

132 - why not democracy?

REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

JAMES AND GRACE LEE BOGGS



MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

1

REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION

There is a dangerous and terrifying gap between the emotions with which most people respond to the critical state of affairs in this country and their understanding of how our struggles relate to the continuing struggle of humankind down through history.

All too often people believe that once an issue has been identified, the next step is action and the more militant the action the better. In their haste to find a quick and simple solution, militant activists usually disregard the evolution of man/womankind. All they can see is man/woman as he/she is now. They fail to recognize that what we are today is the result of a long and continuing process of evolution, and that this process of evolution is still going on and will go on as long as there are men and women on this planet. All too often, militants fail to understand the links between the struggles that we are carrying on today in this country and the struggles that other men and women have carried on in the past and are still carrying on in other parts of the world. They do not stop to reflect on how man/womankind's revolutions have been an essential part of their evolution, and their evolution an essential part of their revolutions.

Man/woman did not suddenly appear on this earth planet a few years ago nor did man/woman begin with Adam and Eve as the Bible tells us. Long before there were any gods, there were the men and women whose imaginations invented and created the gods. Nature and the universe existed before human beings, but the world in which we live has been created by the ideas, the work and the deeds of human beings. Therefore it can be changed by the ideas, the work and the deeds of human beings.

Humanity has been in the process of developing for the last twenty million years, ever since some creatures, looking more like apes than people, began using sticks and stones as tools. *Homo sapiens*, or the beings who have left behind evidences of their ability to reflect, did not come into being until approximately fifty thousand years ago. Thinking about themselves, reflecting upon their past, their present and their future, is the unique ability which separates human beings from all other living creatures. It is the ability which enables them to learn from the past and project into the future. Animals only react and spend their entire existence living by their instincts. Man/womankind, on the other hand, has been continuously evolving through the thoughts and actions of living men and women.

In every period, when most men and women were still doing what they had been doing all along and when this was creating more problems than it was solving, a few, a very few, individuals began to reflect, i.e., to have second thoughts. They began to examine what man/woman was doing and to wonder how we might behave differently in order to create a better life for humankind. In this process of creative thinking, or of thinking differently from the norm or average, a few individuals have always pioneered for the great majority.

Humanity as a developing species has undergone and surmounted many crises in the past. We are in a critical period today, and if we are going to get to the root of our crisis, some individuals will have to do some serious and creative thinking. Some individuals, some people, have to take the responsibility.

Once the new ideas have been developed, some individuals, some people will have to put them into practice and from their practice, enrich or correct the new ideas. Putting ideas into practice is always necessary; it is always a concrete and difficult problem. But for man/woman to behave in a new and different way, the thoughts, the

new ideas, have to come first—whether it is a new way of making things or a new way of people living together.

This concept of the relation between revolutionary ideas and revolutionary practice is very different from that which is held by most militants in the United States, and especially young militants. In their impatience they see the relation between theory and practice as an antagonistic one. What they call "practice" is activism: "Enough of this talk, let's do something even if it's wrong." They have no concept of the flow from revolutionary theory to revolutionary practice and then back again to enriched theory through the evaluation of systematic practice.

New ideas come out of reflection upon past experiences. They do not come from out of the sky. Nor do they come from just reacting to what someone or the system does to you. The process of reflection is as important as the experiences themselves because in the reflection lies the possibility of something new and original.

As human beings concerned with revolutionary social change, we must have a philosophy of revolution. That is to say, we must have some very fundamental ideas about what a revolution means to the continuing advance of humanity.

To get ourselves into the proper setting for thinking about what a revolution is, we have to begin with some fundamental questions. Once you begin to think, that is, once you pause in your many activities, which to one degree or another have been only reactions, and start to use your mind, then it is crucial which questions you ask.

What is a revolution? How do you project the notion of revolution? Today, as we look or listen to the mass media, we are being given its concept of revolution. Its concept is inevitably ours as well until we have examined and repudiated it.

There is an urgent necessity today to combat the widespread tendency, propagated by the mass media, to think of revolution in terms of a single tactical event or episode, as a D-Day confrontation or shoot-out between the violence of the state and the violence of the oppressed. The idea which most of us have of revolution, encouraged by the FBI as well, is that of barricades, a Wild West shoot-out, an assault upon a police headquarters or even hijacking an airplane or robbing a bank. Most people, including most militants, think of a revolution in terms of "Instant Revolution" rather than in terms of a protracted struggle. Revolution to them is one confrontation after

another. They have not stopped to wonder about the advance in human evolution which is the only justification for a revolution and which can only be achieved when the great masses of the people at the bottom of a society make a tremendous leap forward in their own humanity.

To understand what a revolution *is*, we must be very clear about what a revolution *is not*. The first step in defining anything is differentiation. A revolution is not the same as a rebellion or an insurrection or a revolt or a coup d'état.

A *rebellion* is an attack upon existing authority by members of an oppressed group with no intention on the part of the rebels to take state power. It is usually spontaneous.

An *insurrection* is a concentrated attack upon existing authority by members of an oppressed group, usually with the intention of taking power, if only temporarily, during the course of revolutionary struggles or at the culmination of a process of revolutionary struggle.

A *revolt* is an organized attempt to seize power, usually by a section of the armed forces, without prior organization of the masses in struggle and without any clear set of social objectives.

A *coup d'état* is the successful overthrow of existing authority in one audacious stroke, usually by a section of the armed forces. Another name for a coup d'état is a putsch.

All these are single events, limited in time as well as in target and objective. Each has distinct characteristics although the line between them is not always rigid, and a particular event may take on the characteristics of more than one of these categories. The first two, rebellion and insurrection, may take place in the course of revolutionary struggle, but they do not constitute revolution.

Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution, but it is not revolution. It is an important stage because it represents the "standing up," the assertion of their humanity on the part of the oppressed. Rebellions inform both the oppressed and everybody else that a situation has become intolerable. They establish a form of communication among the oppressed themselves and at the same time open the eyes and ears of people who have been blind and deaf to the fate of their fellow citizens. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question the legitimacy and the supposed permanence of existing institutions. They shake up old values so that relations between individuals and

between groups within the society are unlikely ever to be the same again. The inertia of the society has been interrupted.

Only by understanding what a rebellion accomplishes can we see its limitations. A rebellion disrupts the society, but it does not provide what is necessary to establish a new social order.

In a rebellion the oppressed are reacting to what has been done to them. Therefore rebellions are issue-oriented. They tend to be negative, to denounce and expose the enemy without providing a positive vision of a new future. They also tend to be limited to a particular locality, or to a particular group—workers, blacks, women, chicanos. For all these reasons the time span of a rebellion tends to be limited—usually to a few days or a few weeks.

When those in rebellion talk about power, they are employing the rhetoric of revolution without the substance. In fact, they are simply protesting their condition. They see themselves and call on others to see them as victims and the other side as villains. They do not yet see themselves as responsible for reorganizing the society, which is what revolutionary social forces must do in a revolutionary period. Hence a rebellion begins with the feeling by the oppressed that "we can change the way things are," but it usually ends up by saying "they ought to do this and they ought to do that." So that while a rebellion generally begins with the rebels believing in their right to determine their own destiny, it usually ends up with the rebels feeling that their destiny is, in fact, determined by others.

It is very hard for those who have been oppressed to get beyond the stage of asking others to do things *for* them. It is particularly difficult in the United States. The Welfare State and the abundance created by exploitation of other countries and by advanced technology have made possible a vast apparatus of social workers and welfare workers whose economic well-being depends on expanding the agencies for helping the oppressed. This country has also had the wealth to create a vast network of programs by which the oppressed are pacified and the most militant leaders are rewarded with high-paying jobs in community projects.

It is hard to go beyond rebellion to revolution in this country because of the widespread belief that revolutions can be made as simply and instantly as one makes coffee. Therefore the tendency is to engage in acts of adventurism or confrontation which the rebels believe will bring down the system quickly. It is always much easier

for the oppressed to undertake an adventurist act on impulse than to undertake a protracted revolutionary struggle. A protracted revolutionary struggle requires that the oppressed masses acquire what they never start out with—confidence in their ability to win a revolution. Without that confidence, the tendency of many militants is toward martyrdom, in the hope that their death may at least become an inspiration to others.

In a period of sustained rebellion such as the present, the oppressed begin to feel the need for some philosophy, some general body of ideas to bind them together and enable them to make an appeal to others. Since it is not easy to create a philosophy of revolution, their first efforts in this direction are usually very idealistic, romantic or escapist.

In the United States today most militants refer constantly to "the struggle," implying that they are engaged in a revolutionary struggle whose importance is so obvious that only a reactionary would raise questions. Most of them think of revolution as a "Day of Reckoning," when those who have been exploited or oppressed (the "good guys") wipe out those who have exploited them (the idle rich, the capitalists, the "bad guys") in a sudden angry upheaval. By some miracle, these angry masses are assumed to have been imbued with all the moral and political virtues and qualities necessary to create a new society. This metaphysical concept of revolution as miracle is closely linked with the tendency to think of revolution as a spontaneous, unpredictable act of god or of other forces outside human control—something like a forest fire or earthquake.

This scenario has not only been encouraged by the mass media but by romantic historians who spend their lives in studies of what has already happened rather than in the creative and arduous activity of making or leading a revolution. Few of them have even stopped to reflect on the fact that revolutionary thinking is itself only two hundred years old. Oppression and rebellion against oppression have been an integral part of human history. But only in the last two hundred years have people believed that the oppressed could not only rise against their oppressors but go on to create a new, more advanced society.

Revolutionary thinking begins with a series of illuminations. It is not just plodding along according to a list of axioms. Nor is it leaping from peak to peak. Revolutionary thinking has as its purpose to

discover where man/woman should be tomorrow so that we can struggle systematically and programmatically to arouse the great masses of the people to want to go there.

A revolution is not just for the purpose of correcting past injustices. A revolution involves a projection of man/woman into the future. It begins with projecting the notion of a more human human being, i.e., a human being who is more advanced in the specific qualities which only human beings have—creativity, consciousness and self-consciousness, a sense of political and social responsibility.

A revolutionary period is one in which the only exit is a revolution. Revolution is a specific way in which the evolution of man/woman is advanced. The only justification for a revolution is that it advances the evolution of man/woman. A revolution is a phase in the long evolutionary process of man/woman. It initiates a new plateau, a new threshold on which human beings can continue to develop, but it is still situated on the continuous line between past and future. It is the result both of long preparation and a profoundly new, a profoundly original beginning. Without a long period for maturing, no profound change can take place. But every profound change is at the same time a sharp break with the past.

Man/woman is obviously at a threshold, a border, a frontier. How should people live today? What changes are necessary in our values, in our morality? Today we know that moral progress is not an automatic byproduct of technological development, that in fact economic overdevelopment exists dangerously side by side with political and moral underdevelopment. How can we achieve the political and moral development required to cope with the present stage of technological development? Not by more development of economic forces or of technology. Not simply by making what already exists more available to more people on a more equitable basis. Not by depending upon spontaneous rebellion of the oppressed.

A conscious struggle, that is, a struggle governed by conscious values, conscious goals, conscious programs and conscious persons, is required. Yet for so long have Marxists and most radical social scientists relegated morality and consciousness to the "superstructure" that most radicals are hesitant even to talk about the values that are the product of tens of thousands of years of the cultural development of humankind.

Abstract

The contradictions are within man/woman, internal as well as external. Because man/woman has crossed the threshold of reflection, and because each man and woman is a conscious individual, there are thousands of choices which each must make, including how and where and when he/she would like to live with his/her fellow men and women, and how he/she will think about him/herself, about society and about humankind.

These choices can only be posed by those who have developed the capacity to think historically, in terms of the development of men and women over tens of thousands of years.

Who are the antagonists in the present struggle? In the United States today there is far more antagonism on questions of social relations than on questions of economic relations. The conflict is not just between rich and poor, not just between one generation and another, but between different concepts of what a human being is and how a human being should live. We must know what is the principal contradiction before we can decide who is on the right side and who is on the wrong side.

Man/womankind today needs to redefine what are appropriate social relations. This can't be done by a plebiscite, by counting noses, or by any other kind of numbers game. It must be done by particular kinds of people projecting another way to live and testing it against certain classes, certain races, certain groups, certain people.

Clearly we are at a threshold of a new relation between necessity and choice. But what does any American today know about necessity or the concept of necessity? Necessity and choice used to be clearly separate. Today the borders between the two are no longer clear. One cannot be defined without the other. Once you accept the idea that people are no longer dominated by necessity in the way that they used to be, then you must see that our freedom to choose carries with it new responsibilities.

At this point we have to ask ourselves: can a worker or a black person be exonerated from responsibility because of class or race or because he/she has been and is oppressed? Are the ideas, the contributions of upper-class persons to be rejected out of hand because of their class origins? Or are ideas, actions, to be judged on their merits, in relation to how they contribute to the advancement of humanity?

How should people spend their lives? Is it sufficient to say that capitalism is responsible for the present state of affairs and that we are all its victims? Or is it necessary to develop new conceptions of appropriate social and human relations and then the concrete programs of struggle necessary to realize these conceptions?

What is the relation between wants and thoughts? Between wants and needs? Between masses and revolutionists? Masses have wants which are not necessarily related to human needs. Revolutionists must have thoughts about human needs. They cannot just rely on the spontaneous outburst of the masses over their wants. A revolutionist must absorb and internalize the lives, the passions, and the aspirations of great revolutionary leaders and not just those of the masses. It is true that revolutionary leadership can only come from persons in close contact with masses in movement and with a profound conviction of the impossibility of profound change in society without the accelerated struggle of the masses. But leaders cannot get their thoughts only from the movement of the masses.

A revolution begins with those who are revolutionary exploring and enriching their notion of a "new man/woman" and projecting the notion of this "new man/woman" into which each of us can transform ourselves.

The first transformation begins with those who recognize and are ready to assume the responsibility for reflecting on our experiences and the experiences of other revolutionary men and women. Thus the first transformation can begin with our own re-thinking. That is why we believe it is so crucial that before we undertake to project the perspectives for an American revolution, we review what previous revolutions of our epoch have meant in the evolution of man/womankind. As we study these revolutions, the first thing we shall learn is that all the great revolutionists have projected a concept of revolution to the masses. They did not just depend on the masses or the movement of their day for their idea of what should be done. They evaluated the state of the world and their own society. They internalized the most advanced ideas about human development which had been arrived at on a world scale. They projected a vision of what a revolution would mean in their own country. They analyzed the different social forces within their country carefully to ascertain which forces could be mobilized to realize this vision. They

carried on ideological struggle against those who were not ready to give leadership to the masses or who were trying to lead them in the wrong direction. Only then did they try to lead their own masses and every other possible sector of the society in struggle.

We review these revolutions not as scholars but as revolutionists, for the help that they can give us in clarifying the perspectives for a revolution in the United States. We are very much aware that our problems are very different from those of people in Russia, China, Vietnam, and Guinea-Bissau. But by reviewing these revolutions we can view the revolutions that have taken place in different parts of the world in our epoch as a historical whole, a continuous process of human liberation which advances one step at a time and whose forms move from country to country, from people to people. We can gain some insight into how far world humanity has already advanced towards the conscious creation by men and women of a new expanded human identity. We can draw some universal lessons from particular revolutions which will contribute to the next advancement. And we can begin to appreciate the protracted commitment, the refusal to be confined by dogma, the creative boldness, the readiness to practice new ideas as well as to compel others to choose between opposing roads, the tireless struggle against the new contradictions and obstacles which never cease to appear—all of which are the awesome responsibility of revolutionary leadership.

As we struggle in the second part of this book to understand our choices in the United States, we must not allow our thoughts to be paralyzed by fear of repression and fascism. One must always think realistically about the dangers, but in thinking about the counter-revolution a revolutionist must be convinced that it is a "paper tiger."

Revolution and counter-revolution both involve social upheaval, but they are not equal opposites. The revolution creates the future; the counter-revolution seeks to maintain the present or restore the past. The counter-revolution is invariably anti-historical. It narrows and limits human beings, whereas a revolution expands and enriches human identity.

An American revolution will enable the American people to renew and enlarge their sense of their own humanity. It will give them a new sense of time, of duration, of development, and of progress. It will instill in them a new love both for themselves and for men and women everywhere as they begin to see themselves as an integral

part of the history of all man/womankind. An American revolution will give Americans real and continuing opportunities to make responsible choices—opportunities which at the present time they do not even know they lack.

*Systems presently are developing
out of process. So what is the
great revelation of the author's 1st
chapter.*