Review

Praxis and revolution: A theory of social transformation

Eva von Redecker.
Translated by Lucy Duggan.New York, Columbia University Press, 2021, xvi+296 pp., ISBN: 9780231198226

Contemporary Political Theory (2023) **22,** S157–S160. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-022-00575-4; published online 1 August 2022

How does social change happen? Why do some patterns of change endure and become revolutionary? Eva von Redecker's book, *Praxis and Revolution*, is a study in fundamental questions. The book was originally published in 2018 by Campus Verlag, but Lucy Duggan has recently translated it for publication in Columbia University Press's 'New Directions in Critical Theory' series. *Praxis and Revolution* seeks nothing less than to offer a comprehensive theoretical vocabulary to describe social stability and change, at multiple scales, and from a 'practice-first' or 'praxeological' point of view. It is an expansive book, sometimes unwieldy, often maddening, and occasionally brilliant. Its best claims are far-reaching, suggesting new ways for political theorists and critical historians to rethink an alluring phenomenon at the heart of our disciplines: revolution.

At its core, *Praxis and Revolution* builds a 'detailed model' of what revolutions are and how they happen (p. x). Revolutions are not events or ruptures between the old and the new. They are 'stretched out' processes where already-existing practices get transferred, substituted, and repurposed into new configurations. As the first half of the book explains, social stability happens when overlapping practices coagulate, reiterate over time, and form a bedrock of continuity. Like a magnetic field, a society's kaleidoscopic practices get 'aligned' toward one another and 'anchored' around shared foundational practices. We call the result 'structures,' which are not 'repeated practices but the expression of these practices in the form of stable rule-resource sets' (p. 98). A revolution happens when this bedrock of structural stability gets contaminated, or 'hijacked,' by already existing minor practices that are re-functionalized in new ways. As in Ludwig Wittgenstein's treatment of the famous 'duck-rabbit' image, these 'interstitial practices' become fulcrums for perspectival aspect-shifting on a mass scale. In a revolution, interstitial practices, 'laboriously rehearsed over time,' become the anchor for a new hegemonic paradigm (p. 219). What was once anomalous becomes central, even vital. What appears new is discovered to already have been there all along, in

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form though not in content. Seeing revolution from this perspective 'liberates revolutions from the hyperbolic notion of a single, central contradiction' (p. 222). Revolutions are not defined by heroic class agency or group identity. They are textured by networked practices that ebb and flow, together and apart, from background into foreground in unexpected 'performative paradigm shifts' (p. 201).

This is powerful stuff. It is also challenging. Readers should know right away that *Praxis and Revolution* is not easy reading. Across twelve substantive chapters, four brief literary interludes, and two prefaces, we get 'three types of rule (which define, constitute, and evaluate praxis),' associated with '[the] three forms of practical knowledge,' including 'recognition, knowledge, ability,' as well as 'four characteristics of practices,' namely that they are 'rule-governed, repeatable, material, and open to interpretation' (pp. 37, 41, 43). We get descriptions of how practices 'align,' 'overlap,' 'interlink,' and become 'anchored' through 'three variants': as a 'schema,' as an extended norm, and as 'an indispensable prerequisite for entering into other practices' (p. 70). Added to this terminological profusion is an ensemble cast of supporting theorists to explain, contextualize, and supplement. Despite remarks to the contrary, the component pieces of Redecker's theory are not won from engagement with the rough ground of the French Revolution. They are sculpted from creative engagement with theorists like Judith Butler, Anthony Giddens, and Hannah Arendt, all of whom are assembled like a house of cards, each precariously supporting another. The book draws on literary examples, but they are not approached as literary. Fictional scenes from Charles Dickens and Mary Wollstonecraft are scrutinized as if they were ethnographic reports. In truth, these literary examples offer Redecker a storehouse of convenient illustrations for the book's 'model' of revolution.

Praxis and Revolution is self-aware about its approach. The book aims to develop 'the right terminology' for analyzing revolution, a 'unified terminological frame' forged from 'a certain amount of terminological acrobatics' (pp. 84, 87, 110). The result is a fine-tuned model, but not necessarily a more illuminating one. Having more words to describe reality does not mean we grasp it any better. The situation calls to mind a commonplace remark about Catholicism. Few things are more coherent and comprehensive than Catholic doctrine. So rich, so sophisticated is its spiritual language, its canon and precepts, that no aspect of spiritual life is unexplainable through doctrinal extension. But whatever other virtues they may signify, comprehensiveness and coherence do not make a doctrine true on their own. The same could be said of Redecker's model of 'interstitial revolution.' It is an exhaustive explanatory edifice that floats mid-air like divine architecture.

Political theorists should not be distracted by the minutiae of Redecker's theory of revolution. They must look for the spirit beyond the letter of the argument, because that is the book's major strength and contribution. The profound thread guiding Redecker is that 'revolutions are not natural disasters. They do not engulf society from the outside' (p. 15). They are more akin to internal metamorphoses in

the practical bedrock of everyday life. If we continue to construe revolutions as a wholesale replacement of the old with the new, then we would have to concede to Martin Buber, whom Redecker quotes: 'If the new is not already there,' then 'the old will always retain the upper hand' (p. 9). For a revolution to happen, present alternatives must already be on hand. 'Someone has to have trusted in [that] alternative praxis rather than what already exists, and somebody must have seen this alternative as innovative in a broader sense' (p. 15). This is a refreshing model of revolution oriented toward repurposing, not rupture. It invites us to imagine how ordinary people recycle well-rehearsed practices for unexpected uses rather than leaping across historical abysses. Redecker is rightly skeptical of *ex nihilo* contingency where, like a Catholic rite—or Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou for that matter—'the event [becomes an] absolute' (p. 197). A theory of 'interstitial' revolution is not a heroic image of revolution, Redecker admits, but then again, the heroic portrait never seemed rooted in the practical realities of everyday life anyway. If there is one advantage to Redecker's model, it is that interstitial revolution is something people can do. For this reason, despite its abstract schematics, Redecker's theory of 'interstitial revolution' seems more felicitous to revolutionary experience than its cataclysmic and Promethean counterparts could ever be.

Redecker spells out the consequences of her model for scholars and activists today, and her prescriptions should be taken seriously. 'Historians would be obliged to seek the hidden preliminary stages of new structural articulations' if the book is correct (p. 128). Our attention should shift to templates of action, cultivated in interstitial social spaces, and which retroactively change the meaning of the scenes onto which they explode: 'Yes, it was already there, but it was not yet intelligible. Yes, it is new—but only as a paradigm, not as a praxis' (p. 225).

Similarly, 'activists would be well advised to keep postrevolutionary practices at hand "underground" until the day when they break through' (p. 128). This is an explicit prescription of prefigurative politics. In the preface to the American edition, Redecker suggests we read her book as an effort 'to overcome the most obvious rejoinder to prefigurative politics: that the transition from the small scale to the whole is unaccounted for' (pp. x–xi). The book is enormously successful in this respect. Its image of revolution provides a compelling update to that old Marxist adage that the ingredients of a new world must emerge from the womb of the old society (p. 213).

Yet in the end, there is something odd about constructing a baroque theory of revolution with only cursory engagement with actual revolutions. *Praxis and Revolution* aims at a comprehensive model of revolutionary change yet manages to avoid discussions of violence altogether. It has little feeling for the distinctive mixture of tragedy and farce that makes revolutions so remarkable. There is minimal attunement toward what Arno Mayer famously called 'the Furies' of revolution, the way actions and reactions 'lift off' and become dynamics unto

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themselves. Omitted here too is the revolutionary role of the unconscious, transference, repetition, and fantasy—psychodynamics an older school of critical theory would have assigned pride of place. Redecker has given us an impressive taxonomy of practices, tethered to a model of how those subterranean practices create revolutions. But the light of 'praxeology' sometimes feels too bright. It washes out the things that make revolutions what they are. We shouldn't forget critical theory's original methodological injunction: start from reality, the better to unfold an analysis of its form of appearance; as far as possible, derive categories of analysis from objects directly. We would do well to bring Redecker together with our messy realities of revolution. Together, they can help us better spot the signposts of an emancipated future.

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