

Pushed Over the Edge

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I. Corruption and Social Revolutions

In her 1979 book, *States and Social Revolutions*, Theda Skocpol observed that social revolutions occur when a corrupt *ancien régime* experiences an economic downturn, setting in motion widespread popular discontent. The Russian Revolution of 1917, like the French Revolution of 1789, was abetted by the breakdown of the imperial order, in both cases leading to a reign of terror. Other social revolutions, such as Roosevelt's New Deal, have been less terrifying although similarly leading to a gnashing of teeth among those who lost power, status, and influence.

The corruption of the American empire has been widely remarked on. The nation, which at the close of World War II enjoyed broad-based peace and prosperity (not always shared by its Black citizens) over the course of two generations spiraled downward into extreme inequality and fractiousness. This downward spiral was led by some of the most prominent families and institutions in the nation, whether the finance industry that nearly destroyed the economy in 2008, a Republican Party that evolved into a cult, or social media such as Facebook that far from bringing Americans together instead sowed new divisions and fractiousness.

Corruption is one face of inequality. Lord Acton's famous "All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely" should be

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understood not as an empirical observation but as an axiomatic statement: the pursuit of power, when not tempered by institutional or traditional constraints, inevitably corrupts those who are pursuing it. Although Donald Trump is the most recent and glaring example of corruption at the top level, other examples, whether corporate leaders or political figures, abound from the past 70 years. Kenneth Lay's Enron, like the Sackler family dope pushers from Bel Aire, Theranos drug treatment scam, or the Lehman Brothers, pushed the boundaries of legitimate business. In the political world, both Newt Gingrich in the 1980s, Mitch McConnell in the current century, and several Republican governors today, opposing public health measures that would keep their constituents alive, are also exemplars of corruption. Although anthropologists have been slow to develop a theory of corruption and decadence (not wishing to impose value judgments on the societies that we study), the decadence and disarray of some of the world's leading imperial powers, whether the United States or China or Great Britain, is an undeniable fact. A critique of imperialism must include not only its creation of subaltern populations, but also a critique of decadence at its top levels, its rotting away of the imperial overlords.

The other face of economic inequality is political inequality. A democracy is incompatible with extreme inequalities of wealth, and the 1% have clearly given up on democracy. Like the Bourbon monarchs, they are serene in the enjoyment of their wealth, at least until a guillotine lops their heads off. The guillotine is no longer used, but "de-platforming" (e.g., the former president's banishment from Twitter) is its 21st century equivalent.

Political inequality has many faces, whether gerrymandering, the domination of state legislatures, the corruption of a Republican Supreme Court and its "shadow docket" of controversial issues hiding in the wings. The rotting away of the Supreme Court is a tale ripped from today's headlines.

II. A Quick Account of American Corruption: Inequality, Lawlessness, Ignorance

Probably a leading example of corruption would be the new business model of the current century, "fake it until you make it." This phrase was practically nonexistent before the current century, yet burst on the scene with Elizabeth Theranos and her "blood tests" which led to thousands of unnecessary deaths. Other examples of corruption in the current century include the drug pushers of the Sackler family, who made billions off of the deaths of more than a half-million Americans overdosing on oxycontin, and the entire medical-industrial complex which has cost Americans far more for health care with worse results than any other industrialized country.

The Pandora Papers recently exposed the corruption of leaders around the world, with even some jurisdictions in the United States such as South Dakota serving as tax havens comparable to Monaco and the Canary Islands. Although tax havens are not per se illegal (though sometimes they are used to launder dirty money obtained from bribes and drug deals), using a tax haven is clearly a statement that “I am not invested in this nation.”

What all of these have in common is a breakdown of the state administrative apparatus, a deteriorating of fellow-feeling that defined the political community, and the mutuality that is at the heart of a republic.

All of this is melancholy enough, but when a pandemic – analogous and in many quarters contributing to an economic downturn – pushes the country over the edge the stage is set for a social and possibly a political revolution. Not unlike the Black Death in the 14th century that killed not only 200 million Europeans and Middle Easterners but also the entire feudal régime, today’s pandemic is exposing the fragility of democracy, or more accurately the democratic façade hiding corruption.

III. What Will This Revolution Look Like??

Understanding what this revolution will look like is a simple empirical exercise, because we are already in the midst of it. The events on January 6 are comparable to the storming of the Bastille less in the body count and more in the symbolism of a mass uprising against a proud symbol of the government, or perhaps a “dress rehearsal” for subsequent insurrections. Around the nation, “militias”, 21st century Jacobins, are defying democratic norms and claiming power in the name of “the people.” Groups such as the Proud Boys, the Boogaloo Bois, the Michigan Militia, QAnon, the Oath Keepers, the Kenosha Guard, Patriot Movement, and many more American brown shirts, have declared themselves superior to the established institutions of the state. If this is not a revolution-in-the-making, then the word has no meaning.

How the revolution will play out is an open question, depending less on the internal dynamics of insurgent groups and more on the broader societal response to them. Further insurrections are coming, and whether the criminal justice system, the legal profession, and the court of public opinion can forestall them is unclear. On the one hand the legal system has decisively rejected the notion that the 2020 election was “stolen” by the Democrats, and more and more members of the Trump administration and business organizations are coming under the scrutiny of criminal justice. On the other hand, large segments of the American public rely on Fox News and on-line propaganda outlets for their daily “newsfeed,” a constitution of ignorance that is diametrically opposed to what Jonathan Rauch calls *The Constitution of Knowledge* (Rauch 2021).

Technologies such as social media and cable TV (which, unlike broadcast TV, are not subject to Federal regulation), lay the foundations for widespread ignorance. This revolution is being fought less at physical barricades (although such battles are an ongoing dynamic) and more in a clash of ideas and persuasion.

IV. A Business Anthropological Perspective

What insights might business anthropologists offer toward the resolution of this revolution? Two of the major drivers of the discontent from below have been globalization and technology: globalization erasing national advantages in manufacturing and services, and technology both in eliminating and restructuring jobs. Supply chains, which were once confined to a single country or continent, now stretch around the globe, and (in the name of efficiency) have been made more fragile, threatened both by such diverse matters as container shortages and fuel shortages and personnel disruptions. Charles Perrow's analysis of *Normal Accidents* (1994), in which complexity and tight coupling *inevitably* leads to organizational breakdowns, is played out daily in the industrial world: in the name of efficiency, "just-in-time" delivery has replaced "just-in-case," meaning that disruptions ramify quickly. Globalization, in other words, far from being a sunlit upland of free trade *per* Adam Smith, is better understood as making the world a more fragile place, with prosperity confined only to a few corners.

Similarly, technology, by automating millions of jobs, have reduced skilled operators to machine-tenders, hollowing out not simply the skills but also the self-esteem that comes from mastering a complex skill set. We are in the midst of a great re-thinking of what "the workplace" actually means (on many levels). When "the workplace" as a desk in an office or a bench in a factory it was one thing, but when the *workplace* spans the entire globe, an entirely new skill set is required.

Technology does not so much eliminate jobs as it scrambles them, creating job shortages of those who design, build, and service the automated global workplace. It places an even greater premium on education, not only in the so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields but also in entrepreneurial and executive roles, both of which by definition *cannot* be automated. *Critical thinking* becomes a central skill in this new world. While entrepreneurs do not enjoy the (fast-disappearing) security of the skilled trades, we do not know what unlimited possibilities are out there.

Similarly, globalization creates opportunities for those who are trained to seize them. Fluency in languages and cultures opens the doors to opportunity in many industries. Sensitivity to the impact of linguistic and cultural differences and boundaries prepares the individual for citizenship in the global community. While few people can master

multiple languages and cultures, everyone can become aware of cultural and linguistic boundaries and can cultivate the skills to push the boundaries. A willingness to explore and build bridges opens the door to discovery.

All of this may seem obvious to any anthropologist who is reading this essay, but there are literally millions of business and political leaders whose entire repertoire depends on *not* understanding it. One downside of technology is that it places a premium on ignorance, on the cultivated *unawareness* of inconvenient facts. Social media create pitched battles with anti-vaxxers, with many leaders insisting that their constituents and customers expose themselves to a deadly pandemic because vaccination has become incredibly politicized. Facebook's algorithms are designed to sow discord, inasmuch as discord reaps "mouse clicks," Facebook's measure of success. Complaints about the "Chinese virus" play into the undercurrents of xenophobia that are just beneath the surface in American culture. Supply chains have become frozen because too great an emphasis was placed on efficiency (i.e., tight coupling) at the expense of resilience. "Populist" political leaders, presenting themselves as advocates of "the people," resist any adequate funding of the Internal Revenue Service. Financial technology – "fintech" – lines the pockets of the few who understand it, immiserating millions more. The constitution of ignorance in its durability is a new feature of our world.

In sum, what we are seeing is less history unfolding and more a clash of world orders, a liminal episode, "betwixt and between" in Victor Turner's phrase, in which everything is up for grabs. No individual, institution, or leader can determine the outcome. This is characteristic of all social revolutions. Whether this will lead to a sunlit upland of a new Enlightenment, or a new Dark Age, cannot be predicted. What can be pushed forward is an understanding of these stark alternatives, an understanding that by educating ourselves about other cultures and the forces (benign and malign) that are shaping them, we can confront and act on these alternatives. These forces include technology, the collapse of institutions, and the widening gaps within our societies.

A shared vision of the good life is beyond the writ of anthropology, but an awareness of where we are coming from and heading toward might soften the blows. Understanding the importance of education, not only in job training but also in exploration and critical thinking helps individuals adapt, even in the face of resistant institutions. Community-building, at many levels (local, professional, national) creates a resilience that "rugged individualism" lacks. Over the past thirty years the Business Anthropology community has been engaged in a world-wide exercise in community building, graduating from an academic exercise to embrace practitioners in a wide variety of industries and walks of life, and expanding far beyond its original home in academia. Business anthropology has eclipsed academic anthropology as the throbbing heart

of the discipline. *Sharing* this vision of community with other disciplines, professions, and walks of life is now the challenge before us.

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