Reassessing Reform, Revolt and Revolution

Most preconditions for reform, revolt and revolution have changed significantly since the end of the so-called cold war while other preconditions and factors have remained. Studies show that any movement, including social, reformist or revolutionary and separatist movements are likely to succeed when about 3.5 - 5.0% of a population actively participate in the discourse. As encouraging as this may sound, one of the constants from the cold-war up until today is the high probability that movements are being co-opted. The following article reviews historical and recent practice. The article does not offer “easy solutions” but proposes a reassessment of reform, revolt and revolution.

Changing or Maintaining the Bell-Shaped Curve: Studies in political and social sciences show that the political spectrum in almost all societies follows a bell-shaped curve. That is, some 3.5 - 5.0% of most societies are potentially willing to become actively engaged in either maintaining or in attempting to change a social, political, national or other discourse. The potential of the vast majority lies in other words in its propensity to “go with the flow”. Every government and every serious political scientist, political activist, intelligence or military analyst is well-aware of this phenomenon.

Some of the greatest cold-war propaganda and social engineering successes were achieved by convincing an as great amount of people who belong to the majority of the societal bell-curve that “the adversary” is co-opting political movements while the own side, e.g. NATO countries, the Soviet Union, China, are promoting freedom and self-determination on the basis of altruistic principles or “universal values”. The cold-war line-up of players on the global playing field may have changed, somewhat, since the end of the so-called cold war. The principles and fundamental objectives have remained constant.

One example for how this phenomenon is applied within a politico-military context is the United States' military Training Circular TC 18-01. Although the United States may be notorious for “regime change”, it would be naive to conclude that other nation's military and intelligence services do not apply similar principles as those outlined in the TC 18-01. The training circular is provided for study here.

One of governments' primary instruments for maintaining the stability of the bell-shaped curve is media. Within this context it is unimportant whether we are thinking in terms of State run news agencies and media or whether we are thinking in terms of pseudo-free and independent press that either has been infiltrated by intelligence services or a press that is owned by influential members within a given society's oligarchical systems. The outcome is largely identical; That is, some degree of dissent is tolerated, even promoted as long as it does not challenge the foundations of the given political system, the fundamental political paradigm.

The Fatal Mistake of A-Priori Condemnations.

One of the greatest obstacles to reaching critical mass is the habit of a-priori condemnation. A-priori condemnations are not only divisive and prohibiting movements from reaching critical mass; They are also among the strongest instruments in the toolkit of those social engineers who are engaged in the attempt to maintain a status quo. One of the most obvious examples would be the pitting of e.g. the political left against the right.

Another example would be the a-priori condemnation of e.g. everything published by any given NGO because it
receives funding from specific sources. To mention a few obvious examples? The a-priori condemnation of Greenpeace as “western agent” in Russian media when the NGO launches an action against a Russian oil rig while omitting the fact that the same NGO also launches actions against US oil rigs.

One preferred method that is used by mainstream media is to use alleged analysts and experts, dissidents from a perceived adversary nation, to bring the message across. Among the many other NGOs who are often condemned on an a-priori basis are Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, Journalists Without Borders.....

Admitted, all of the above have been politicized and all of the above have been involved in unethical practices, have been instrumentalized. It would, however, be a fallacy to condemn these organizations on a a-priori basis. Journalists Without Borders may have issued a report that misrepresents e.g. the comparative freedom of the press in respectively Russia and the USA; The same organization has, however, pointed out that a large number of journalists in e.g. Pakistan have been targeted for assassination. Again, the operand question for those who want to bring about political change may not be whether this organization is biased, but whether it can be used to improve the freedom of the press and stop the killing of journalists in e.g. Pakistan. In other words, one may consider one of the fundamental principles of guerrilla warfare and apply it to this discourse. Use what ever tools you have available, especially the weapons of your enemy.

Another fallacy would be to compare these NGOs with directly State funded organizations like USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, or similar, respectively Russian, Chinese, Venezuelan, and other overtly or covertly State-run organizations. Even here, an a-priori condemnation may be problematic. Not least because such a-priori condemnations are irreconcilable with the fundamental principles of guerrilla strategies. Again, there is no country in this world that is an Utopia and there is legitimate political dissent everywhere.

Consider an independent newspaper that attempts to challenge mainstream government and corporate media in all countries, based on the realization that there exists legitimate dissent, a legitimate need for social, political and other reform in each and every country. Applying the logic of guerrilla warfare, the ethical issue that should concern such media should not be whether part of the funding comes from the one or the other foundation but whether it creates a firewall between editorial policy and funding to enable independent journalists from all countries to report on otherwise oppressed issues.

One of the most naive manifestations of a-priori condemnations is manifested in selective a-priori condemnation. An appropriate cold-war example is the designation of U.S. backed Nicaraguan Contras as imperialist vassals while describing the in part USSR-backed PFLP, Al-Fatah, the ANC as freedom fighters without analyzing their role within a wider geopolitical context. One may argue that one of the greatest challenges of today’s political activists is to overcome the artificially created dichotomies between terrorists and freedom fighters, between independent NGOs and those who receive funding from a source that one tends to position as an “adversary”. Also this is irreconcilable with the fundamental principles of guerrilla tactics.

As mentioned above, considerable social change, change of government, secession of territories and so forth are possible when some 3.5 – 5.0% of a given population actively work for, or even fight for changing a given status quo. In some cases even a secession is possible by peaceful means. The fact that Scotland almost seceded from the UK is one recent example. The fact that Catalonia may soon secede from Spain may be another one. Peaceful fundamental change is, however, only possible in a minority of cases. This brings us to the question whether one can or even should condemn armed struggle on an a-priori basis.

The Fallacy of Condemning Armed Struggle on an A-Priori Basis.

No entrenched political system voluntarily allows a change of political paradigms when this change directly affects the ruling elite. Before we continue, let us consider the fact that elite or oligarchical structures form in all political systems.

Historically, any entrenched political hierarchy that was confronted with the prospect of a paradigm change has used force against those who challenged the prevailing paradigm. In most cases it has been necessary to use force to overthrow these systems. Examples?

It took the use of arms to overthrow most of Europe's feudal systems. There would not have been a French revolution and period of enlightenment without armed insurrection. There would not have been an American revolution without the use of arms and neither would there have been a revolution that brought about the Soviet Union. The operand
question is not about the primacy of the one or the other political system. It is much rather the recognition of the fact that armed struggle is a necessary aspect of almost all movements that lead to a paradigm change.

**Bitter and Positive Lessons from the Armed Struggle in Europe.**

One inspiring way of assessing the armed struggle in Europe between the 1970s to the mid-1990s is by comparison between the IRA, ETA, and the armed Italian and German organizations including German Rote Arme Fraktion (RAF), 2. Juni, and maybe most importantly, Germany's Revolutionäre Zellen (RZ).

One of the main assets of the Irish Republican Army was that it had a functioning, legal, political organization in Sinn Fein. Another of the IRAs assets was that both Sinn Fein and the IRA, to some degree, were able to represent their discourse in widely accepted and disseminated media. It was, arguably, the use of this two-tiered approach that prevented that the IRA and Sinn Fein could be politically isolated from their basis and maintain the active involvement of at least 3.5% of the population in their discourse. One may argue about whether the ultimate political compromise was sufficient, but the IRA – Sinn Fein duo is today the primary example for the fact that armed struggle can be an important factor that leads to political achievements. This is said without prejudice and without wanting to minimize the suffering that has been caused on both sides of the conflict. Every war implies casualties, tragedy and suffering on all sides.

In comparison, the Basque ETA has been far less successful for a number of reasons. The lack of sufficient military organization comparable to e.g. that of the IRA. The ETA's own failure to build a sufficiently strong political party and the Spanish government's success with criminalizing political parties. The failure to establish widely disseminated media to convey the political and military discourse to the wider public.

With regard to Germany's RAF, one can argue that the RAF made its first PR mistake during its first armed action. That is, the fact that one of the most intellectually capable proponents and editor of the (covertly GDR funded) magazine Konkret, Ulrike Marie Meinhof went underground after the liberation of RAF co-founder Andreas Bader. Ulrike Meinhof would have been an invaluable journalistic and intellectual asset.

Forget for a moment that both the precursors of the RAF and 2. Juni were infiltrated by German intelligence, another problem of these two closely related organizations was that membership automatically implied that one had to go underground. Especially for the RAF this created a cohort of problems and vulnerabilities; among them:

The inability to agitate legally. Increased isolation from legal political representation. Increased isolation from the political basis that was sympathetic to their political goals and the armed struggle as one means to bring about change. The need for a colossal and extremely costly logistical apparatus to provide everything from apartments, vehicles, license plates, passports and other ID. In part these “necessities” had to be financed with bank robberies, drugs and other commodities, etc... More importantly, however, the RAF and the 2. Juni became increasingly dependent on external support from foreign intelligence services including East Germany's (GDR) Stasi, the USSR's KGB and others. Both also became increasingly dependent on more well-established organizations including the Palestinian Al-Fatah, PFLP, and others. In this regard there is a need to re-assess the dichotomy between the advantages of an international cooperation and the dependence this has created with regard to autonomous policy as well as strategic and military decisions. Finally, one of the fallacies of RAF / 2. Juni strategy may have been that they failed to conduct missions which could easily replicated by others. Which brings us to Germany's Revolutionary Cells (Revolutionäre Zellen – RZ).

One of the main problems with the RZ was that they lacked the logistical strength to sufficiently support those of their members whose cover had been blown. In other words, the RZ had too little of that, which the RAF had too much of. Consequently, those who had to go underground were either very much on their own or extremely vulnerable with regard to being drawn into activities that were dictated or strongly influenced by foreign intelligence services. Another option for RZ members who had to go underground was to go abroad and join Palestinian, Colombian or other liberation and guerrilla movements.
The function of this article is not to declare the primacy of the one organization, policy or strategy. All of the above had their strength and weaknesses. The article should much rather call for a much-needed debate about all of the above mentioned issues as long as it is possible to debate them.

In summary.

The likelihood that attempted social, political and other reform, revolt, revolutionary change or strife for national independence succeeds is high when some 3.5 – 5.0% of a population actively engage in the discourse. This cannot be achieved without a representative media and a representative political apparatus or party as well as access to widely disseminated media.

Governments, worldwide, are aware of this phenomenon and tend to co-opt movements that express legitimate dissent. Recent examples? Predominantly the United States and UK co-opting legitimate protests in Ukraine. The co-opting of legitimate calls for political reform in Syria by western and Middle Eastern governments to turn calls for reform into a war. Even though some countries are more notorious than others, it would be naive to assume that most countries don't act in similar fashion.

All governments and oligarchical power structures allow some degree of dissent and do at times even encourage dissent. For example the support of an engineered opposition that divides rather than unites people about political goals. Example? The pitting of US Americans of African, Latino or Caucasian descent against one another rather than an opposition that can gain mass traction with regard to political goals that would be beneficial for all of them.

All political power structures will use force, including armed force against the population when the primacy of the ruling elite and prevailing political paradigms are threatened. Anyone who is in a situation where such comprehensive change is sought must invariably be prepared for a time when armed resistance becomes a necessity. It is time to re-assess successes and failures in that regard.

A-priori condemnations are inconsistent with the political as well as the military doctrines of a guerrilla. No money is inherently bad, no weapon is inherently evil. Considering the defunct western peace movement, considering the defunct opposition, worldwide, that is representative of the sovereign, the people, considering that there is not one country where there is no legitimate dissent, it may be time to re-think reform, revolt and revolution and to re-form these concepts to be compatible with today’s challenges. Revolution is an ever-lasting process.

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