

Dan Leahy's Book Outline On:

October

By China Mieville (Verso Books, 2017)

The book is a month by month chronicle of revolt and debate from February 1917 to October 1917, but the book starts off with this quote:

"One need not be a prophet to foretell that the present order of things will have to disappear." This, I firmly believe. I believe we are headed for an autocratic, formally militarized governance structure, with widespread state suppression of "dissent."

It made me wonder what the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) thinks about "the present order of things," whether they think the entire social/political order is collapsing in the midst of a capitalist onslaught of extraction and war, and whether they see the SMA as a defensive mechanism or a replacement strategy. Perhaps both.

I had hoped that the book would give some ideas about how to deal with the "present order of things," but in the end the author writes, "The specifics of Russia, 1917, are distinct and crucial. It would be absurd, a ridiculous myopia, to hold up October as a single lens through which to view the struggles of today." But, then he writes, "It would be equally absurd to say that there is nothing we can learn from the revolution."

Here are some 8 things that this book made me think about.

1. Fear of Governance.

I think one of the strengths of the SMA is the practice of governance. The left set up soviets or councils throughout Russia to practice governance, but also held up the idea of "dual governance" with the Provisional Government. The left was afraid of direct governance without the some elements of the capitalist bourgeoisie. This remains a feature of the social democratic/liberal left in the US.

I think you need to impress upon the SMA that they need to see themselves, like many of the soviets, as the legitimate governance structure, regardless of the "democratic" government, that they need to both practice decision-making (scenarios) in more and more chaotic circumstances and to identify and be able to mobilize real resources. I know you are working on this. The number of local and Russian wide forums, strikes, mobilizations and debates during this nine month period was impressive, even as the formal social order was near total collapse in terms of basic items like food, water, clothing, etc.

2. Dependence on the Bourgeoisie.

The socialist left's alliance with the Bourgeoisie was both out of fear of governance and due to their idea of the path of revolution, that is, one must have a bourgeois capitalist "stage" before they could be a socialist one.

I don't imagine there is much thinking about "stages" here in the United States, BUT, I do believe there is a definite dependence on the "bourgeoisie" as reflected in the Democratic Party. In fact, if there is a left in the United States it is a wing of this capitalist institution even though its entire "left-ish" platform of a social welfare state was abandoned decades ago as the neo-liberal order took precedence and began to dismantle it.

My point, I guess, is that this dependence/reliance on the Democratic Party is as dangerous as the left's belief in Kerensky's ability to run a dual government structure. It will lead to greater repression and social disorder. I think this subject area should be part of the SMAs, but I suppose we will have to wait for the 2018 Congressional elections to see yet again the failure of the Democratic Party "save us from Trump."

3. Necessity of principled debate, voice and reading of changed circumstances.

I know we tend to avoid debate and lean into collective discussion around a central question looking for synthesis, but I was impressed by the number of political groups operating within the Russian revolution that had their idea of where power resided... in the peasant revolt and demand for land, in the industrial labor unions wanting control and decision making, in the provisional government or parliamentary and ministerial rule, in the decentralized and autonomous soviets, in the dual government, in alliance with the capitalist bourgeoisie, etc.

Sometimes I think we need principled debates by ideologues about where power to replace this collapsing capitalist order resides. By ideologues I mean people with distinct and theoretical belief systems who can argue where the power to resist autocratic rule resides, without personal attacks on their opponents. I'm not sure this is a part of the SMAs, but I'm beginning to think it should be in the form of "plenary panels" perhaps.

I was also reminded about voice, about oratory, how important it is both as a leadership tool and as a defense against demagoguery. Helen Lee used to conduct "soft box" sessions where the women in our Summer Schools would learn to stand up on the soap box and speak. Maybe something like this should be incorporated into the SMAs if it is not there already. It was my conclusion after years of work at the Labor Center that what we accomplished was a worker's "voice."

Reading changing circumstances is as much a part of one's belief system as one's observations on the ground. I think both are important, especially in times of mortal danger to social survival, whether from climate chaos or nuclear war. I'm sure you "knew" what would happen in Houston post hurricane even before you saw it. What do the SMAs think about what will happen in the US even before they see it.

I keep thinking about what would happen in the US if Trump attacked North Korea with nuclear weapons. What would be the changed circumstances both theoretically and on the ground in the US. The amazing thing to me during those nine months was how often both the circumstances and the theorizing changed. When will the circumstances of mass shootings and the theory of the need for more guns change? When will there be a different read on mass shootings other than a search for personal "motivation?"

4. Synthesis and the written word.

This book's tale reminded me how important both the written word was (in mass journals), but also in the ability to craft a synthesis out of heated debates. Your immediate chronicle of the SMAs successes and then immediate follow up with an evaluation survey is an example of that need to write it down quickly and enforce the organizational victories. Also, I think the SMAs work on synthesis is an important practice. In this book, synthesis was in the form of "resolutions" presented in decision making bodies that moved the revolution forward, but they were only successful when a synthesis was embodied in the resolution.

5. Women and the Crowd.

The revolutionary 9 months were kicked off in February 1917 by a march of women demanding bread. A crowd that became politicized. It reminded me of George Rude's work on the French crowd in history... how does a demand for bread by women become a demand to overthrow the monarchy. Here again the women's demand for bread led to the Russian revolution. What happened to the women's march after Trump's election? How did that march NOT become politicized? I assume, like the one in Seattle, there was no direction offered to the crowd. If there is another one how does it become politicized? There will no doubt be more "crowds", if only of the homeless.

6. Internationalist/Globalist Perspective and Isolation.

The Russian left maintained a very internationalist perspective since they did not believe a socialist revolution was possible in Russia since a bourgeois capitalist revolution had not as yet replaced the Czar. They saw the Russian revolution was the "detonator" for a European revolution among the advanced capitalist orders. However, that European revolution did not happen and Russia was invaded, isolated and its revolution terminated under Stalin.

I think the SMAs efforts to maintain links with the Global South is very important as the autocratic order here attempts to isolate us from linkages to the broader social movement.

But I also want to say that we should be wary of making judgements about what to do here based on what might happen somewhere else. I'm not sure what difference it would have made, but what if the Russian left had analyzed their position absent a notion that a socialist revolution only happens in an advanced capitalist order.

7. War

One of the objective conditions that is certainly not present here is the terrible cost in military lives suffered by Russia in World War I, an estimate of between 1.7 and 2.2 million deaths. A central dynamic of the Russian revolution was the revolt of armed soldiers at the front and in Russia. The Soviets often had more soldiers participating than workers or peasants and, ultimately, the Soviets had more soldiers than the regime.

Here, despite years of meaningless and endless wars, there does not appear to be any revolt within the ranks of the US military, rather there is a growing notion that these militarists (Petraeus, McChrystal, Mattis, Flynn, McMaster) who led soldiers from one defeat to another in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are the "adults" in the room surrounding a "dangerous" Trump. With the Democrats giving the militarists a greater budget than even Trump requested, expanded war is in our future.

While I realize there is no anti-war movement even within the "left" segment of the Democratic party, the SMAs need to confront this perpetual war if any of their hopes are to be fulfilled.

8. Alliances

Near the end of the book, the author briefly interrogates the left socialists' refusal to agree to a socialist alliance of left forces to form a socialist government. I know you think about both the advantages and dangers of alliances, especially an alliance with a stronger organization. Still as social disorder increases, reaching out and making alliances with the victims of that disorder will become a more important organizational task.

November 2017