

James Boggs: The American Revolution

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Any social movement starts with the aim of achieving some rights heretofore denied. Sometimes a portion of these rights is achieved without a change in the social structure of the country. When this happens, the movement is not revolutionary, even though it has brought about social change. Such a movement was the CIO. At other times a movement is unable to achieve the rights it seeks without taking power from the existing government and creating a totally new order. When this happens, it is a revolution.

Very few revolutions start with a conscious attempt to take power. No revolution has ever started with everyone in the country agreeing with the goal of the revolutionary movement. It is clashes, both ideological and physical, among segments of the population and usually the whip of the counter-revolution which give the revolution its momentum. Sometimes the revolution is violent, sometimes it is non-violent, but always it is the revolution. Sometimes those in the revolution are conscious of the consequences of their actions, sometimes they are not, but always there is action.

Who will and who will not start a full-scale revolution cannot be foretold. The basis for a revolution is created when the organic structure and conditions within a given country have aroused mass concern. Sometimes the revolution is started by its opponents who by some act arouse the masses to anger and action. Sometimes a very marked improvement in living conditions inculcates in the masses a belief that there is no limit to what they should or can have. Sometimes it is just seeing one segment of the population living so much better than the rest.

No one has ever been able to predict which class or race would start a revolution or how many people would be required to do it. The only certainty is that the success of a revolution depends on the joining in of the working people who make up the bulk of the population.

Marx's theory of revolution was developed in relation to the advanced capitalist countries. The United States is the most advanced capitalist country in the world. Not only that. It is the citadel of world capitalism without which the other capitalist countries could not survive. Therefore any revolutionary who evades facing the specific conditions and realities of American capitalism is like the British workers in Marx's day who were so preoccupied with keeping the Irish workers down that they couldn't fight for their own advancement, or all the American socialists who have been so preoccupied with Stalinism, either pro or con, that they have not sought or been able to find the basis of the revolution that is here, right in front of their eyes, in the most advanced capitalist country in the world. American socialists have never been able to understand why there should be a revolution in the United States when there is such an abundance of commodities in this country. Rather than face this question squarely, they have become refugees in theory, if not in physical fact, from the American Revolution.

Preoccupied, while still living in America, with how revolutionary regimes live up to or fall short of their socialist ideals, American revolutionaries have failed to understand the problems actually faced by these regimes after they come to power. They have not understood the nature of the problem of accumulating capital enough for industrialization, and that the burden of this accumulation must be placed on the backs of the workers—just as it was in all capitalist countries, and especially on the backs of Negro workers in the United States— unless they can get the needed capital from already developed countries like the United States. But the United States will share its resources with the underdeveloped countries only if there is a social revolution in the United States. Which brings us right back to the question of the American Revolution.

The American Revolution does not necessarily have to start from economic grievances. Nor does it have to start with the American working class in the lead. The development of capitalism in the United States has generated more than enough contradictions to pose the question of the total social reorganization of the country. Some of these contradictions

relate to sheer poverty and the workers' life in production. Others are just as important and have even wider bearing on the quality of social existence. Man is imaginative and creative. His needs go far beyond the realm of the material.

What is man's greatest human need in the United States today? It is to stop shirking responsibility and start assuming responsibility. When Americans stop doing the one and start doing the other, they will begin to travel the revolutionary road. But to do this they must use as much creative imagination in politics as up to now they have used in production. The fact is that the more imaginative Americans have been in creating new techniques of production, the less imaginative they have been in creating new relations between people. Americans today are like a bunch of ants who have been struggling all summer long to accumulate a harvest and then can't decide how to distribute it and therefore fight among themselves and destroy each other to get at the accumulation.

The greatest obstacle in the way of the American people beginning to behave like human beings rather than like animals is the great American illusion of freedom.

Stop an American and begin to make some serious criticisms of our society, and nine times out of ten his final defense will be: "But this is the freest and finest country in the world." When you probe into what he means by this, it turns out that what he is really talking about is the material goods that he can acquire in exchange for his birthright of political freedom. That is, he is free to have an automobile, a TV, a hi-fi, and all kinds of food, clothing, and drink as long as he doesn't offend anybody he works for or anybody in an official capacity, and as long as he doesn't challenge the accepted pattern of racial, economic, and political relations inside the country or its foreign policy outside. On these questions most Americans absolve themselves from any responsibility by saying that all that is "politics" and "I am not interested in politics." What they really mean is that they are afraid to assume political responsibility because it would mean jeopardizing their economic and social status. No people in the world have more to say about the lack of free speech in Russia, China, Cuba, and Ghana. The reason is that as long as they have these other places to talk about, they can evade facing the silent police state that has grown up inside America. If you casually mention the police state to an American, the first thing that comes to his mind is some other country. He doesn't see his own police state.

That is because in the United States, more than in any other country in the world, every man is a policeman over himself, a prisoner of his own fears. He is afraid to think because he is afraid of what his neighbors might think of what he thinks if they found out what he was thinking, or what his boss might think, or what the police might think, or the FBI, or the CIA. And all because he thinks he has a lot to lose. He thinks he has to choose between material goods and political freedom. And when the two are counterposed, Americans today will choose material goods. Believing they have much to lose, Americans find excuses where

there are no excuses, evade issues before the issues arise, shun situations and conversations which could lead to conflict, leave politics and political decisions to the politicians. They will not regain their membership in the human race until they recognize that their greatest need is no longer to make material goods but to make politics.

But politics today in the United States is not just ordinary politics made by ordinary politicians. Not since the 30's and the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt has there been political statesmanship in the United States. Roosevelt's problems and therefore his responsibilities, as he made very clear in his First Inaugural Address, were extraordinary. But Roosevelt's problems were largely domestic. Today, in contrast, every issue, no matter how local or domestic it may seem, has international repercussions inherent in it from the very beginning.

In President Eisenhower's Farewell Address, he warned the people of the growing power of the "military-industrial complex" inside the country. Ike was speaking mainly of the actual military power and personnel. He did not go into the way this apparatus has been intertwined with those who control the economic processes of the country and with the various investigating agencies which at every level control the thought processes of the population. All together, these now constitute a military-economic-police bloc which was not elected by the people and cannot be held responsible to the people but which makes all the decisions controlling the life of the people.

This bloc has its present power because the United States actually does have its back to the wall both domestically and internationally. Domestically, it is dependent upon the war economy for economic survival as a capitalist country, and has been so dependent since the Great Depression of the 30's. Internationally, it is dependent upon the military for protection against the world revolutionary movement that is arising among the have-not peoples of the world, and has been so dependent since the 1949 Revolution in China and the Korean War. The United States has lost all the spiritual power which underlies political power of a peaceful kind.

It is the refusal of the American people to face this situation openly and to assume responsibility for tackling it uncompromisingly that gives the military-economic-police bloc its strength. If the secret police were not so secret and silent, it would be much easier to fight. An open enemy is the best enemy. But the fear of the American people of clashing openly with this bloc adds strength to it.

Most secret of all is the CIA, which even members of Congress do not dare question. Yet the CIA has the power to go into a country, organize a war or a revolution or a counter-revolution, recruit among the American people for its schemes; it has the funds and the staff at its disposal to fight an underground war not only against the Russians but against every

country in the world.

The FBI is the secret police force closest to the lives of the people. Unlike the FBI of the 30's which used to be hailed as the great protector of the people against the criminal elements, the FBI today functions chiefly as a political police to pry into the private lives and thoughts of every American.

What the FBI does in complete secrecy, the House Un-American Activities Committee does in semi-secrecy, having the power to drag before it any individual or group which actively challenges the status quo in this country. In this way it dangles over all whom it queries the kind of public suspicion and silent condemnation from which there is only one way for the individual to escape—to prove his or her loyalty to the police state by becoming an informer for it.

If the leap that the American people have to take in order to meet the problems of this new age of abundance were not so great, the powers of the secret police would likewise not be so great. In the 30's the problems were relatively simple. All that was required was that the poor struggle against the rich, who were the capitalists and whose failure was clear and obvious.

Today in the 60's, the struggle is much more difficult. What it requires is that people in every stratum of the population clash not only with the agents of the silent police state but with their own prejudices, their own outmoded ideas, their own fears which keep them from grappling with the new realities of our age. The American people must find a way to insist upon their own right and responsibility to make political decisions and to determine policy in all spheres of social existence —whether it is foreign policy, the work process, education, race relations, community life. The coming struggle is a political struggle to take political power out of the hands of the few and put it into the hands of the many. But in order to get this power into the hands of the many, it will be necessary for the many not only to fight the powerful few but to fight and clash among themselves as well.