonial territories to the iniquitous dependency relations of the postcolonial socioeconomic order, under the hegemony of a handful of dominant "metropolitan" capitalist countries. Understandably, the postcolonial local beneficiaries of an internationally intertwined exploitative system could not offer a serious alternative to the social order in existence, since their continued privileges depended on it. It must be also emphasized that after the collapse of the Soviet system the national question has been conveniently misrepresented as simply the "legacy

of communism,” as if the capitalist countries were immune to such complications. Canada, among other countries, is a living refutation of such misrepresentations.

The insolubility of the national question—just like the other dilemmas and contradictions outlined above—is due to the adversarial/antagonistic structural determination of the capital system, from its smallest productive and distributive “microcosms” to its most comprehensive framework of decision making. It follows, therefore, that a viable solution of these problems is feasible only by radically changing the system itself.