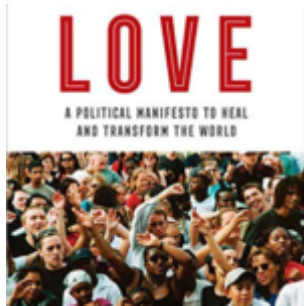


The Power of Revolutionary Imagination

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A review of *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*, Michael Lerner (University of California Press, 2019).

In 1923 the feminist Bolshevik, Alexandra Kollontai, wrote a letter to Russian socialist youth. This was a time when the stresses and strains of the civil war years were beginning to erode the early liberatory aspects of the Russian Revolution, and when more authoritarian tendencies began to emerge. In her letter she called for

“...a sensitive understanding of others and a penetrating consciousness of the individual’s relationship to the collective. All these ‘warm emotions’—sensitivity, compassion, sympathy and responsiveness—derive from one source: they are aspects of love, not in the narrow, sexual sense, but in the broad meaning of the word. *Love is an emotion that unites and is consequently of an organizing character.*” (Emphasis added, from *Alexandra Kollontai, Selected Writings*, ed. Alix Hold, 1977.)

Over the subsequent nearly 100 years few socialists, let alone liberals and social democrats, appreciated or understood Kollontai’s perspective. Even Che Guevara’s iconic statement, “At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love...” was subsumed by its underlying vanguard elitism. Now Rabbi Michael Lerner has written a book that comprehensively addresses these issues and elevates these “warm emotions” to a transformative revolutionary philosophy. Today’s youth manifests the contradictory feelings of an emergent resistance movement on the one hand, and widespread cynicism and despair on the other. It is to these young activists, as well as to older liberals, progressives, and traditional socialists that Rabbi Lerner addresses his book. The book is enriched by the multidimensionality of Lerner’s own life. He draws from his experience as a young radical in the 60’s, a leader of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and a co-founder of NAM (the New American Movement), a clinical psychotherapist, a Jewish renewal Rabbi, drawing from the Old Testament’s mandate to “love the stranger” and wisdom of the Hebrew prophets, and finally as an elder. The arc of his life has taken him through the certainties of his youth, through critiques and acknowledgement of life’s uncertainties and complexities, to humility and wisdom from which we can all learn, young and old alike.

From its title alone, *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World*, one already knows that this book does not offer a timid or modest perspective. No, what Lerner offers here is nothing short of a paradigmatic shift in how we approach transformative politics, and in how we imagine a socialist world might be. Why paradigmatic? Because the perspective he proposes, the spiritualization of socialism, the integration of love, generosity, empathy and compassion as defining principles of socialism and socialist strategy, is as radical a departure from traditional materialistic and economic socialist theory as was quantum mechanics from classical Newtonian mechanics.

The paradigmatic shift requires a revolutionary change in the worldview of transformative politics.

Can the Left Heal itself?

Why has the Left remained marginal, unable to reach masses of Americans, working class or otherwise? The reason, says Lerner, is that these movements, as undeniably important as they have been, with their one-dimensional focus on economic issues, have been unable to provide a new and exciting perspective of what socialism can be. They have made clear what we are *against*, but have fallen short in providing an inspiring vision of what we are *for* beyond reformist policies. And this inability to put forth a transformative revolutionary vision occurs because they have ignored what Lerner calls “The Great Deprivation,” the spiritual hunger that people have for meaning and connection to others in their lives. The spirituality of which he speaks reflects the deeper meanings by which people live, the sense of awe and wonder at the natural world and all living things, and the desire for connection to other human beings. It is an appreciation of “something” that is beyond our complete understanding, but which gives meaning, inspiration and depth to our lives. Spirituality, in this sense, has nothing to do with organized religion—but the fact that so many people express faith in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or other religious traditions, indicates that belief in a spiritual component to life is important to them. Spirituality is something that both current and historical notions of socialism have neglected, and may partly explain the negative impressions that the word “socialism” evokes in many people. A spiritualized socialism in the context of this book is a socialism that, while not denying the importance of economic justice, does not restrict its meaning to economics. Spiritualized socialism speaks to our internal processes, our psyches and our dreams, and touches the aspirational part of our humanity.

Lerner acknowledges those who have influenced his thinking, among them Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Martin Luther King, Jr, Wilhelm Reich, Gandhi, the feminist movement in general, as well as several feminist theologians and poets. One can certainly see the influence of these predecessors and mentors. In particular, it is Wilhelm Reich’s, 1933 “What is Class Consciousness?” which echoes strongly in Lerner’s perspective. Reich, too, was troubled by the inability of the German Social Democracy (GDP) to reach the German people. This he attributed to the GDP’s “ossified dogmas”:

“While we presented the masses with superb analysis and economic treatises on the contradictions of imperialism, Hitler stirred the deepest roots of their emotional being...we acted like mechanistic, economic materialists.”

Lerner makes this critique contemporaneous:

“...the core problem of these past movements went deeper... (they) focused almost entirely on the external realities of life, the economic and political arrangements, ignoring the inner realities, the need to place love, empathy and genuine caring for each other...at the top of their agenda. They did not recognize the importance of “meaning needs”—being connected to higher values for one’s life than simply satisfying material wants and needs...(they) focused on *objective* caring. *Subjective* caring involves helping people actually feel respected and treating them as important and deserving of care.” (Emphasis added)

The relevance of both of these quotes for today’s social and political environment is immediately apparent. Trump, of course, has addressed people on an emotional level, and assuaged their hunger to feel a part of something, albeit in reactionary, xenophobic and racist terms. In response, the American Left has had little to offer. How we have gotten to this state is a central political, social and psychological problem of our time. And unraveling this problem is the focus of Lerner’s book—that in order to transform the world, in order to reach the masses of people necessary for such

a transformation, the generic Left must look at the world in new ways. The Left must do some serious soul searching, must stretch itself beyond its comfort zone, and must let go of both its outdated and dysfunctional fear of spirituality, and its economic reductionist instrumental ways of approaching people. The Left's outmoded ways of thinking have kept it out of touch with the very people it wants to reach.

Many of these old attitudes and behaviors, Lerner points out, are a result of the Left's own internalization of capitalism's objectification of human beings, "the many constraining ideas our current political and economic system has planted in us." So while the capitalist may objectify the worker as a source of value, profit or productivity, the socialist may also objectify the worker as a "force" or a "class", an entity to be mobilized for revolution, to be molded by a socialist vanguard—dehumanizing constructs in both cases.

There are certainly more than enough examples of how liberals, progressives, and socialists have approached people in disengaging, instrumental or demeaning ways. One need only recall Hillary Clinton's shockingly insensitive reference to a "basket of deplorables." More subtle instances are the ways in which the Left often labels anyone with opposing views as racist, sexist, class enemies, or just plain ignorant and stupid. One sees this most glaringly in social media, especially Facebook. There are other dehumanizing manifestations, including the ways in which political organizations often diminish their own members, those who are less knowledgeable or sophisticated in political or socialist theory, the way in which discussions are still often dominated by the more outspoken, the lack of respect shown when people express questions or doubts about a particular strategy or tactic. (See "Manners: Revolutionary and Bourgeois" by Samuel Farber in *Jacobin*, August 2019).

It is no wonder then, that so many people feel put down by progressives, demeaned and belittled, and no wonder that so many consider the Left to be elitist, a meme taken and effectively run with by the Right. And here Lerner draws on his experience as a clinical psychotherapist at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. In the course of interviewing working class people, Lerner's own curiosity about people allowed him to be educated about how people understand their own realities. One of the most poignant recollections he shares is that of a working class woman who told a progressive campaigner during the 2016 election: "I agree with the Democrats so much but I feel like they hate me and everyone like me. I just want you to know one thing: I am not a deplorable."

Revolutionary love, then, is overcoming the internalization of these constraining ideas and objectifying approaches to people. How do we do this? With humility and curiosity. He writes:

"Getting to know people, being exposed to their consciousness, and hearing how they understand their world and their desires are prerequisites for helping us all understand the complex yearnings and inner dynamics of human beings and our ever present possibilities for transcending ourselves and our world. "

"To change a society", says Lerner, "you must respect its people." And further, we need to engage in tactics "that embody the kind of society we want to build...the path toward the world we want must embody the values of the world we want." What Lerner proposes is a strategy based on revolutionary love, empathy, and compassion and a vision of a caring society, a socialism not afraid of spirituality but nurtured by it: "The revolutionary possibility of love is that it allows the Left to heal itself while healing others and provides the foundations on which a truly loving movement can be birthed."

What is to Be Done? Utopianism or Revolutionary Vision

The second part of this book suggests programs and strategies that provide a way to move toward a

caring society. Lerner suggests the Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment (ESRA) to the Constitution, to achieve a more robust and democratic society by empowering the public to ensure that institutions are accountable to the goals of environmental and social responsibility. He suggests a Global Generosity Plan, using collective global wealth to eliminate domestic and foreign poverty, homelessness, hunger and inadequate education and healthcare, among other things. To challenge the old ways of thinking, he proposes groups of people, sometimes called “Empathy Tribes”, sometimes “spiritual progressives”, who will guide liberals and progressives to a new kind of movement, and a new consciousness. Prophetic empathy, he writes, “affirms each individual, challenges the degree to which they have become attached to the values of the competitive marketplace and supports them to become involved in building the caring society.”

Lerner acknowledges that some of his suggestions are short-term goals, such as reducing the workweek to 28 hours, a guaranteed income for everyone, free healthcare, among others. He offers these measures as a means of initiating public discussion of the issues. In the process, such public discourse will affirm the humanity of all, including those who may not agree. In this way he avoids the problems faced by past revolutionary leaders who also tried to create a new consciousness—the efforts of Lenin and Trotsky, Mao and Che were all felled by the ravages of authoritarianism because, ultimately, public discussion and dissent were not allowed. “Our outreach activities,” he writes, “are not designed to manipulate people, but rather to aid each other to outgrow the instrumental/utilitarian way we’ve all been taught to think about others.”

Some may find Lerner’s approach idealistic and utopian, especially given common Leftist disdain for anything hinting of utopianism—residue from *The Communist Manifesto’s* rebuke of utopians for building “castles in the air.” But this disdain has outlived its usefulness, has severely constricted the imaginativeness of Leftist theory and practice, and has allowed transformative vision to languish, leading to frustration, pessimism, vitriolic infighting and sectarianism, and disengagement from people.

Lerner himself anticipates the critiques of his book, but he nevertheless offers his vision, and his suggestions “to give a sense of what steps could be taken to build a different world.” He invites his readers to “read, refine, critique and transcend what I’m envisioning here.” There will, and should be, many critiques and refinements. For myself, I would want some refinement of those Empathy Tribes—without some further clarity about the criteria of participation in these tribes, and the process of membership and accountability, they strike me as a possible slippery slope to the problems Jo Freeman wrote about in her 1973 essay, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.” She showed how informal structures allowed some people to assume power over others, and allowed decision making processes to be limited to only the few initiates. However, Lerner is willing to bear, and welcomes, critiques because he has humility about the inevitability of mistakes, and because he is passionate in his belief that we *can* be freed from the oppressions of our present, and passionate in his vision of a transformed world.

His book is a challenge for us to live *in* our vision of the world to which we aspire. If we do not attend to the psychosocial and spiritual dimension of our existence, if we remain tied only to the material, economic, and external structures of society, we will be unable to sustain the transformative power of our interconnectedness, and our movements will wither, succumbing to apathy, pessimism, cynicism and to bleak organizations that cannot inspire anyone. Of this we have more than enough empiric evidence.

Revolutionary Love is an important book, and should be read by all who aspire to a better world—read it, discuss it, critique it, refine it, imagine it. This is the author’s stated intention for the book. It is a visionary book that provides hope against demoralization. Ultimately, this book tells us that how we behave, toward ourselves, toward others in our personal lives, in our movement,

towards those who disagree with us, and toward our fevered earth, is *as* critical, maybe *more* critical, to social transformation than the goal we are trying to achieve.

In the face of capitalism's brutal inequalities, its dehumanizing hegemonic culture, its perversion of human relationships, its predatory destruction of the environment, and in the face of failed previous attempts of reform and failed revolutions in other countries, we have arrived at a turning point in human history. Our future may depend on our ability to radically change our approach to transformative activity. *Revolutionary Love* is a book for these times.