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The Revolutionary Moment

Janet Biehl

2015

The Revolutionary Moment by Janet Biehl. Today Rojava has become the epicenter of popular desires for radical democratic change. Like Paris in 1789, St. Petersburg in 1905 and 1917, and Barcelona in 1936-37, it crystallizes an era's aspirations for social and political revolution. The last book that Murray Bookchin authored before his death in 2006 was a history of such revolutions, with emphasis on the popular movements:

The Third Revolution

(4 vols., 1996-2004). The book's title is the key to its meaning. The First Revolution is the preindustrial revolution, in which the people rebel against feudalism, as in 1789, when the French peasantry rose up against the aristocracy and monarchy. In 1792-93, working people in Paris created neighborhood assemblies and all but governed the city through them. But the First Revolution failed to liberate the people, because authoritarian figures (Jacobins) emerged and harnessed the movement for liberty into a dictatorship, destroying the liberatory assemblies and paving the way for Napoleon's counterrevolution. The bourgeoisie was the ultimate beneficiary of the first revolution. The Second Revolution is typical of the industrial age, the revolution of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. The

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working class, as Marx described it, was exploited and when its misery became extreme, it would seize control of the means of production and create socialism. But the Second Revolution, too, failed to liberate the people, as its driving forces were harnessed into a tyranny, which that once again instituted a dictatorship, this time in the name of the proletariat. In 1917 the workers of St. Petersburg demanded democratic soviets, by which they meant soldiers' and sailors' councils. They wanted to create a council democracy, with several tiers, in which power flowed from the bottom up. But once the Bolsheviks came to power on the revolutionary wave, they transformed the flow of power through the layers of soviets from bottom up to top down, transforming them from democratic expressions of the popular will into instruments of dictatorial rule. The totalitarian states of Stalin and his imitators were the ultimate beneficiary of the second revolution. The Third Revolution—the one Bookchin advanced—would be the revolution of the people against dictatorships, a libertarian revolution against domination by the state and capitalism, but also against all social hierarchies, especially sexism and racism. In this anarchistic revolution, once again, people create democratic institutions—neighborhood assemblies and the councils—to empower themselves. But this time they have learned the lessons of history. They know not to let the bourgeoisie capture society's wealth, or to let vanguards create dictatorships in their name. The assemblies become the institutions of the new society, and by confederating they wage a struggle against the forces of capitalism and the nation-state. For Bookchin, the libertarian revolution was inspired by the Spanish revolution of 1936-37. Bookchin's lifelong project was to try to bring the revolutionary tradition into the postwar period. The era of proletarian revolutions was over, he knew, and the new revolutionary agent would be the citizen; the arena of the revolution would be not the factory but the city, especially the urban neighborhood. New social movements—feminism, antiracism, community, ecology—were creating a new revolutionary dynamic. Modern technology was elimi-

nating the need for toil, so that people would soon be free to participate in the democratic process. Hence his ideology of libertarian municipalism—the creation of face-to-face democratic institutions in urban neighborhoods, towns, and villages.

Had Bookchin lived to see the Rojava Revolution, he would surely have considered it emphatically part of the Third Revolution. In July 2012 the Assad regime simply let go of power there. Freed of that brutal yoke, people in the three cantons, following the principles of Democratic Confederalism, went on to create people's assemblies and tiers of confederal councils, very much as Bookchin envisioned. Bookchin had not foreseen it happening so nonviolently. In the United States, for example, the federal government in Washington would not simply roll over and abandon New York and Chicago and Los Angeles to people in assemblies. It would fight hard with its powerful high-tech military. So he thought the confederated assemblies would have to form a counterpower to the nation-state, or a dual power (in Trotsky's phrase). Acting a dual power, the confederation would express the people's will and constitute a lever to force a transfer of power, initiating a revolutionary conflict. The people would form people's militias, but it would be crucial, he thought, for the existing armed forces to cross over from the side of the state to the side of the people. But one thing he emphasized repeatedly in his later years. Revolutionary moments do not come around often in history; for a revolution to succeed, history on must be on the side of the revolution, and such "revolutionary moments," as he called them, are relatively uncommon. Too often, when a revolutionary moment appears, the people are not ready. A social and political crisis explodes, and people pour into the streets and demonstrate and protest—but they are an angry crowd, wondering what to do. By the time the revolutionary moment occurs, it is too late to create revolutionary institutions. It was crucial, Bookchin told his students, to begin to create the institutions of the new society within the shell of the old. In the United States, he said, people could create town meetings-

like those of New England throughout the country, and gradually, as more and more people began to use them to express their will, they could become powerful institutions of self-government, and through confederation could mobilize against the nation-state. The more I read about the Rojava Revolution, the more I am struck by the fact that its architects understood clearly the need for organizing in advance, even with no foreknowledge of when the moment would come. Yekitiya Star and the PYD began organizing clandestinely under the brutal Assad regime. Then in March 2011 the conflict that began at Dara'a opened up space for more overt organizing, and they plunged ahead in full force. The MGRK and Tev-Dem created councils in neighborhoods, villages, districts, and regions. People began to pour into the institutions, so much so that they a new level was needed, the residential street, which became the home to the commune, the true citizens' assembly. By the time the revolutionary moment occurred in July 2012, this process had been underway for over a year, and the movement was more than ready. The democratic council system was in place and had the support of the people. The next challenge will be not only to survive in the war against the jihadists, but to ensure that power continues to flow from the bottom up. For the rest of the world, the Rojava Revolution offers many important lessons, but the most important may be the one about advance preparation. It is crucial to build popular institutions in advance, long before the revolutionary moment comes around, so that when it does, they will be ready to take power. While Western activists often face repression, they face nothing like the brutality of the Assad dictatorship, and they have the relative freedom to begin to create new institutions now.

Will they be ready, on the day their revolutionary moment comes around?