

Guest editorial

Another revolution is possible: Foucault, ethics, and politics

It is time to think about revolution again. After the failures of the Russian revolution signaled by Stalin's defensive slogan, "socialism in one country" (every bit as oxymoronic as "capitalism in one firm"), the 1960s reawakened a sense of revolution from something of a slumber. New Year's eve in Havana, 1959, brought the Cuban revolution and over the next two decades an extraordinary series of events put revolution squarely back on the agenda: successful anticolonial struggles and preemptive declarations of independence in Africa and Asia (prefigured in the Asian subcontinent in 1947), Vietnamese opposition to imperialism, antiwar uprisings in various continents, the feminist revolt, the global crescendo of 1968, working-class rebellion from Santiago to London, antiracist and civil rights movements, the demise of fascism in Spain and Portugal, environmental and queer rebellions, Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, a workers' revolt turned clerical clampdown in Iran.

Whatever the very real successes of these movements, they did not remain revolutionary and with only a few exceptions—foremost Cuba, perhaps—they did not dislodge the integument of capitalist social relations. On the contrary, the response to many of these challenges was the opposite: a forceful, often military, counterrevolution, often with US support, which eventually strengthened local capitalism under the banners of an emergent globalization and neoliberalism, injecting capitalist social relations deeper and deeper into the marrow of daily life. The reprise of capital after the mid-1970s therefore hastened another political retreat from revolution, and by the 1990s those who continued to think in terms of revolution or even speak its possibility seemed archaic, out of touch, hopelessly unrealistic (for an exploration, see Berlant, 1995). The truth today in the so-called advanced industrial world is that our stunted imaginations have largely lost the ability to think what a society other than capitalism—with all its repressive and oppressive aspects, and spanning the gamut of social relations—might look like.

Marx was carefully attuned to the inevitability and power of revolution in larger historical perspective. Revolution is no external implant, he reasoned, but comes from within. Whatever the brutality of capitalism, it is simultaneously the most revolutionary mode of production. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production", reads *The Communist Manifesto*. This is a theme to which much of *Capital* is devoted, but Marx also insists that the bourgeoisie cannot survive without creating an ever larger and more extensive proletariat, its own revolution from within.

Surprisingly perhaps, because in the English-speaking world he is often and much too easily read as an abrupt counterpoint to Marx, Michel Foucault not only gives voice to this same revolutionary impulse but if anything universalizes it beyond Marx's specific, historically bounded, analysis of capitalism. His support for the 1979 Iranian revolution in its earliest months has recently come under sustained attack for his presumed naivete concerning a revolt that was already turning fundamentalist in its religious reaction [see Afary and Anderson (2004; 2005) and the debates that ensued]. But the reproach of Foucault largely elides the most interesting aspect of his argument.

"Revolts belong to history", Foucault (2000) wrote about the Iranian revolution, but "in a certain way they escape from it. The impulse by which a single individual,

a group, a minority, or an entire people says, 'I will no longer obey', and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be something irreducible People do revolt; that is a fact, and that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it." The very title of Foucault's piece, "Useless to revolt?" could hardly be clearer: he was challenging quite forcefully the post-1960s sense of the uselessness of social revolt, and it is not without irony that the controversy surrounding his qualified support for the Iranian revolution came amidst and in the wake of immigrant uprisings in Paris in 2005, spreading to other cities in western Europe. In painting him as a naive dupe, his critics have also, willy nilly, striven to reinstate the sense that revolt is useless.

But Foucault must be defended. He was writing only months after Iranian oil workers sparked the revolution by going on strike and at a time when the hijacking of the revolt by a theocratic elite was far from certain. For him, in the spring of 1979, the "Iranian movement" still defied "that 'law' of revolutions" whereby "the tyranny lurking within them" comes to the surface. Yet the controversy over Foucault's revolutionism has largely sidestepped a central and symptomatic dilemma in Foucault's forceful defense of revolution, and here he may be on less secure ground. Insofar as the penchant for revolt is, as he suggests, universal, this sits very awkwardly with the "subjectivity" of revolution to which he is just as equally attuned. To span the breach between universality and irreducibility on the one side and subjectivity on the other Foucault proposes a "theoretical ethics". This theoretical ethics is opposite to, and for Foucault replaces, any strategic politics; it is explicitly "antistrategic", he says. Potential tyranny lurks not only in revolt, he implies, but equally in a strategic politics. As an intellectual, he feels that his role therefore is to "keep watch, a bit behind politics, over what must unconditionally limit it."

Foucault's breach is philosophically familiar, of course, even if it is not a purely philosophical question. The tension between structured social position and the agential possibility of changing both social structure and social process is common to all with an ambition for social transformation, revolutionary or otherwise. But Foucault's version of this dilemma, juxtaposing universality and inevitability with subjectivity, widens the breach significantly. Marx bridged precisely this breach with a historically specific and situated analysis of capitalism and its discontents and the consequent identification of its grave diggers—the working class. "Theoretical ethics", by contrast, invites a confusion between ethics and politics, even a substitution of the former for the latter, and a consequent demobilization of politics. Foucault obviously did not go so far; rather this is a dilemma he kept struggling with. There can be a politics to ethics, then, and ethics is inevitably bound up with politics, but politics is a lot more than, and sometimes less than, ethics, and an ethics unhinged from politics runs the danger of nestling inside a status quo of which it may yet be superbly critical. This is precisely the dilemma of a social liberalism which properly abhors all of the deleterious effects of capitalism without mobilizing that ethical revulsion toward a practical confrontation with causes. Marx's analytical choice of the working class as the revolutionary class surely involves an anti-exploitation ethics—an ethics built into the analytical category of surplus value—but it equally involves an analytical calculation about which social groups can and which cannot be expected to revolt, and why. It in no way excludes other revolutionary possibilities, nor does it assume a narrow definition of the working class as somehow unchanging, industrially defined, or devoid of gendered, racial, national, or sexual identification. Even less does it suggest a one-dimensional future for a socialist society. Quite the opposite. The dismantling of economic difference should presumably unleash unbridled social difference, long brutally repressed by

poverty, one-dimensional consumerism, socially coerced identities, and what Herbert Marcuse called repressive tolerance.

The antiglobalization and social justice movements are currently morphing in part into anticapitalist movements and have adopted the slogan, “another world is possible”. Another revolution is possible too—as a means to that world. Indeed, with Foucault, we can say that revolution is a future fact: revolts belong to the history of the future as much as the history of the past. Not to anticipate this future fact is as much an act of elaborate self-delusion as the assumption that revolutions are always just round the corner. If, as Gramsci once put it, one can predict the future to the extent that one is practically involved in making it happen, the prudent course would seem to be to diagnose the kind of revolutionary change one thinks necessary and to find a way of making it happen—making it happen under conditions which are, as much as possible, those of our own choosing. This in no way precludes incremental political change, but especially today when a globally connected ruling class has felt empowered to effect its own revolution in the conditions of capitalist social and political economy, not to mention a certain discursive economy—identifiable under the most generalized label, neoliberalism—and when the majority of ethically driven progressive forms have been swept aside, it does suggest that a commitment to incremental change which does not at the same time have an ambitious political eye on the ‘irreducibility’ of revolution, is itself unrealistic.

Revolutions are by definition about discontinuities, and this inevitably provokes fear in those with something to lose: “however bad things are now they could be worse.” But they also embody certain continuities. The road to revolution is not magically erased in the world that follows; rather it brings its traces into that world, warts and all, and so the revolutionary intent has to prefigure in practice, as best it can, the kind of world desired. It is in this sense that Foucault’s “theoretical ethics”—let me broaden this to “social ethics”—is vital for generative political change. But by the same token, our prerevolutionary political imagination, shackled by the prison house of capitalism, cannot be allowed to straightjacket “the poetry of the future”, as Marx once put it. To take just one example, this is the lesson of the extraordinary if unpredictable political and cultural creativity that followed the Russian revolution, short-lived as that creativity was before snuffed out.

But, however vital, an ethics is insufficient to a revolutionary politics. It does, indeed, as Foucault suggests, remain “a bit behind politics” (indicating, it is worth pointing out, that for Foucault there was no fuzzy confusion of ethics with politics). Foucault’s antistrategic impulse may well have represented a recoil against Stalinism, more than a trace of which still remained in a ‘reformed’ postwar French communist party, but that is far from the only political alternative to capitalism. A politics without strategy is inconceivable and a ‘theoretical ethics’ that holds itself separate from politics to preserve a well-reasoned ‘antistrategic’ impulse is in the end destined to be spectator more than Gramscian participant in world-historic political transformation.

Neil Smith

References

- Afary J, Anderson K, 2004, “The seductions of Islamism” *New Politics* 10(1) 113–122
- Afary J, Anderson K, 2005 *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL)
- Berlant L, 1995, “68, or the revolution of little queers”, in *Feminism Beside Itself* Ed. D Elam, R Wiegman (Routledge, New York) pp 297–311
- Foucault M, 2000, “Useless to revolt?”, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 3: Power* Ed. J D Faubion (New Press, New York) pp 449–453