

OPINION

Could the great recession lead to a great revolution?

A look at mass protests during the past 500 years reveals surprising clues

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BROOKLYN, N.Y. - For the first time in generations, people are challenging the view that a free-market order – the system that dominates the globe today – is the destiny of all nations. The free market's uncanny ability to enrich the elite, coupled with its inability to soften the sharp experiences of staggering poverty, has pushed inequality to the breaking point.

As a result, we live at an important historical juncture – one where alternatives to the world's neoliberal capitalism could emerge. Thus, it is a particularly apt time to examine revolutionary movements that have periodically challenged dominant state and imperial power structures over the past 500 years.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which laid the foundation for liberal democratic elections and the expansion of the free-market system throughout the world, revolution and protest seemed to lose some of their potency.

Leading historians believed that a new age had appeared in which revolutionary movements would no longer challenge the status quo. Defenders of the contemporary system were suspicious of nearly all forms of popular expression and contestation for power outside the electoral arena. But remarkably, this entire discourse sidestepped the major impulses of human emancipation of the past 500 years – equality, democracy, and social rights.

Proponents of neoliberalism are indifferent to this history and dismiss the notion that “another world is possible” that could alleviate grinding misery and poverty around the world. But in opposition to the contemporary individualistic system of capitalism, evidence of a new global movement dedicated to social justice and human rights has sprung from the ashes of the past. Just in the past decade, we have witnessed the expansion of worker insurgencies, peasant and indigenous uprisings, ecological protests, and democracy movements.

Historians frequently view revolutions as extraordinary and unanticipated interruptions of state social regulation of everyday life.

This isn't the case.

In my work as editor of a new encyclopedia of revolution and protest, I've reviewed 500 years' worth of revolutionary actions. And the surprising pattern I've found is the regularity of volatile and explosive conflicts, commonly revealed as waves of protest from within civil society to confront persistent inequality and oppression. While historians cannot forecast the time and place of revolutions, the past has a sustained, if disjointed, record of popular resistance to injustice.

History shows that revolutions must have political movement and a socially compelling goal, with strategic and charismatic leadership that inspires majorities to challenge a perception of fundamental injustice and inequality. A necessary feature is the development of a political ideology rooted in a narrative that legitimates mass collective action, which is indispensable to forcing dominant groups to address social grievances – or to overturning those dominant groups altogether.

Unresponsive rulers risk possible overthrow of their governments. For example, the vision and struggle of a multiracial South Africa was a guiding principle that put an end to the entrenched white-dominated apartheid system.

A second essential element is what Italian philosopher Antonio Negri calls constituent power, the expression of the popular will for democracy – a common theme in nearly all revolutions – through what he calls the multitude.

Mr. Negri counterpoises the concepts of constituent power and constituted power to demonstrate the oppositional forces in society. Thus, following the American Revolution, the ruling elite created a second Constitution establishing a national government with fewer democratic safeguards.

In response to challenges from popular movements, modern states have concentrated power in constitutions and centralized authority structures to suppress mass demands for democracy and equality. Few democratic revolutionary movements have gained popular power as new states almost always consolidate control, often resorting to repression of the masses that initially brought them to power. Still, virtually all revolutions during the past 500 years have created enduring consequences that, in evolving form, remain forces for justice to this day.

Revolutionary movements must recognize the durability and overwhelming inertia of state power. They must acknowledge that they are highly unlikely to seize power from unjust regimes, even when their objectives have moral force and are deeply popular among the masses. And yet, history is full of exceptions to this rule, so we must conclude that while revolutionary transformation is improbable, it is always a possibility.

At a lecture to Young Socialists in Zurich just one month before the February 1917 Revolution, Vladimir Lenin said: “We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution.” Less than a year later, Lenin and the Bolsheviks gained power over the Soviet state with the initial support of workers, peasants, and most of the military.

In the last century, the opponents of the failed bureaucratic statism in the Soviet sphere and free-market capitalism in the West have struggled to find a discourse of resistance. While democratic opponents defeated Soviet Russia in the early 1990s, opponents of free-market capitalism have yet to gain traction, in part due to the general consensus among global rulers in defense of neoliberalism. As such, revolutionary movements have had to redefine themselves outside territorial borders as powerful tools of the global collective to petition for human rights and social justice for all.

People are inherently cautious and take extraordinary action only when they have little to lose and something to gain. The current economic crisis has pushed more people into poverty and despair than at any time since the early 20th century, to the point where alternatives to the current system can be considered.

Today, throughout the world, peasants, workers, indigenous peoples, and students are galvanized into movements that are challenging state power rooted in global norms of neoliberalism. New movements have gained greater traction with the legitimacy and strength of a global collective

behind them, rather than as isolated protests. The oppressed are framing new narratives of liberation to contest power on a state and international level: whether peasants in Latin America or India struggling for land reform; indigenous peoples mobilizing resistance for official recognition of their rights; or workers and students throughout the world waging unauthorized strikes and sit-ins, and taking to the streets in support of democracy and equality.

P.S.

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0730/p09s01-coop.html>

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