Introduction

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One hundred years ago, the shockwaves of the Russian revolution reverberated around the world, striking fear into the hearts of ruling classes and stirring hopes of emancipation that mobilized millions. For the next seven decades, national liberation and socialist-inspired revolutionary movements fired the imaginations of peasants and working people who suffered under the boot of colonial regimes, rapacious domestic elites, and the ascendant power of the USA. From Vietnam to Cuba, China, Algeria, Mozambique, Bolivia, Grenada, Nicaragua, and beyond, insurgent movements seized state power, pushed domestic elites aside, and enacted a series of redistributive policies that sought to uplift and empower the downtrodden by creating cooperative, rather than competitive, ways of living. Igniting dreams of a future beyond the dull compulsions of the capitalist market, they expanded the horizons of popular expectation and educated an international left. And like all revolutions, they challenged not just the domestic status quo but also the global hegemony of western imperialism. Indeed, in the run up to the 1979 Sandinista triumph over the Somoza dictatorship, a popular slogan—*Si Cuba venció, Nicaragua vencerá*—indexed the power of revolution to galvanize people beyond national borders.

Nowadays, revolution has lost its appeal. It is widely perceived as neither possible nor desirable, even though the legitimacy of neoliberalism has cracked under the pressure of the 2008 capitalist crisis, and “socialism” earns high marks from young people. The waning support for revolution is due, in part, to the sense of betrayal and disillusionment with national liberation movements and socialist experiments that failed to enact their emancipatory projects. Stalinist terror and the implosion of the Soviet Union have erased the considerable achievements of the Russian revolution’s first decade. Similarly, the lack of democracy in Cuba and the rightward shift and corruption of the ruling Sandinista faction in Nicaragua have tarnished the legacy of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, while the African National Congress’ embrace of free market policies has aggravated class inequality in South Africa and alienated former supporters, moving some to charge the current regime with presiding over “apartheid in blackface.” Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party has created an authoritarian state-

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manipulated market economy that generated stunning growth for well over two decades, while trampling on the rights of workers, peasants, and students.

Yet the future of revolutionary states was not solely determined within national borders. The cold war intensified US meddling and the threat of intervention, making it nearly impossible for left-leaning governments to succeed. Richard Nixon ordered the CIA to “make the economy scream” in Chile so that the socialist project of democratically elected Salvador Allende could not serve as an example to other countries, and Ronald Reagan mined the harbors of Nicaragua and unleashed a mercenary paramilitary force, known as the *contras*, to bring down the Sandinistas. The USA trained and armed state security forces and supported paramilitary groups to wage covert warfare against both reformist and revolutionary challenges to the status quo from Latin America through Africa to Southeast Asia. Contemptuous of the very democratic procedures it claimed to uphold and willing to scorch the earth to beat back challenges to its rule, the USA unleashed a reign of terror that killed the most dynamic leaders, ruptured networks of solidarity, destroyed popular organizations, and ripped people from their communities of support. Terror obliged people to turn inward to solve their problems, to trust only their families, and to embrace religious faiths less focused on life in the present than with salvation in the afterlife (e.g., Grandin 2004; Gill 2016). By tempering the militancy of activists, it drove many social movements to attenuate their calls of redistributive justice and champion their cultural particularity. Counterinsurgent violence also reorganized popular memory. It created a present charged with horrific memories that served less to power collective mobilization than attest to a legacy of painful defeat and a denial of the future. Nightmares of impending environmental Armageddon and the individual imperative to consume commodities replaced dreams of revolutionary transformations (Traverso 2016).

The 1979 Sandinista defeat of the Somoza dynasty represented the apogee of the twentieth century’s revolutionary arc, which then bent toward neoliberalism. Francis Fukuyama’s oft-quoted claim that humanity had reached “the end of history” in which liberal democracy had replaced class struggle epitomized the chest-pounding capitalist triumphalism that radiated around the world at the close of the millennium. The consolidation of neoliberal hegemony, expressed in terms of electoral democracy, free markets, and human rights, succeeded in marginalizing or discrediting challenges. But only briefly. Neoliberalism’s promise that a steadily rising tide, buoyed by the market, would lift all boats was short lived almost everywhere. Beginning in 2001, annual gatherings of the World Social Forum declared that “another world is possible.” They brought together social movements, non-governmental organizations, and advocacy campaigns to share experiences and develop alternatives to capitalist globalization. Latin America arose from the ashes of the cold war and became revolutionary again, quickly moving to the forefront of the global fight against neoliberal orthodoxy. Beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the twenty-first century, the election of left-leaning governments in Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina—the so-called pink tide—reflected widespread popular rejection of a decade of onerous austerity measures. The new regimes moved to “bring the state back in” to the development process with regulation, the re-nationalization of industries, and social programs aimed at the poorest of the poor. Protests quickly spread around the world following the 2008 global financial meltdown. As policy makers returned to business-as-usual and offered little more than balanced budgets and tax cuts for the wealthy, uprisings in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, known as “the Arab Spring,” Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish *indignados*, and protests in Portugal, Greece, Iceland, Iran, and Eastern Europe, expressed some of the popular outrage over deepening inequality, unemployment, debt, eroding public services, and environmental

destruction. In some cases, they challenged the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, and in others, they experimented with forms of organization and social relationships meant to “prefigure” a new society beyond elite control.

Yet none of these movements took power or forced major concessions from governing elites. The Arab Spring was brutally crushed, and Occupy Wall Street neither sought power nor articulated demands for change. In Latin America, falling global commodity prices revealed the limits of pink-tide governments’ ability to mitigate the worst aspects of neoliberalism. Without huge commodity rents from minerals, oil, natural gas, and other export products, uplifting the poor, without challenging the power of capital, was no longer possible. The collective failure to produce alternatives to neoliberalism opened the door for the resolution of crises in favor of the right. In Brazil, the right orchestrated an institutional coup d’état against the Workers’ Party president Dilma Jouseff, who had already moved to the right. Argentines elected a right-wing populist, and Venezuela descended into chaos following the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013. In the USA and Europe, the far right mobilized popular anger more successfully than the left. It channeled anti-establishment sentiment into immigrant bashing, racist nationalism, and support for strong-man rule. It then converted this anger into political capital that underwrote the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit decision. Right-wing nationalism and populism were also on the march in India, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and the Philippines, whose reactionary president, Rodrigo Duterte, publicly bragged about murdering hundreds of drug dealers and addicts.

It is clear, as Kathy Powell notes in her contribution to this special issue, that capitalism has entered a period of uncertainty in which, as Gramsci observed, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”

What does this mean for how we think about revolution today?

In an era when imagining the end of the world, as Frederic Jameson observes, is easier than envisioning the end of capitalism (Jameson 2003), exploring this question and understanding the legacy of twentieth century revolutions are important to rethink a transformative political project in non-revolutionary times. As Saygun Gökarişel points out in his contribution, nowadays, the concept of revolution is often reduced to all manner of hackneyed references to media and technological change and a focus on the political event over the process. The editors of *Socialist Register* remind us that “The ‘political event’ of gaining state power ... has proven time and again to be less crucial than the social revolution of building capacities for self-government and the democratization and socialization of institutional resources. The ‘event,’ in itself, may be a dramatic rupture that opens new political possibilities ... [but] it will never be a sufficient condition for the exploited and oppressed to build their own capacities ...” (Albo and Panitch 2017: ix). How then do we envisage revolution, what it means, and what its possibilities are?

The articles in this special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* address these questions and they do so by exploring how people in different ethnographic contexts are envisioning social change and facing a range of struggles in a moment of political reaction. Saygun Gökarişel revisits the defeats of social struggles under Polish communism to reconsider the possibility of emancipatory political praxis in the present. To do so, the article focuses on an “Open Letter to the Polish United Workers’ Party,” written by two prominent Solidarity activists that sought to refashion revolutionary Marxism, break out of Communist party constraints, and develop new forms of worker organization. Gökarişel examines the political struggles that invoked, silenced, and rejected the letter during the Solidarity trade union movement to highlight the shifting conditions of revolutionary practice. He demonstrates that as the Solidarity movement gained power and its

leaders assumed positions in the government, the movement itself surrendered to the power of capital and enacted policies at odds with its earlier aspirations. Labor and human rights were disarticulated, state repression intensified, and Western capital was increasingly able to shape the meaning of social transformation. A political void emerged in which right-wing groups could claim the right to speak on behalf of working people. Understanding the material processes that undergirded this process, Gökariksel argues, is key to creating a living memory of the past that is not simply memorialized but used to refashion a different future.

In problematizing the complexities of Brexit, Kathy Powell argues in her contribution against leftist interpretations of Brexit that regard the vote as a fitting rejection of European Union neoliberalism and the elites that preside over it. Powell insists that we address the complexity of contemporary struggles, which means treating immigration and racism as central concerns. She reminds us that not all anti-establishment outbursts are progressive. The xenophobia and racism that fueled the Brexit decision have created impediments for envisioning revolutionary futures, but a resurgent parliamentary left, led by Jeremy Corbyn, has created new opportunities, as the conservative majority stumbles.

Aaron Kappeler's contribution demonstrates how Venezuelan governments from across the political spectrum used spectacular infrastructure projects—in this case, a hydroelectric dam—to build multiclass alliances. The military emerges as an engine of economic development linking the dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez to the authoritarian populism of Hugo Chávez in its use of infrastructure to generate political support. Kappeler argues that it was not just the promises of resource redistribution that accounted for the appeal of populist leaders like Pérez Jiménez and Chávez; the use of large-scale infrastructure to link these military leaders to the will of the people was key to nation-building efforts. Dams were attractive to a variety of different groups, especially the middle class and experts in state agencies who were key to retaining power. For these people, socialism represented “the chance to advance” and reproduce themselves as middle class. Democratic governance was less important than having their status desires fulfilled. Kappeler's analysis helps us understand some of the fragility of Chávez's twenty-first century socialism and why it has veered into authoritarianism.

Maka Suarez posits a revisionist interpretation of what it means to be revolutionary. Her piece demonstrates how unemployment and indebtedness via subprime mortgage default affect the lives of Ecuadorean immigrants in Barcelona, and it explores how these people have become involved in a housing movement that demands debt cancelation and asserts the right to housing. As finance capital increasingly extracts wealth from the working class through indebtedness, Suarez's case studies illustrate how debtors are coming together to oppose the power of finance capital at a strategic “chokepoint” in the system. Through their daily encounters with each other, their legislative initiatives, and their opposition to eviction, migrants challenge the tenets of finance capital and imagine themselves as citizens. According to Suarez, they are transforming reformist demands into revolutionary practices that have stopped evictions and canceled debt obligations.

On the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution and the 150th anniversary of the publication of Marx's *Capital*, the ascendance of neoliberalism has not only deepened inequality; it has erased the memories of revolution that once guided leftist and anti-colonial struggles. The time has clearly arrived for leftists to light more fires, politically and intellectually, and then fan the flames until they spread like wildfire. The struggles captured in these essays will hopefully help us think more critically about the meaning of revolution and about how to push entrenched capitalist orders in new socialist directions.

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