Ukraine, Coup or Revolution?

February 25, 2014

The Ukraine is no longer 'in flames.' With the hurried flight of the detested Yanukovich, peace and order have descended on Kiev (except for some fistfights in the Parliament!) There is no looting. Self-organized popular militias protect the luxurious Presidential Palace (privatized by Yanukovich) as crowds of citizen file through to gape at his collections of antique and modern automobiles.

These orderly crowds have lived through the experience of months of revolutionary activity in support of the constantly renewed Kiev occupations. They are conscious and discipline. All through the cold winter they have organized a continuous mass occupation, including the provision of food, hygiene, safety, and self-defense under the discipline of units of one hundred ('Hundreds'). They have improvised nation-wide network of smaller occupations and support groups providing the Kiev occupiers with food, medical assistance, rotating re-inforcements, and recently the weapons ('liberated' from the Army in Lviv) which, although never fired, turned the tide in favor of the revolution.

These military firearms were only 'liberated' and brought to Kiev in response to Yanukovich, who clumsily raised the level of violence by ordering his elite snipers to use live ammunition on the occupiers, who had been defending themselves for the most part with shields and clubs.[2] The symbolic arming to the masses, re-established the balance of opposing forces, opening the way for the negitations between the leaders of the "100s" on the one hand and the Army and Police on the other. Many among the latter had relatives among the occupiers, none was ready to kill or be killed to save Yanukovich's ass. The blood of the 84 fighters who fell to sniper bullets in defence of the occupation was not shed in vain.

Today, no longer confined behind barricades, Ukraine's citizen activists have jubilantly taken over the city. For the moment, they are the only power, and they have the right to chant, echoing the slogan of Occupy Wall St : 'This is what democracy looks like.'

The Ukrainian demonstrators Like 'Occupy' and the *Indignados,*also reject the corrupt, entrenched, oligarch-financed political parties who are trying to patch together a new government in a Parliament (whose doors are carefully guarded by citizen defense forces). They have no more use for the leaders of what the media call the 'opposition' then they did for Yanukovich. Their contempt echos the Argentinian masses whose street protests unseated a series of governments in the early 2000s: *¡Qué se vayan todos!*("Throw ALL the bums out!").[3] They have in their memory the lived experience of 2004, when their mass occupations preciptated a previous democratic revolution, rapidly highjacked by corrupt politicians and billionaire oligarchs. They are not prepared to be bilked a second time, and they have so far had the good sense to remain armed, organized and vigilant.

Nationalism and Internationalism

The crowds who have accomplished this victory for 'peoples' power' unite people of all classes and all ethnicities, including not just native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian, but also Moslems, Jews, and various nationalities of the Caucuses.[4] A recent interview with a marvelously lucid and well-informed Ukrainian revolutionary syndicalist named Vlatislav, who has been in the thick of things, confirms the spontaneous, self-organized, multi-class and multi-ethnic composition of the revolutionary crowds. He dismisses the idea that the people are 'pro-Europe' as anachronistic, dating from the early days of the occupation, when it was largely symbolic.

As for the divide between the Russian-speaking East and the Ukrainian-speaking West, Vlatislav thinks it is "often exaggerated to the point where the existence of a single Ukrainian nation is even denied. I think Ukraine is still a more unified nation-state than Belgium, for example." This is confirmed by polls that show fewer than 9% of Ukrainians in both geographical areas want to see Ukraine divided. Indeed, Vlatislav explains how this linguistic division has actually been favorable to the Ukrainian working people, for "it was the main reason why in Ukraine the ruling class failed to establish an authoritarian regime in the mould of Russia or Belarus: it ensured that no politician has ever had support from the majority of the population. Therefore, they had to balance and make concessions to the weak working class: bourgeois democracy was retained, and welfare state elements are much more generous than in Russia."

No wonder the US and Europe are calling for a strong central government capable of imposing IMF-style austerity! No wonder the *NY Times* laments that no such unity emerged from the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004. One hopes that a more democratic Ukraine will be able to continue playing off Russia and the West against each other to keep its independence. Otherwise the choice is grim: on the one hand return to neo-Stalinist semi-dictatorship under a Putin clone, on the other IMF-imposed austerity and eternal debt servitude to the German banks.

Neo-Liberalism Eastern and Western-style

In any case, once in power Yanukovich introduced anti-worker austerity and neo-liberal reforms, privatizing everything in sight, often (like the Presidential Palace) to his family's enormous profit, which explains why he was universally hated. As Vlatislav testifies: "The natural gas tariffs were growing; the government launched medical reform which will eventually lead to closure of many medical institutions and to introducing the universal medical insurance instead of the unconditional coverage; they pushed through extremely unpopular pension reform (raising pension age for women) against the will of more than 90% of population; there was an attempt at passing the new Labor Code which would seriously affect workers' rights; the railway is being corporatized; finally, they passed a new Tax Code which hit small business." Vlatislav's interview is worth reading in full.[5]

Another observer who stresses the autonomous character of the Ukrainian revolution is Adrian Ivakhiv, who blogs at Ukrainian Temporary Autonomous Zone and discusses "The 'Threat' of Direct Democracy in Ukraine." Ivakhiv makes a useful distinction between three types of democracy: authoritarian (à la Putin), liberal (the EU), and direct, exemplified by people power in Ukraine. He also deals with the question of nationalist and right-wing influences in the revolution, pointing out although the neo-fascists, who love to fight, were well-represented on the barricades, the percentage of voters identified with far-right parties in the Ukraine is lower than that in France and Austria. And 'nationalism,' which is near-universal in this land that has been dominated and fought over by Russians, Poles, Austro-Hungarians, Swedes, Rumanians and Germans for centuries, has a different resonance in Ukraine than elsewhere. His piece is also well worth reading.[6]

Media Propaganda Right and Left

In contrast to these creditable on-the-ground reports, what we find in the media is mostly sheer propaganda. The *Times* and the networks portray this revolution as a defeat for Russia and a victory for Western neo-liberal capitalism. Period. On the other hand, part of the Left sees it more or less through the Cold War lens as a 'right-wing coup' engineered by US imperialism. Pacifica Radio's 'War and Peace Report' headlined 'Ukraine: a coup or a revolution?' and described (three times) Yanukovich as the 'democratically elected president' as if the Ukraine were Chile in 1973 or Honduras two years ago.[7] A previous show featured an interview with pro-Russian professor Stephen Cohen under the headline "A New Cold War? Ukraine Violence Escalates, Leaked Tape

Suggests U.S. Was Plotting Coup." Cohen stressed U.S. aggression (real enough) against Putin's Russia, the omnipresence in Kiev of right-wing fascists and nationalists, concluding on the danger of a Ukrainian Civil War between East and West which would lead to a new violent confrontation between Russia and the West.[8]

Prof. Cohen is someone whose scholarship (his biography of Bukharin) I admire, who has been critical of both Stalin and Putin, but who has retained his pro-Russian 'patriotism' from the Cold War days. His theoretical frame, like many other left-liberals, does not recognize Russian imperialism along with other imperialisms (from Chinese to German and US) in what is increasingly a multi-polar world, similar to the world of 1914 on the eve of WWI with its complex and shifting alliances. Throughout the Cold War, many still defended the Soviet Union as the 'underdog' and more 'progressive' than the US, but this attitude is sheer nonsense today when Russia is ruled by oligarchs and mafia under a neo-Stalinist police state; today when there is an active, autonomous democratic, revolutionary labor movement with which we can identify.

What Next?

To conclude: the first phase, democratic of the Ukraine's ongoing revolution is now complete. The tyrant, abandoned even by his own party, has fled. The repressive apparatus as been neutralized, and the former Defense Minister responsible for the sniper shootings of dozens of demonstrators is on trial. The Constitution of 2004 has been restored in satisfaction of a major popular demand. Today's Ukrainians remember their so-called Orange Revolution, which soon mired in corruption. The masses, although peaceful for the moment, remain armed and mobilized. The question is, What will happen in the next, in the social phase of this revolution?

Chris Kinder, on the Eco-Rev list serve, has raised some very serious problems, impossible to dismiss as propaganda, about the history of fascism and right-wing nationalism in Ukraine and the many threats to a possible democracy there which need to be taken into consideration.[9] As Victor Serge observed during the failed German Revolution of 1923, the rise of fascism depends on two factors: 1) dispair among the active, youthful, combattive elements of society of a liberal or communist solution to capitalism's problems, and 2) the backing of big capital and the military.[10]

To me, the ultimate outcome largely depends popular struggles and solidarity on the international scene. The potential tragedy of the Ukrainian revolution (and indeed *mutatis mutandi* of all the 'successful' popular uprisings since 2011 from Egypt on) is that confined to the national context the political leadership gets taken over or overtaken by a rival section of the local ruling class (military, religious, nationalist), normally backed by a rival imperialism. We have seen this happen twice in Egypt, just has we have seen Syria's original citizen uprising for human and democratic rights turned into a reactionary military holocaust with the interference of at least five imperialisms, secular and religious, world-wide and regional.

The one thing all these conflicting bourgeois interests have in common is the will to defeat and destroy the popular, democratic uprisings which, if allowed to come to power, would inevitably, being majoritarian, demand more social equality and thus threaten the interests of the rich and power elites. Such a successful revolution would set a very 'bad' example for the planet's billions. As Victor Serge reminds us, in 1917-18 during the First World War, fourteen imperialist nations put aside their deadly conflicts in order to crush the Russian Revolution, while in the Ukraine (whose name means 'Borderland') White Russias, Germans, Rumanians, French and Poles intervened militarily and financed local parties.[11] Today we have the same actors interfering Ukraine, plus the U.S. (not always aligned with the 'fucking' European Union…)

To survive, revolutions must spread, or retreat….

Given this tragic situation, should we consider the participants in the Ukrainian mass democratic movement (and for that matter their counterparts in Egypt, Tunisia Turky, Russia, Brazil, Spain, Grece etc) naive and mistaken whenever they rise up in indignation to demand human rights? Do we not, at the least, owe them a duty of international solidarity? Must we not follow the example of Egyptian Teachers' Union showing support to the teachers occupying the Wisconsin State House in 2011? Of our worldwide support for the Zapatistas' unlikely uprising a decade earlier? Did not our own organization, *Praxis,* present in Kiev and the Crimea since 2004,grow out of such a network in the 90s? Such networks of support and exchange are the seeds from which international solidarity can grow, indeed, that revolutions can spread, as they must if they are to survive.

Like Serge, indeed like every socialist from the First International on up, I have always believed that revolutionary movements can only succeed when they become international, and today, with capitalist globalization, that means planetary. Indeed, only a planetary uprising against capitalism can save the planet from industrialized eco-cide in the very near future. Our only chance is to rise up together in one long 'rolling revolution;' and today we can actually create such solidarity in real time thanks to the World Wide Web, social media, alternate media and machine translation.

Planetary revolution? One chance in a hundred! Maybe, but what if there is no other survival solution for the planet's inhabitants? (for more, please see my "Ecotopia: A Bet You Can't Refuse").

Notes

[1] Secretary, Victor Serge Foundation (Montpellier, France); founding member of the Praxis Research and Education Center (Moscow), www.praxiscenter.ru, which co-sponsored the first International Congress of Independant Labor Unions last November in Kiev.

[2] Some of the demonstrators did, at one point, fire pistols and shotguns.

[3] Andrew Higgins, "Ukrainian Protesters See Too Many Familiar Faces in Parliament After Revolution," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2014.

[4] According **Timothy Snyder**, professor of history at Yale University, author of *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin,* who is studying the composition of these crowds.Democracy Now

[5] "Maidan and Its Contradictions: Interview with a Ukrainian Revolutionary Syndicalist". Thanks to Loren Goldner for bringing it to my attention.

[6] Direct democracy in Ukraine?. Thanks to Brain Tokar.

[7] Democracy Now .

[8] Democracy Now.

[9] here.

[10] "Fascists and Communists," Sept. 29, 1923 in Serge,*Eyewitness to the German Revolution,* Ian Birchall, TR. Haymarket Books.

[11] Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*.