**Re-Imagining Revolution**

Judy Rebick

Abstract

Imagination is rooted in our reality. That’s why the radical imagination today will emerge from the Global South and from marginalized people in the Global North.

“The radical, committed to human liberation does not become the prisoner of a circle of certainty within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better he or she can better transform it.”

- Paulo Freire

Radical imagination is not about letting our imagination run free, it is about rooting our imagination fully in reality. The question is what reality? In North America most of our imaginations are so massively polluted by Hollywood and Madison Avenue, not to mention the privilege of many our lives, it is hard to even imagine how life can be truly different. Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network says that most people are still sleepwalking. We can’t see what is really going on.

The North American imagination masks the brutality of neo-liberalism so it makes sense that so much of radical writing and film, from Noam Chomsky to Michael Moore, from *The Shock Doctrine* to *Food Inc.*, is about exposing that reality. But even more important, in my view, is for people to believe that it is possible to create a better world. Otherwise, escaping it, for those who can, seems like the most sensible path. For that we need radical imagination. As urban and environmental activist Van Jones has said, “Martin Luther King didn’t become famous saying I have a complaint.”

The dream of much of the Left, it seems to me, is stuck in a radical imagination rooted in centuries old realities when capitalism and liberal democracy were just taking hold. Socialism based on the power of the industrial working class via revolution was an act of radical imagination in Marx’s time. The idea that a party based on the interests of that class could take over the bourgeois state and implement policies in the interest of workers was another act of imagination. In fact, much of the debate within the Left over the 20th century was about debating first the imagining of changing state power and then the experiments in doing it. But times have changed. Today our imagination has to take root in different reality, it seems to me.

That’s why I found myself in Bolivia. I had heard the story of the MAS (Movement for Socialism), a political party that was not really a political party but rather a “political instrument” of the social organizations, mostly Indigenous and campesino. The Bolivians are making the road while walking, as the Zapatistas would say. Bringing together the ancient wisdom of Indigenous people with the best ideas from the modern Left, they are constructing a new state within the belly of the old. There is no model here but rather a new path to social change based on different values and engaging new actors.

It was the Bolivians and other Indigenous peoples I met in Latin America who made me realize that colonialism was at least as deeply responsible for the mess we are in as capitalism and patriarchy. It was the Bolivians who showed me the seamless connections between environmental and social justice, who practice a sort of spirituality that was about their relationships with all living beings, who understand without question that change happens at the roots, through the mobilization of the people. It is the Bolivians who are making revolutionary change without violence through standing up to the violence of the Right through mass mobilization on the one hand and honesty and integrity on the other.

Evo Morales never makes a major announcement until he has met with the leaders of the social organizations showing his first accountability is to them, who put his government in power and who are the ones carrying out the revolutionary changes they are in the process of making.

But mostly I realized that a radical imagination today has to reach back to before the time of capitalism and colonialism when humans lived in community with each other and with the other creatures that live on this earth. For various

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historical reasons, the Bolivians never lost touch with that communalism and now are able to combine those ancient ideas with the best of modern society.

This does not mean that we can find a path to socialism from the model in Bolivia but rather that they can help us to free our imaginations. A good example is their leadership of the global movement for climate justice that emerged so strongly after Copenhagen. The Cochabamba Accord lays out a clearly anti-capitalist approach to climate change. The coalition here in Canada that is promoting the accord just published a poll that shows that most Canadians actually agree with much of what is proposed in the Accord. For example 87% agreed that we need an economy that is in harmony with nature and that recognizes and respects the planet. I was amazed.

The radical imagination of the Bolivians is about “living well.” Not exploiting and not being exploited, not robbing and not being robbed. It is about everyone having enough to eat, a roof over their head, access to education and health care and the possibility of being the very best that they can be. There are enough resources for everyone on earth to live well, they say, but there is not enough for some people to live better. “I can only be happy when everyone in my community has what they need” is their deeply held value.

It’s a very radical jump for those of us in North America who live so much “better” and that’s why I have come to believe that the radical imagination we need will come from those who have the least in this unequal world.

If we start from giving up privilege it’s a hard sell in North America. Many radicals have made the mistake of thinking that transformation is about moralism in relation to privilege and guilting those who are not ready or able to make that move. But if we start from reinforcing the values that connect us to each other and our communities there are tens of thousands and perhaps millions who are already there.
Endnotes

i Judy Rebick is a life-long activist. Her latest book Transforming Power: From the Personal to the Political explores the ideas in this article in more depth.


iii From an interview in the forthcoming documentary Evolve Love by Velcrow Ripper. See http://kck.st/c0tcUx.

iv http://transformingpower.ca/en/blog/martin-luther-king-didnt-become-famous-saying-i-have-complaint-van-jones

v http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/24/peoples-agreement/
