Dormant Seeds of 1848

John Hewetson

1948

”As for the greater number of revolutionists, they unhappily know only of the theatrical side of former revolutions as related with forced effect by historians, and they scarcely suspected the immense work accomplished in France during the years 1789 through 1793 by millions of obscure persons–work which caused France to be in 1793 quite a different nation from what she was four years previously.” (Peter Kropotkin, Revolutionary Studies)

Revolutions in the past have resulted from the accumulation of tendencies in social evolution. It has not been difficult for historians to disentangle the various factors and analyse them–to show where they reinforce one another, and where their clashes brought suddenly into the open long dormant antagonisms. At such moments the old structures of society fall away and the new society thus born seems to take steps forward more rapidly in a few years–or even months–than the whole preceding century had achieved.

Revolutions are thus occasions of progress, and its opportunity. It is therefore natural that the revolutions of the past should be anatomised more and more closely today when dissatisfaction with existing social forms is almost universal. It is for their lessons that we chiefly study such movements of the past, and 1848 provides a focus for many trends which have by no means exhausted their interest or relevance for the present age.

We live in a pre-eminently political epoch. For years now we have grown accustomed to the spectacle of masses of humanity groaning under conditions of misery, and often enough of horror, resulting from no action of their own, but from some political decision taken by people they have never seen, in Capitals they have never visited. They are completely divorced from responsibility for their own lives. The Treaty of Versailles produced a mass of miserable and dissatisfied minority populations; the ”settlements” of today are repeating the process on an even grander scale. While between the two trudge the columns of refugees, of displaced persons, fleeing from France, from Spain, from Chiang Kai-shek, from Japanese or German or Russian invaders, from hostile Sikh or Moslem majorities, always from some manoeuvres which may have reality in the dim world of politics, but which are hideously alien from the warm world of human contact and human kinship.

These helpless and hopeless columns of dehumanised humanity are almost the distinguishing feature of recent history. The callousness, the inhuman indifference which sets these weary symptoms afoot is scarcely unexpected however. They spring from political actions, from the domain of leaders, of men in morning suits or other uniform signing documents in the dreary

splendour of state apartments. The pre-eminent engines of such contemporary misery are the determined and disciplined groups who constitute the political parties, more especially the totalitarian, monolithic political parties which have been increasingly dominant since 1918.

The manifest misery of the refugees is only the open symptom of our age and our politics-ridden lives. Where human relations should be warm and touched with sympathy, they are in fact sterilised by the distrust and stiffness which is implied in the word "bureaucracy". Its increasing pervasion of human life and its effects on human character are responsible for the almost universal dissatisfaction with existing social forms; but the massive misery which forms the background to the weary journeyings, and the frustration and defeat of human hopes and aspirations has at the same time removed the optimism which used to inform the conception of Progress.

Hence social change is not now greeted as an opportunity for a new life, but rather feared as the probable precursor of yet more misery. Horrible as these are, men today prefer the ills they know to flying to others that they know not of. Disillusionment, and disillusionment that extends to the revolutionary periods of our own day, has made cowards of us all.

A hundred years ago men of vision awaited the Revolution expectantly, with determination and hopes high. It is quite otherwise today.

Yet the revolutions of the future must still provide the opportunities for renewed life. They will offer the disintegration of social forms; and hopes can be reposed still less in conservatism, in maintaining the existing social structures than was ever the case in the nineteenth or even the early twentieth centuries. More than ever therefore are we thrown back on the study of the revolutions of the past, in the search for solutions to problems of the present and future. Nevertheless, the accent has shifted: instead of deriving hope and consolation from revolutionary successes, we have to consider chiefly the failures and omissions which opened the door to defeat.

The history of 1848 is appropriate for us to study, since it was chiefly a political revolution. Yet, although the influence of mass movements was less evident than in the Great Revolution or the Commune of 1871, it was nevertheless present, and the most important factor. No attempt will be made here, however, to study political issues in detail; instead, certain broader issues–one might almost call them philosophical questions–will be emphasised.

In its general outlines, 1848 followed the historical lines of all revolutions. As early as 1842, Heine had reported the conscious misery of the workers: "Everything is as quiet as a winter's night after a new fall of snow. But in the silence you hear continually dripping, dripping, the profits of the capitalist, as they steadily increase. You can actually hear them piling up–the riches of the rich. Sometimes there is the smothered cry of poverty, and often, too, a scraping sound, like a knife being sharpened." And, as always, it was the sudden action of the anonymous mass which toppled over the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe. In January 1848, a spokesman of the Government had declared in the Chamber that "the Ministry will not yield one step", and it only needed the trivial occasion of the forbidding of the reform banquet arranged in Paris for February 22nd to start the demonstrations which led to the barricades going up in the Paris working-class districts.

The fallen ministry and Monarchy were succeeded by the Republic and a government composed of Republican leaders like Ledru-Rollin, and Socialists like Louis Blanc. Such political figures were provided with their opportunity by the mass uprising; but they were not the cause of it. Kropotkin has described the process which leads up to revolutionary situations. Revolutionists

of vision, who have a clear view of what human life could be like, are always in a minority. But events gather to their ranks many more who are merely dissatisfied with the existing regime.

"This affluence to the ranks of the revolutionaries of a mass of malcontents of all shades creates the force of revolutions and renders them inevitable. A simple conspiracy in the palace, or of Parliament, more or less supported by what is called public opinion, suffices to change the men in power, and sometimes the form of government. But a Revolution, to effect any change whatever in the economic order, requires the agreement of an immense number of wills. Without the agreement, more or less active, of millions, no revolution is possible. It is necessary that everywhere, in each hamlet even, there should be men to act in the destruction of the past; also that other millions remain inactive in the hope of seeing something arise to improve their future conditions. And it is just this vague, undecided discontent–very often unconscious–surging in the minds of men at the eve of great events, and that loss of confidence in the existing order, which permits true revolutionists to accomplish their immense task–the Titanic task of reconstructing in a few years institutions venerated for centuries." (Kropotkin: Revolutionary Studies.)

The revolutionists of 1848, however, were not equal to the task, for in general they had neither the vision to provide the ideas necessary for a new society, nor the courage to break with and destroy the past. One of them, at least, recognised this from the outset, for on the day after the events of February 24th, Proudhon wrote that the revolution had no plan: "It must be given direction, and already I see it perishing in a flood of speeches." As D.W. Brogan says, "to have written this diagnosis of the Revolution of February 24th, on February 25th, was an astonishing feat of penetration for it was Proudhon who was right–and the naïve enthusiasts who were wrong".[1]

Proudhon was an intensely practical thinker, despite his many paradoxes, and it is worth following some of his ideas further. In this country he suffers under the rival reputation of Marx, whose answer, entitled The Poverty of Philosophy, to Proudhon's The Philosophy of Poverty is uncritically accepted by thousands of socialists who have read neither the original nor the reply. In France, Proudhon's influence powerfully affected the uprising of 1871 and the development of the French Labour Movement. His outlook and his attitude affect the social activity of the French workers even today.

Proudhon was elected to the Assembly by a substantial majority at a by-election in Paris in June, but by that time the initiative had already passed from the hands of the workers into those of timid political leaders. Hence Proudhon's contribution to the ideas of the Revolution was received with hostility. Alone among the revolutionists of the time, he saw the necessity to destroy the social basis of the past by expropriating the bourgeois class and by the equalisation of incomes. This was no mere socialistic flourish. Proudhon knew from practical experience of life that the obedience of the ruled is chiefly exacted by economic pressures and he saw that the power of the reaction and the social order over which it ruled could only be broken by radical economic adjustments. Expropriation was not merely an act of social justice, it was a severely practical safeguard for the revolution.

Of course, such economic measures against the possessing class had been recognised as necessary by the socialist schools of Saint Simon and Fourier long before Proudhon. Such ideas were part of the accepted ideas of socialism. Yet the Ledru-Rollins and Louis Blancs, far from acclaiming Proudhon's proposition, voted with the majority that "the proposition of Citizen Proudhon is

[1] Proudhon, p. 48.

an odious attack on the principles of public morals". Proudhon's resolution, which he put before the Assembly on July 31st, 1848, received only two votes in favour–his own and that of a Socialist named Greppo.

The interesting point is not that such a resolution should have been put forward, but that none of the prominent Socialists except Proudhon should have supported it. The process is one which has been repeated in succeeding revolutions: in Kropotkin's words about the day after revolutionary uprisings, "when the immense majority of those who yesterday gloried in the name of revolutionaries hasten to pass into the ranks of the defenders of order". It was in defence of order that the military laid siege to the working-class districts and overcame the working-men's army in June, 1848. It was in the name of order that Thiers massacred in 1871 the Communards, whose very appellation of "Federals" was a tribute to Proudhon's federalist conceptions.

This matter of the economic timidity of revolutionary leaders is of immense practical importance, for it has contributed to the failure of the great revolutions of our own time, in 1917 and 1936.

At the fourth Congress of the First International at Basle in September, 1869, the followers of Bakunin advanced a resolution condemning the principle of hereditary succession to property, and then went on to demand the abolition of private property altogether. Although such a step would seem to be an essential prerequisite for the social ownership of production by the community at large (I do not say by the State), it was fiercely contested by the Marxist section of the International. The resolution was nevertheless accepted by a majority vote, and it was this victory for the ideas of Bakunin that determined Marx on the manoeuvrings which ended with the removal of the General Council to New York and the virtual destruction of the International. That Marx's hostility to the complete abolition of private property on this occasion was not merely a tactical question is shown by his assertion that in the Communist Manifesto of 1847 he only sought the expropriation of capitalists' property.[2]

Despite the success of Bakunin's resolution in the Fourth Congress of the International, the Paris Commune of 1871 merely advocated a limited collectivism making only large-scale industry socially owned. Where Proudhon had put expropriation of the Banks as the first act which the revolution must accomplish and the only one which could in no circumstances be allowed to wait, the Communards failed to see the need to cut away the economic basis of the bourgeois power by expropriating the Bank of France and all economic undertakings. Hence with his economic powers virtually unimpaired, Thiers was able to exact his brutal revenge.

And the revolutions in Russia and Spain also left intact a money and wages system which permitted the new rulers to impose the same economic fetters on the workers which they imagined they had destroyed in the uprisings that brought down the old regime. Proudhon's lesson has yet to be learned.

So mar the events of 1848 have been treated only as they relate to France. But the significant thing about the revolutions of that year was just the fact that they were not confined to one country; the whole of Europe was affected by the revolutionary unrest. Beginning in Italy, the revolution spread to France and then to Germany, Austria and the Slav countries, while in England the Chartist movement flickered before going out altogether. It is not, however, true that the movement "spread" from one country to another, certainly not in the sense that it was consciously carried by revolutionists across national frontiers. For, as other writers have pointed

[2] F. R. Salter, Karl Marx and Modern Socialism, p. 52.

out, 1848 was notable for the nationalist character of its uprisings. For the most part, the active revolutionists had no internationalist conceptions, and the armies of one republic were used to crush the republican aspirations of another revolution.

Subsequent revolutions have made fully clear the lesson that radical social changes cannot be made and maintained by a revolutionary people in isolation. But in 1848 this lesson appears to have been grasped by one man only. In other directions Bakunin's social ideas were to mature considerably in the years that followed. But he was already an internationalist when he wrote in 1848:

"Two great questions were posed from the first days of the spring: the social question and that of the independence of all nations, the emancipation at once of people at home and abroad. It was not a few individuals, nor was it a party; it was the admirable instinct of the masses which had raised these two questions above all others and which demanded a prompt solution to them. Everybody had understood that liberty is only a lie where the great majority of the population is reduced to leading a poverty-stricken existence, where, deprived of education, leisure, and bread, they find themselves more or less destined to serve as stepping-stones for the powerful and the rich. The social revolution then appears as a natural and necessary consequence of the political revolution. In the same way it was felt that while there was in Europe a single nation persecuted, the decisive and complete triumph of democracy would not be possible anywhere. The oppression of a people, even of a single individual, is the oppression of all, and it is impossible to violate the liberty of one without violating the liberty of all…The social question, a very difficult question, bristling with dangers and big with tempests, cannot be resolved either by a pre-conceived theory or by any isolated system. To solve it, there must be the faith of all in the right of everybody to an equal liberty. It is necessary to overthrow the material and moral conditions of our present existence, break into ruins from below this decaying social world, which has become impotent and sterile and which will be unable to contain or allow such a great mass of liberty. It will be necessary beforehand to purify our atmosphere and transform completely the surroundings in which we live, which corrupt our instincts and our wills, in limiting our hearts and our intelligences. The social question thus appeared from the first as the overthrowing of society."

I have quoted this passage at length because it contains so many points of interest–to some of which I shall return later. But for the moment what concerns us is the breadth of Bakunin's revolutionary conceptions which extend far beyond the boundaries of mere political frontiers. The factors which made 1848 the year of European revolutions were doubtless mainly the economic ones which underlay them all. But the nationalist revolutionists did not recognise this fundamental community of interests. Marx had addressed his peroration in the Communist Manifesto to the workers of the world, but twenty odd years later in 1870 he still thought in nationalist terms, for he looked for the victory of Prussia over France as a step forward for Socialism. For the internationalists of that time he had nothing but scorn. French workers in a manifesto to the German workers had declared in 1870: "Brothers, we protest against the war, we who wish for peace, labour, and liberty. Brothers, do not listen to the hirelings who seek to deceive you as to the real wishes of France." And German internationalists replied: "We too wish for peace, labour and liberty. We know that on both sides of the Rhine there are brothers with whom we are ready to die for the Universal Republic." These men–anonymous workers–had a vision of the human race undivided by war-making frontiers. But Marx and Engels wrote to one another of the "imbeciles of Paris and their ridiculous manifesto".

Nor were internationalist conceptions fully grasped by the Russian and Spanish revolutionaries. It is only too clear that even advanced theoreticians in these countries thought primarily of their national problems and considered revolutionary trends in other countries only as possible adjuncts to their own struggle. Absorbed in the local upheaval, they could not see it as a symptom of world unrest which must either spread universally or be engulfed by the reaction. It is a sobering reflection that Bakunin had grasped the universal position as long as a hundred years ago, for internationalism can hardly ever have been at such a low ebb as now.

A radical view of the economic problem of the social revolution, and internationalism: Proudhon and Bakunin had understood these questions in 1848 and revolutionary theorists have conceded the correctness of their views. But more important still, because almost unrecognised even today, were certain views about the motive force and the directing power behind revolutionary events. Once again the anarchists Proudhon and Bakunin had reached conclusions far in advance of contemporary social thinkers, in the course of those all-night sessions in which they argued about Hegel and listened to the symphonies of Beethoven.

Even today it is regarded almost as axiomatic that revolutions are led. Led by intellectuals, men who have pondered the social questions and in their wisdom instruct the ”blind masses” as to what is best for them. Intellectual leaders or military adventurers: these are still the revolutionists of romantic history and propaganda build-ups. And inevitably the ambitious men who seek such roles make use of an instrument suitable for imposing their views on the ”blind mass”. That instrument is the political party, and its power, its malign power over the lives of millions has already been referred to. Can the ideas of 1848 shed any light for us on these dark places?

The most outstanding characteristic of revolutions is their tremendous energy. As Kropotkin pointed out, this overbounding energy sweeps away old institutions and in a few years transforms the social structure in directions which cannot be reversed.

Such changes cannot be the work solely of parties, for no such changes occur at non-revolutionary moments when initiative rests much more securely in the hands of the political grouping which forms the government. Revolutions emerge from the initiative of masses of anonymous people, from ”the agreement”, in Kropotkin’s words, of immense numbers of wills”. The dominance of the party requires the exact opposite; initiative must rest in the hands of a comparatively small number of party functionaries and their will must prevail over a more or less docile population. It is to be noted that such docile submission, if not vouchsafed voluntarily, is secured by practical politicians by means of police, secret or otherwise, wielding an immense system of punitive laws and penal institutions. Such structures most certainly do not exist to give free play to the revolutionary energy and aspirations of masses of a population.

It is not perhaps surprising that the power for social change possessed by a mere party is trivial compared to that which a revolutionary population achieves in a few months. Such a conception of the motive force of revolutionary events is not widely current today. Yet Proudhon had grasped it well enough when he wrote: ”Philosophic reason…does not admit, with the Jacobins and the doctrinaires, that one can proceed to…reform by legislative authority. It only gives its confidence to reforms which come out of the free will of societies; the only revolutions which it acknowledges are those which proceed from the initiative of the masses; it denies, in the most absolute manner, the revolutionary competence of governments.”[3]

[3] P.J. Proudhon: Confessions of a Revolutionary (1849).

In the passage quoted already Bakunin is seen to have reached the same conception. Regarding the social question and internationalism, he declared: "It was not a few individuals, nor was it a party; it was the admirable instinct of the masses which raised these two questions above all others, and which demanded a prompt solution of them."

With such a conception, it is clear that any move which tends to remove initiative from the revolutionary mass by placing it in the hands of a few individuals or a party will undermine the source of energy for revolutionary change. Such a transference of initiative will bring the revolution to a standstill.

And so it proves in history. In 1848, as in 1789, the revolution came to a standstill when the period of revolutionary motivation gave place to the formation of a strong government. In Russia, the revolution of workers and peasants was overwhelmed by the emergence of a strongly centralised political party with its discipline and its secret police. And the outstanding achievements of the Spanish revolution were the work of the anonymous peasants and workers in the collective farms and factories which they organised and controlled independent of the shadow government of Largo Caballero. The function of the party government of Negrin was to dismantle these achievements and inevitably (though apparently incidentally) the anti-Fascist struggle as well.

The reliance on political parties and political leaders is in no small part due to the influence of Marx. He and Engels were capable of regarding even international wars from the point of view of whether or not they advanced their particular theories within the Socialist movement. The following letter from Marx to his collaborator shows this with brutal clarity, and at the same time exhibits the contempt which these leaders evinced for the revolutionary workers, and also their underlying nationalism:

The French need a thrashing. If the Prussians are victorious the centralisation of state power will be helpful for the centralisation of the German working class; furthermore, German predominance will shift the centre of gravity of West European labour movements from France to Germany. And one had but to compare the movement from 1866 till today to see that the German working class is in theory and organisation superior to the French. Its dominance over the French on the world stage would mean likewise the dominance of our theory over that of Proudhon…"

The leadership conception is clearly expressed in this passage. It leads directly on not only to Lenin's outspoken opinion that the workers could only achieve a trade-union mentality and therefore require intellectuals to do their thinking for them, but also to the more polite dictatorship of the intellectuals expressed by the Labour Party.

With such a conception it is not surprising that Marx and Engels deplored the initiative of the French workers in 1870. "If one could have any influence at Paris," wrote Engels to his friend, "it would be necessary to prevent the working folk from budging until the peace."[4] No doubt it was the same fear of the energy of revolutionary masses which made Marx continually exclaim:" Tell the working men of Marseilles to put their heads in a bucket!"

There is no need to idealise or to idolise the "masses": it is enough to regard the political fiascoes of 1848 with a clear eye and to reflect that in this, as in preceding and succeeding revolutions, the revolutionary achievements derived from the spontaneous uprisings of the mass. The leadership conception is the antithesis of this, and its corollary, the emergence of the political party as the would-be controlling force, signifies the end of the revolution, the beginning of

[4] F.R. Salter: Karl Marx and Modern Socialism, p. 61.

the counter-revolution. With all its imperfections, futilities and failures, 1848 contains the seeds whose germination could fructify the social revolutions of the future.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



John Hewetson
Dormant Seeds of 1848
1948

A Hundred Years of Revolution: 1848 And After, edited by George Woodcock (Porcupine Press, London, 1948)
Scanned from original.

theanarchistlibrary.org