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The Revolution is Not Being Televised

Kevin Carson

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In the course of his post, Richard Cranium cites an excellent article at Counterpunch (“How to Change the World Without Taking Power,” by John Ross).

The title of Ross’ article is an allusion to a book by John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*.

According to Ross, Holloway’s book (which I haven’t read, but have put on my must-read list) contrasts the Zapatista movement, as a general type, to the state-oriented leftism of Hugo Chavez.

When a Lula or a Chavez take the power of the state, they suddenly find themselves trapped in alignments that force obeisance to the World Bank and the White House from which they cannot break away. Their promises begin to sound hollow as transnationals reap fortunes at the expense of the people whose progress is pretty much straight down hill.

Cranium quotes this article as evidence that Brazil’s Lula has succumbed to just such neoliberal pressure.

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I'd also add that, back in the bipolar days when such leftist regimes were forced (more or less as a matter of course) into dependence on the USSR for patronage against the US, their Soviet ties resulted in "entrapping alignments" and "obeisances" virtually identical to those Ross wrote of. The effect of such dependence on the Soviet Union was to strengthen the hand of the Communist Party against elements of the libertarian and decentralist left.

As Hannah Arendt argued in *On Revolution*, any revolution has such elements, alongside the statist and centralizing elements. The real revolution, or revolution within the revolution, is the local organs of self-government and self-management that ordinary working people create for themselves. For a time, if the transition of power results in a partial or total collapse of central power, those local organs may become the basis of social organization, as they did in the southeastern parts of Spain in the summer of 1936.

The usual pattern, unfortunately, is for them to be coopted and absorbed (or suppressed) by the new "people's state" when it consolidates power (e.g. the conquest of CNT-dominated areas by the Communist-dominated Madrid regime in late 1936 and 1937, and the suppression of worker self-management)—in other words, a revolution in name coupled with a counter-revolution in practice. A similar counter-revolution took place under Lenin, with the soviets coopted into instruments of the Party Apparatus's domination, and the workers' committees suppressed in favor of Lenin's Taylorism and "One-Man Management." It's not difficult to fit the American Revolution into this pattern, with the Federalists' court party coup of 1787–89 and the subsequent suppression of the genuine revolutionary tradition in the Whiskey Rebellion. Murray Bookchin's magisterial four-volume work *The Third Revolution* is an excellent survey of this pattern in the modern era. The process is hastened by the imperatives of acquiring and defending political power in a national center, and by the parallel imperatives of maintaining the delicate relationship with a statist foreign patron.

Of course all this presents us with endless strategic difficulties. The states involved in such a counter-bloc are, like the U.S. and other neoliberal states, ultimately just more regimes to be seized and dismantled. But so long as the bloc's primary focus is on resisting and weakening the "sole remaining superpower," it may be a useful tactical ally (you know the saying about "the enemy of my enemy..."). There is, however, another equally valid proverb to remember: when dining with the Devil, one should use a very long spoon. The challenge is to take advantage of the maneuvering room and political cover presented by such a Third World leftist bloc, in order to build our own counter-institutions, without being coopted into its statist model of resistance.

of developing nations—without the imprimatur of the Usual Suspects. The purpose, said Brazil’s president, was “to fully exploit the potential among us, which does not depend on the concessions of the rich countries...”

Such a movement might even coordinate with the OPEC countries or China in adopting the Euro as a medium for international trade—the equivalent of a monetary atom bomb on the U.S.

If any one country undertook such measures, the CIA would probably begin immediate destabilization attempts, as it did with Allende’s Chile or Chavez’s Venezuela; but if several countries made such a withdrawal from the world corporate system simultaneously, pledged each other mutual support, and appealed for support to the people of the rest of the world, it might be more than the U.S. could handle. This latter would include mobilizing popular discontent against non-supportive regimes throughout the Third and Fourth worlds, promoting defaults and withdrawals by even more countries, and radical opposition within the core of the Empire itself.

With the serious political divisions between international capital, such a movement might even attract the support of a great power rival to the U.S. The Europeans, Russians or Chinese would be quite likely to ignore any U.S. attempt to impose trade sanctions. Any would-be rival “Eurasian bloc” of such powers might, indeed, welcome the movement as a form of strategic leverage, the same way the USSR welcomed the old nonaligned movement.

The alternative model that Holloway presents (according to Ross), centered on such decentralized grass-roots movements as the Zapatistas and the post-Seattle movement, has been analyzed under various names since the ‘90s. The Zapatistas were taken as the leading example of this kind of “netwar” back in the ‘90s, in a Rand study by David Ronfeldt and others. The idea was, by using the internet as an organizing tool, to put together ad hoc coalitions with little advance notice, and either to put together mass demonstrations in support of the Zapatistas or overwhelm (or “swarm”) government with phone calls, emails, letters, and generalized public pressure, than it could possibly cope with. Ronfeldt et al expressed their dismay in language quite similar to that used by Samuel Huntington in his 1970s lamentation over the “excess of democracy” and “crisis of governability.” The authors also compared “netwar” to the kind of decentralized “leaderless resistance” advocated by right-wing racists like Louis Beam. And the Rand study, bear in mind, came out before the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations of December 1999. It’s a fair characterization, after those events, to describe elite reaction as barely controlled hysteria. The anti-globalization movement replaced anti-government “militias” as federal law enforcement’s Enemy Number One, as described by commentators like Alexander Cockburn and Sam Smith. Paul Rosenberg did a frightening analysis of the evolution of the Gestapo tactics used against anti-globalization activists at subsequent protests.

The lesson is that our focus should be primarily on building counter-institutions from the ground up, and using them as the building-blocks of a decentralized counter-system. Political effort is not, by any means, to be ruled out. But the focus of any activity within the state should be toward immediately seizing it to deny it as a weapon to the enemy, and dismantling it as quickly as possible, so that it can be supplanted by a bottom-up system based on voluntary cooperation and mutual aid.

In the meantime, though, some states are bigger targets than others; any left-wing bloc that can serve as a political counterweight to the “sole remaining superpower” and provide cover for such institution building may serve as a tactical ally. Richard Cranium suggests that an organized bloc of regimes like Lula’s and Chavez’s might succeed, where individual regimes have failed, in resisting neoliberal pressure.

That’s why the “Pax SouthAmericana” approach that seems to be emerging is so intriguing to me. While an individual nation state can ultimately be isolated by the hegemonists, a continental left-democratic movement has the potential to be self sustaining. A broad based alliance that spans several countries in the same geographic region doesn’t require nearly as much external political and/or economic support from the rest of the world.

This especially caught my eye, because I’ve periodically tossed around similar ideas myself. There’s a passage on a Third World bloc, much like the one that Cranium envisions, in a subsection of the “Crisis Tendencies” chapter of *Studies in Mutualist Political Economy*:

It’s interesting that we’ve seen a near-collapse of central power in Argentina, with the emergence of a variety of grass-roots economic and political organs of self-government; and anti-neoliberal populist regimes in Brazil and Venezuela—all in just a couple years’ time. As the impacts of the Uruguay Round and other neoliberal policies make themselves felt in the Third and Fourth world, with the resulting political unrest and emergence of populist and nationalist movements, we can expect more and more such defections. At some point, such countries are likely to stop negotiating with the IMF individually, and attempt a joint action of some kind.

Imagine if several significant Third World countries made such a coordinated withdrawal from the Bretton Woods institutions, and repudiated their international debts. They could combine this with other genuinely free market reforms, like abrogating the intellectual property and industrial property provisions of GATT, so that native-owned competition might emerge to Western corporations, and be allowed to adopt modern production technology without restraint. If the domestic power of feudal oligarchies was broken in these countries, and with it their collusion with Western agribusiness, the land could be deeded to the actual peasant cultivators or agricultural laborers. A number of countries might enter into an accord to legalize mutual banks, LETS, and all other voluntary credit or money systems—and possibly organize a state asset-backed currency of some sort for trade between themselves, as an alternative to dependence on the dollar. They might announce a policy, finally, of ceasing to subsidize from state revenues the infrastructure projects on which Western capital depended to be profitable in their countries: that would mean all electricity, transportation, etc., services would be paid for by western firms on a cost basis. Rather than “privatizing” state enterprises by auctioning them off to kleptocrats and TNCs, they might transform them into either producers’ or consumers’ cooperatives—at least as genuine a form of privatization as the looting commonly practiced, but one that never seems to be adopted in Jeffrey Sachs’ version of “free market” reform.

If this seems overly fanciful, consider Brazil’s recent proposal for a free trade area among the G-20 group