

# Is Capitalism's Crisis Putting Revolution Back on the Agenda?

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, every attempt to go beyond capitalism ended in failure. Either people looked to socialist politicians, whose reforms made capitalism even more secure, or they supported revolutions that degenerated into repression and mass killing. Consequently, today, few people have much hope that humanity could ever successfully transcend capitalism.

But are capitalism's present problems putting anti-capitalist revolution back on the agenda? And could a future revolution liberate humanity in ways that past revolutions failed to achieve? To try to answer these questions, I am going to look at past revolutions with particular emphasis on aspects that are rarely considered in conventional left discourse. These include humanity's origins, gender and military history and the revolutionary transcendence of work and democracy.

The first ever revolution, described by anthropologists as the 'human revolution', was the transformation that created the first fully human societies in the form of communities of hunter-gatherers. The nature of this revolution can be inferred in various ways. For example, studies of contemporary hunter-gatherers show that their strong sense of 'moral community' is maintained by autonomous individuals who constantly resist any form of personal domination. In fact, hunter-gatherers are so egalitarian and communistic that even a non-Marxist anthropologist like Christopher Boehm argues that hunter-gatherer societies must have originated in uprisings against dominant males. There is also plausible evidence that these uprisings were led by females looking for collective support to ease their childcare burdens.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the process that actually created humanity can be seen as an anarchist, a communist and a feminist revolution.

Such ideas are controversial and hunter-gatherer societies have many limitations compared to modern societies. Nevertheless, people in the simplest form of hunter-gatherer communities insist that everyone shares everything and they organize collectively without permanent leaders. They also 'work' significantly less than people do in capitalist society. Indeed, Marx himself observed that 'the vitality of primitive communities was incomparably greater than that of ... modern capitalist societies.'<sup>2</sup> So, whatever their prehistoric origins, we certainly have much to learn from 'primitive communities' — not least of all the fact that we were able to live together in a broadly communist way for tens of thousands of years, so we can surely do so again.

These primitive communist relations did eventually break down, probably due to a scarcity of resources caused by over-hunting, overpopulation and climate change. This scarcity would have made it more difficult for people to trust each other and share things. They would then have started looking to leaders to adjudicate between different interests, enabling some males to assert dominance over everyone else. These more stratified hunter-gatherer communities then evolved into class societies and, eventually, into agriculture-based civilizations.<sup>3</sup>

The peasants and slaves, who were dominated in these class societies, continued to resist this domination and their resistance was often a factor in the development and decline of various civilizations. But it was not until people could resist domination in conditions of reduced scarcity that they were able to create a genuinely freer form of society, namely capitalism. Indeed it required the huge population decline of the Black Death to really change things by reducing land

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest...*, 1–10, 84–9, 172–3, 193–6, 249, 256 ; Chris Knight, *Weekly Worker* n638 and n786, [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk) and [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk); C.Knight, C.Power, I.Watts, 'The Human Symbolic Revolution', *The Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, v5, 75ff [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org).

<sup>2</sup> R.B.Lee, *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers*, 391–7; Marx, Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)* v24, 358–9. [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)

<sup>3</sup> L.Sims, 'Stonehenge and the Neolithic Counter-Revolution'; S.K.Sanderson, *Social Transformations...*, 34–51. [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)

scarcity and so increasing peasants' bargaining power across Western Europe. This situation then compelled the lords to replace feudal dues with rent, enabling people to work for money rather than being dependent on a patriarchal lord.<sup>4</sup>

This shift away from personal dependence was particularly significant for women. For instance, it was now women who initiated many food riots, while insisting on the idea of a 'moral community' that was obliged to feed them and their families. The most striking example of such an uprising occurred during the French Revolution when Parisian women began calling the men 'cowards' and declaring: 'We will take over!' These women proceeded to march to Versailles with soldiers following them. This crowd then forced the King to return to Paris where, three years later, women were again major participants in the demonstrations that led to the abolition of the monarchy.<sup>5</sup>

Hunger and scarcity still discouraged people from sharing things or attempting any revival of communist relations. But workers continued to resist the new capitalist relations by indulging in drunkenness, absenteeism and strikes. This forced the factory owners to contain such resistance, first by raising wages and then by replacing these expensive workers with more productive machinery. Governments could also restrain workers' resistance by introducing welfare provision and by allowing the formation of trade unions and socialist parties. However, workers were still dissatisfied and, from 1905 to 1914, there were unprecedented international strike waves.

This unrest, combined with other disturbing social changes, such as the movement for women's suffrage, created considerable insecurity among the ruling class. They could divert some workers' discontent into nationalism, imperialism and masculinist militarism. But this then led to a situation in which, when confronted with inter-imperialist conflict in 1914, governments felt unable to back down, fearing national humiliation and domestic opposition.<sup>6</sup>

The result was the slaughter of the 1914–18 war, which was just the start of a century of hot and cold wars. These wars were very effective at creating a sense of purpose and community that countered any desire workers had for revolution. This atmosphere of war-induced counter-revolution was also very effective at countering the growth of the women's movement. Whenever nations faced defeat, such an atmosphere could rapidly transform into a revolutionary mood. But any subsequent revolutions were now crippled by isolation, poverty and masculinist militarism.

## Russian Revolution

During the 1914–18 war, women initiated protests and food riots right across Europe. Marxists, such as Lenin, warned against such riots. But Marx himself had recognised that 'great social revolutions are impossible without the feminine ferment' and, in 1917, it was Petrograd's female workers who spread the idea of a general strike on 8 March, International Women's Day. On that day, hundreds of women dragged their fellow male workers on to the streets where the rioting crowds had no problems creating their own leaders. As Trotsky later recalled, the women took

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<sup>4</sup> C.Katz, *From Feudalism to Capitalism*, 60–3, 73–8, 128–32. libcom.org

<sup>5</sup> E.P.Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 307–35; D. Garrioch, 'The Everyday Lives of Parisian Women and the October Days of 1789', *Social History* v24, 231–2 libcom.org; D.Levy, *Women and Politics...*, 81ff.

<sup>6</sup> M.Micale, *Hysterical Men*, 162–70; W.D.Smith, *European Imperialism...*, 82–108, 209–11; Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 126, 138–41; J.Morrow, *The Great War*, 16–18, Ch. 5 & 6, 297–8.

hold of the soldiers' rifles and 'beseeched almost commanded: "put down your bayonets and join us"', and, within five days, the centuries-old Tsarist regime had collapsed.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite this achievement, hunger and scarcity still discouraged workers from transcending wage labour. Instead, they looked to socialist militants who set up elected workers' councils that soon tried to impose strict labour discipline.<sup>8</sup>

After the Bolsheviks took state power in October, many workers continued to engage in indiscipline and strikes. But this just drove the new socialist regime to be even more authoritarian. Elected factory committees advocated forced labour for everyone and they readily used armed guards to maintain order.<sup>9</sup> As early as January 1918, Lenin was contemplating that 'one out of every ten idlers will be shot on the spot' and, during the Civil War, both he and Trotsky advocated 'concentration camps' for absentee workers. In appalling conditions of war and hunger, the regime was even more brutal to the peasantry. One Bolshevik eyewitness recalled: 'Our Red detachments would "clean up" villages exactly the way the Whites did. What was left of the inhabitants, old men, women, children, were machine-gunned for having given assistance to the enemy.'<sup>10</sup>

After the Civil War, a huge wave of strikes and uprisings scuppered Lenin's and Trotsky's plans to militarize labour. However, the Bolshevik regime still needed to industrialize to prevent its overthrow by a combination of peasant 'capitalists', disillusioned workers and Western intervention. Consequently the Bolsheviks, now led by Stalin, chose to channel workers' frustration into a revived civil war against underdevelopment and peasant recalcitrance. Workers' strikes and peasant riots, both dominated by women, were at the forefront of resistance to this brutal policy.<sup>11</sup> But starvation and repression crushed all resistance, enabling Stalin's monstrous dictatorship to survive at the cost of millions of lives, including those of many Bolsheviks.

This disastrous outcome discredited socialist and communist ideas for the rest of the century. Anarchists argue that they could have done better. But, when anarchist activists introduced workplace self-management during the Spanish Civil War, scarcity, military pressures and workers' indiscipline pushed these activists in the same authoritarian direction as the Bolsheviks. The anarchist Justice Minister, Garcia Oliver, initiated the setting up of 'concentration camps' and even the most principled anarchists, the Friends of Durutti, advocated 'forced labour'.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, many workers refused to risk their lives for this sort of 'socialism' and the vast majority of the Spanish Republic's soldiers had to be conscripted. Indeed, refusals to fight were a significant factor in preventing the Republic from surviving long enough to drag Spain into the slaughter of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *MECW* v43, 184 [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org); C.Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women*, 43–54.

<sup>8</sup> S.A.Smith, *Red Petrograd...*, 88–94, 247–51.

<sup>9</sup> T.Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia*, 43–4 [www.angelfire.com](http://www.angelfire.com); W.Rosenberg, *Slavic Review* v44, 225–6, 253.

<sup>10</sup> *Lenin Collected Works* v26, 414. [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org) With Lenin's approval, Bukharin even made the appalling claim that 'proletarian compulsion in all its forms, from executions to compulsory labour, constitutes, as paradoxical as this may sound, a method of the formation of a new communist humanity.' For more on this tragic period see 'Beyond Kronstadt – The Bolsheviks in Power' at [libcom.org](http://libcom.org) (see notes 30, 32, 34 & 41 for quote sources).

<sup>11</sup> L.Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*, 176–84, 202–9, 237–8; J.Rossmann, *Workers' Resistance under Stalin*, 6–7, 206, 232.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Seidman, *Workers against Work...*, Ch. 4 (esp. around notes 72–81), 6 & 7 (esp. note 42). [libcom.org](http://libcom.org)

<sup>13</sup> M.Seidman, *Republic of Egos*, 38–40, 89–121, 150–8, 177–238.

## Nazi Counter-Revolution

Back in 1911, Churchill had argued that welfare provision would deter workers from turning to ‘revolutionary socialism’ and, by the 1930s, his prediction had proved correct.<sup>14</sup> But the capitalist system was now at an impasse. If it conceded many more reforms, workers might make more revolutionary demands. On the other hand, if it tried to restore 19<sup>th</sup> century levels of austerity, then revolution was even more likely.

Unable to introduce either sufficient reform or austerity, global capitalism had no way to peacefully extricate itself from the Great Depression. The French and the American ruling classes were still able to contain huge strike waves with state spending. The German ruling class, however, could only prevent an eventual revolution by reviving the nationalism and masculinist militarism of the 1914–18 war and letting the Nazis take power.

Having looked to other socialist parties for so long, German workers lacked the confidence to oppose the National Socialist takeover. Nevertheless, they still indulged in passive resistance and the new regime was forced to spend money on food, rather than the military, to prevent what the Nazi leaders called ‘revolutionary conditions among the people’. The only way to contain German workers in the long-term was to provide the higher living standards of British and US capitalism. And, in the Depression, the only obvious way to fund this was to colonize Eastern Europe and emulate the vast land masses and murderous racism of the British, American and French empires.<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, these older empires feared losing out to a new German empire. However, they were also hesitant to force their reluctant populations into a repeat of the 1914–18 war with its mutinies and revolutions. Consequently, France’s generals chose to implement a highly defensive military strategy. Then, when this strategy failed to withstand the German invasion of 1940, these generals rapidly surrendered, fearing what they called ‘a communist uprising in Paris’. Britain and America subsequently held back from invading France and, instead, prioritized the bombing and blockading of German civilians for much of the war.<sup>16</sup>

British officials admitted that this blockading of Europe would ‘produce widespread starvation’, just as it had during the 1914–18 war when it had led to half a million deaths and then defeat and revolution in Germany. Hitler, however, was determined that, this time, Germany would not starve, so there could be ‘no revolution on the home front’.<sup>17</sup> Nazi officials consequently argued that any ‘attempts to prevent the population [in Russia] from starving ... would undermine Germany and Europe’s capacity to resist blockade.’ The Nazis also blamed the Jews for all the humiliating crises of German capitalism since 1918. These attitudes then led to them to killing anyone — but especially Communists and Jews — who they feared might weaken national unity or make Germany vulnerable to another defeat.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> C.Jones, *Poverty, Welfare...*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, 576–82; Tim Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich...*, 267–74; A.Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction*, 8–10. [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com)

<sup>16</sup> A.Orr, *Mental Maginot Lines*, 62–104 [etd.nd.edu](http://etd.nd.edu); R.Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 133, 200–8; T.Ben-Moshe, *Journal of Modern History* v62, 504, 529–36.

<sup>17</sup> [filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk); N.Gibbs, *Grand Strategy* v2, 214; N.Howard, *German History* v11, 162–7 [lib-com.org](http://lib-com.org); Mason, 180.

<sup>18</sup> O.Bartov, *The Holocaust; Origins...*, 100; Tooze, 476–85, 538–49; U.Herbert, *National Socialist Extermination Policies*, 213–29, 247–66.

Despite this unrestrained brutality, fears of popular unrest did prevent the Nazis from extending their use of mass starvation and poison gas to even larger sections of East European society. At the same time, fears of domestic unrest if the Germans retaliated with gas, did also dissuade the British military from acting on Churchill's 1944 proposal to 'drench Germany with poison gas'. And, towards the end of the war, further fears of unrest encouraged moves to surrender in both Italy and Japan. Then, once the war was over, a huge international strike wave encouraged the Allied victors to introduce major reforms.<sup>19</sup>

If all this unrest had been more widespread and had been able to prevent the Allies from bombing and blockading Germany, Nazi policies might have been less murderous. And, crucially, German workers might also have had the strength and confidence to stage a repeat of their successful 1918 and 1920 uprisings against dictatorship. Indeed, many on the right, such as Baldwin, Chamberlain and even the anti-Hitler plotter, Stauffenberg, were very concerned about 'Germany going Bolshevik' during the Nazi period.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, many on the left failed to argue for a revolutionary end to the war. Instead they called for a more genuinely anti-fascist war effort. War is, however, an inherently reactionary, inhuman activity, as was shown by the way both Trotsky and the Spanish Republic used executions to intimidate conscripts into fighting their wars. So any 'genuinely anti-fascist' war, led by the left, might have been just as brutal and counter-revolutionary as the Allied war effort.

By 1945, the most devastating war in history had decimated and redisciplined much of the world's working class. Workers still wanted a better life and, as the influential Conservative MP, Quintin Hogg, said: 'If you do not give the people social reform, they are going to give you social revolution.'<sup>21</sup> However, unlike during the 1930s, national unity, reinforced with anti-Communist ideology, was now sufficient to prevent reform itself encouraging social revolution. Consequently, such reform, combined with military and other state-led investment, helped create an unprecedented economic boom that made revolution appear completely unnecessary in the West.

This boom, however, did little for the millions starving in the 'Third World'. In countries such as China and Cuba, popular discontent was so great that only nationalist dictatorships, calling themselves 'Communist', could disorientate people sufficiently to hold onto state power. Liberal politicians then exaggerated this 'Communist' threat, enabling them to justify the repression of any 'Third World' movements that threatened Western profits.

The result was a series of massacres and conflicts, during the Cold War, that killed more than seven million people in Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere. As in 1914, governments feared national humiliation and both Kennedy and Khrushchev hesitated to back down during the Cuban missile crisis. Che Guevara's nationalism was even more reckless, leading him to boast that 'if the rockets had remained, we would have used them all and directed them against the very heart of the United States.' Meanwhile, between ten and fifty million died in China when Mao emulated Stalin's disastrous industrialization policies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> en.wikipedia.org; Herbert, 218; D.Cesarini, *Holocaust: Critical Concepts...* v2, 203; J.Paxman, *A Higher Form of Killing*, 128–36; A.De Grand, *Italian Fascism*, 126–7; R.B.Frank, *Downfall...*, 97–8, 293–310, 345–54; Silver, 125–8, 148–52.

<sup>20</sup> M.Leibovitz, *In Our Time*, 49–52; M.Sarkisyanz, *From Imperialism to Fascism*, 222; E.Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, 123.

<sup>22</sup> necrometrics.com; countercurrents.org; J.Castaneda, *Companero*, 231; en.wikipedia.org.

## 1960s Revolution

Fortunately, by the 1960s, after fifty years of war-induced counter-revolution, non-Stalinist radical movements were beginning to develop in the West. Most significantly, by boycotting segregated buses, African-American women sparked the US civil rights movement that then inspired activists across the world.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, full employment and welfare enabled many younger women to rely less on male breadwinners so they could begin to escape the patriarchal family and sexual repression. Indeed, everyone was becoming increasingly free of wartime discipline. People were also more secure and less willing to put up with the boredom of factory assembly lines.

This all came to a head in Paris where the demands of students to be able to sleep together in university dormitories was a major issue in the protests of 1968. These protests then sparked a huge general strike during which workers angrily rejected trade union calls to return to work.

Unfortunately, the financial hardship of the strike made it difficult for women with children to continue supporting their striking partners. Consumer capitalism was still holding out the prospect of a better life and French workers eventually accepted an offer of higher wages.<sup>24</sup> Yet, despite this setback, people in the West remained ill-disciplined and continued to go on strike, often in opposition to the unions' wishes. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, American conscripts killed hundreds of their own officers and US failure in the war, combined with youth, black and feminist rebellions, encouraged a growing anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist consciousness.

The American sociologist, Daniel Bell, warned that people were acting as if society had moved 'beyond necessity'.<sup>25</sup> And industrial production was now approaching levels that could end scarcity and create the basis for genuine communism. But, having looked to political parties for so long, workers lacked the confidence to take matters into their own hands and this enabled governments to roll back state provision.

The resulting recession and mass unemployment, often imposed by 'socialist' governments, made workers think twice about going on strike. The shift of industrial production to East Asia, combined with a revival of the Cold War, then further disciplined Western workers. In this way, capitalism succeeded in creating the false impression that humanity could never go 'beyond necessity' or beyond scarcity — or, in other words, beyond capitalism.

This pessimistic conviction was further strengthened by the economic failures of the 'Communist' countries, even though these failures were themselves a product of workers' growing power. In 'Communist' countries, welfare and repression could contain any collective resistance. However, with little fear of unemployment, individual workers were still able to work slowly and resist management interference and this created enormous inefficiencies and waste.<sup>26</sup>

Gorbachev tried to motivate workers to work harder by introducing market reforms. But, when this led to economic disintegration and strikes, the Russian elite was content to let industry collapse, so decisively weakening workers' power. Many Russians had believed that the introduction of the market, combined with democracy and workplace self-management, would improve their

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<sup>23</sup> M.Kuumba, *Gender and Social Movements*, 24, 33–4, 74, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 37–47, 67–71, Ch.4 & 5.

<sup>25</sup> K.van der Pijl, *New Left Review* n37, 25. [www.newleftreview.org](http://www.newleftreview.org)

<sup>26</sup> Hillel Ticktin, 'Theories of Disintegration of the USSR'; H.Ticktin, *Origins of the Crisis in the USSR*, 12–13, 85–6, 117, 144. [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com)



lives. Instead, tragically, it led to economic devastation and an excess mortality of over three million.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile in China, unlike in Russia, the ‘Communist’ regime could still undercut workers’ bargaining power by employing millions of peasants in industry. This enabled the Chinese to attract international investment and create an economic boom that restrained any popular discontent. Today, having contained both Western and Russian workers by deindustrializing, global capitalism now completely depends on this semi-Stalinist dictatorship in China. However, as the influx of malleable peasants dries up, this dictatorship will face increasing problems containing the many thousands of protests and strikes that occur there every year.

If similar unrest occurred anywhere other than China, it would create political problems far sooner. Consequently, industrial capitalists have hesitated to invest in places like the Middle East, leading to a lack of development that then encouraged some Arab nationalists to resort to the Islamist terrorism of 9/11.

The national humiliation of this attack immediately motivated the US to return to the certainties of the Cold War and launch the ‘War on Terror’. In this way, the US hoped to reassert its leadership while, consciously or unconsciously, reviving its economy through arms spending and, at the same time, containing an international wave of anti-capitalist demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> The US military then had few problems overthrowing the Afghan and Iraqi governments. However, they have since had intractable problems controlling Afghan and Iraqi society.

After years of bombing and blockading Iraq, the US assumed it could impose privatization and unemployment on Iraqis more easily than Saddam Hussein could.<sup>29</sup> However, US-imposed impoverishment just encouraged many Iraqis to support a brutal nationalist uprising against the occupation. At the same time, domestic opposition to high American casualties compelled the US military to use so much violence to protect their troops that they created even more hostility to the US presence. On top of this, international opposition to the war deterred the Americans from simply bombing and massacring the population as they did in Vietnam. The result was that the US was forced to let Iranian-backed Shiite politicians take governmental power.

This defeat of US policy, combined with a decline of US control across both the Middle East and Latin America, shows that the ‘War on Terror’ was unable to restore the Cold War’s ability to mobilize people in support of sustained repression and war. This reluctance to support repression meant that the Egyptian military, and their US backers, hesitated to repress the uprising against Mubarak. Furthermore, this reluctance to support war both prevents a return to masculinist militarism and it prevents capitalism from recreating the post-war industrial boom.

Any such boom requires either the levels of state investment and full employment of the post-1945 period or, alternatively, a restoration of profitability through the imposition of pre-1945 levels of austerity. Either policy might work in conditions of war-time discipline, especially if, as in the Cold War, any militant workers could be discredited as conspiring with the ‘Communist’ enemy. But, without this, both policies risk encouraging workers to mobilize against the capitalist

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<sup>27</sup> S.Crowley, *Hot Coal, Cold Steel*, 16, 193–8; [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).

<sup>28</sup> H.Ticktin, *Critique* n35, 3, 22–8 [www.critiquejournal.net](http://www.critiquejournal.net); D.Graeber, *The Shock of Victory* [theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org).

<sup>29</sup> N.Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 337–72. Significantly, it was threats of unrest by ordinary Iraqis that forced Saddam to abandon his privatization program and to, instead, invade Kuwait. S.Aburish, *Saddam Hussein*, 107–11, 259–62.

system. So, instead, capitalists have neglected industry and largely invested in the financial sector and private credit – and this inexorably led to the unprecedented crisis of 2008.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many workers accepted the miseries of capitalist work because they believed their children would have better lives than they did. As the rise in living standards slowed, the availability of cheap credit then kept everyone on the capitalist treadmill for a while. But, now that Western capitalism can offer little except austerity, just to repay bankers' debts, its legitimacy is beginning to drain away.

In the crises of the 1930s, fascism or Stalinism could easily misdirect any anti-capitalist sentiment. But a lasting legacy of the 1960s, people's lack of deference to authority, makes it difficult to return to such authoritarianism today. After years of defeat and individualization, people still think that if they act, no one will join them, so why take the risk? Yet, once people feel compelled to act and they then start winning, their confidence will increase rapidly. This is what happened in 1917, 1968 and 1989 when, after years of low levels of struggle and with few revolutionaries expecting revolution, epoch-changing upheavals did suddenly break out.<sup>31</sup>

## Future Revolution

For the past hundred years, war-induced counter-revolution helped contain wave after wave of class struggle. For the past hundred years, different government policies, from welfare provision to bank bail-outs, successfully kept workers depoliticised and passive. Yet, today, capitalism appears to have reached an impasse in which, if workers do launch another sustained wave of struggles, it is not clear how they could be contained. Any serious attempt to placate people through reforms risks a repeat of the post-war period when job security promoted ever more worker militancy. While any serious attempt to rediscipline people with even more poverty and cutbacks, risks completely discrediting capitalism, especially when modern technology is so hugely productive.<sup>32</sup>

Today, humanity has the potential to transform technology, in harmony with nature, to end all significant scarcity and to start creating a global communist society. Anything short of this, any attempt to democratically organize wage labour, as the Bolsheviks and Spanish anarchists tried to do, is far too contradictory to succeed. Workers will always resist such alienated labour so it can never be organized rationally. As Marx said: alienated labour 'is by its very nature unfree, inhuman, unsocial activity ... [so] an "organization of labour" is therefore a contradiction. *The best organization that can preserve labour is the present organization, the free competition.*'<sup>33</sup>

This superiority of the 'free competition', i.e. the 'free' sale of labour, over any 'organization of labour' was shown clearly in the experience of the Israeli kibbutzim. Despite their racism, these cooperatives did demonstrate that people could work together 'communistically' without

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<sup>30</sup> John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 193–205 libcom.org; Hillel Ticktin, 'Marxist Method, Working Class Struggle...' sites.google.com and 'A Marxist Political Economy of Capitalist Instability and the Current Crisis', *Critique* Feb. 2009, 23–9 libcom.org.

<sup>31</sup> B.Silver, *Critical Sociology* v31, 440. www.soc.jhu.edu

<sup>32</sup> Politicians may use environmental arguments to justify cutbacks but workers are unlikely to be persuaded. Indeed, until we can abolish capitalist alienation and so control our own labour, we can never rationally control that labour's impact on the environment. Until then, green politics, like socialist politics, can offer little except austerity, limited reforms and authoritarianism.

<sup>33</sup> Uri Zilbersheid, 'Abolition of Labour...', *Critique* n35, 123–4. libcom.org

individual material reward. However this work was always constrained by the need to produce and sell commodities and, therefore, the kibbutzim were incapable of abolishing alienated labour. Having failed to create a society that had any more freedom than capitalism, in 2005, the majority of kibbutz members voted to introduce a capitalist wage system.<sup>34</sup> This experience suggests that people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have little interest in replacing capitalism unless they can create a society with more freedom than capitalism — a society without alienated work, a communist society where people only work, voluntarily, for the sake of creativity or for the sake of their own, and others', needs.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people still had considerable interest in democratic parties that promised full employment and the security of alienated work. But, now that capitalism can no longer provide much job security, workers are starting to lose faith in democracy. Of course democratic rights, like free speech, can be very useful to workers but representative democracy has always shifted their struggles away from the workplace and community, into the isolated passive act of voting. Indeed, in the months following the Russian Revolution, British politicians openly stated that they were extending the vote as a 'buffer' or 'substitute for riot [and] revolution'.<sup>35</sup>

Representative democracy has always reinforced the idea that 'ordinary people' need not take control of their own lives and that they could look to politicians and the state to do things for them. Consequently, faith in democracy has hindered workers' ability to defend themselves after numerous election victories, whether of reactionaries like Hitler or progressives like Nelson Mandela. Indeed, workers' faith in democratic parties was probably a more important reason for the failure of past revolutions than any lack of a genuinely revolutionary party. So, hopefully, today's lack of faith in democracy will lead to a growth in revolutionary groups and movements that emphasise community and individuality more than formal democracy — just as hunter-gatherers do.

In a non-revolutionary period, such 'ultra-left' arguments seem impossibly optimistic. In future revolutions, however, the 'impossible' will become possible and 'ordinary people' will organize themselves in ways as unimaginable to us now as the uprisings of 1789 and 1917 were unimaginable to people before the French or Russian revolutions.

One of the more 'unimaginable' aspects of both these revolutions was the way long-standing regimes were so easily overthrown the moment that proletarian women took the lead. With similarities to the uprisings that may have created the first hunter-gatherer communities, these women refused to tolerate a situation in which society was failing to support them and their children.

Today, individualized childcare, combined with insecurity and overwork, still greatly restricts parents' lives. This leaves little time for the indulgent, responsive attention that some hunter-gatherer communities easily provide for their children, attention that all young children require to become mentally healthy adults.<sup>36</sup> Since the 1960s, women have radically transcended traditional gender roles through better employment opportunities. This has enabled them to maintain their families' living standards even when men's income was falling. However, if cuts in welfare

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<sup>34</sup> U.Zilbersheid, *Critique* Dec. 2007; D.Gavron, *The Kibbutz*, 154–60, 181–8, 260.

<sup>35</sup> B.Harrison, *Separate Spheres...*, 220 web.leadstrinity.ac.uk. Workers' struggles often require minorities to start things off. So any over-emphasis on democracy by the left just gives politicians a powerful means to denounce such struggles as undemocratic and, therefore, illegitimate.

<sup>36</sup> B.Hewlett, *Hunter-Gatherer Childhoods*, 15–20, 31, 62–3, 407–15. anthro.vancouver.wsu.edu

and jobs put even more pressure on women, preventing any further improvements in their lives as individuals, they may again look to collective and revolutionary solutions to their problems.

Workers' resistance has transformed capitalism, just as peasant resistance transformed feudalism. But revolutions initiated by women might, perhaps, be the way to abolish capitalism, just as they abolished French and Russian feudalism. We could then start sharing everything, while also abolishing all imposition of authority and essentialist gender roles. This would return us to a higher form of the communistic relations of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, so fulfilling Marx's hope that capitalism's 'fatal crisis' would lead to 'the return of modern society to a higher form of the most archaic type.'<sup>37</sup>

The revolutions of the last century tried to move towards communism by prioritizing the reorganization of work and the economy. Not surprisingly, they failed, because the communistic values of trust, sharing and compassion are more likely to originate from the transformation of personal relationships and childcare than from the transformation of wage labour. Once we can prioritize these communistic values, we should then be able to coordinate unalienated production free from the external discipline of either a state or a market.

So, to conclude: Is revolution back on the agenda and could it liberate humanity in ways that past revolutions failed to achieve? We cannot precisely predict the future but the anthropological and historical evidence does support an optimistic response to both these questions. Readers of this article may have different interpretations of the same evidence. Nevertheless, our starting point must be that it is only by rethinking all aspects of the Marxist, feminist and anarchist traditions that we can develop new ideas that will be relevant to the revolutionary movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>37</sup> *MECW* v24, 357, 350 [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). A genuine rebellion or revolution is a movement that no one can govern. If people then remain ungovernable they can disrupt any counter-revolution, so avoiding any need for a workers' state or party to contain such counter-revolution. Interestingly, during the 'genuine' initial periods of the revolutions in France, Russia and Iran, the presence of women at demonstrations was very effective at preventing soldiers from shooting at the crowds. See also Temma Kaplan, 'Female Consciousness and Collective Action...', *Signs* v7 [libcom.org](http://libcom.org).

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