

What Works

by Bill Herbst

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Revolutions fail. Consider any social/political revolution of the past 300 years: the French revolution, the Russian revolution, the Chinese revolution, the Cuban revolution, and yes, the American revolution. All failed. Sure, each of them succeeded in overturning an existing government, altering the structure of national economics (who had power, who owned what, how commerce and industry were conducted), and disrupting the existing status quo in social relationships among the populations. In each case also, lofty ideals of equality and justice provided the philosophical background and practical rationales for most, if not all, of policy changes implemented. People tried their best to make the revolutions work.

And yet, all those revolutions failed. The new French state disintegrated into chaos very quickly and gave way to the authoritarian Napoleonic era that followed. The Soviet Union, assailed from its outset by western capitalist powers, never really had a chance to conduct an idealistic experiment in human improvement and quickly retreated into authoritarian measures to survive, which it managed to do for 80 years — nearly a century of major suffering — before it too fell apart and collapsed. The Chinese, Cuban, and American revolutions technically succeeded, if by success we mean that all three governments are still in place. The ideals that propelled those revolutions, while still loudly trumpeted, didn't exactly triumph, though. They coexisted right alongside deeply authoritarian impulses and practices that have made all of them, each in their own ways, not that different from the Soviet Union.

Many Americans will vehemently disagree with me about this. How can I possibly write that America is not much different than the Soviet Union? My God, Ronald Reagan must be turning over in his grave. The FBI, CIA, or Homeland Security ought to drag me away as a traitor. Well, I'd counter with the suggestion that Americans have been hoodwinked and hypnotized by two centuries of propaganda — Greatest Country on Earth. The Last, Best Hope for Humanity. The Shining City on the Hill. Manifest Destiny. American Exceptionalism. Land of the Free, Home of the Brave. Streets paved with Gold.

It's not that American ideals are fake. They're not. It's just that our ideals are ideals, not realities. And we've done a piss poor job of converting our ideals into realities.

OK. Well, then, if revolutions don't work to improve the human condition, then does evolution work? By evolution, I mean working within the existing social, political, and economic systems to reform and refine them toward better realization of our ideals that favor a more mature and inclusive perspective of acting for the greater collective good.

Sadly, no. The status quo in America and the world, established and underpinned by powerful forces (individuals and groups) driven by self-interest and greed is so deeply entrenched that two centuries of earnest efforts by dedicated activists have produced only sporadic changes. Sometimes these reforms have been significant, such as giving women the right to own property or vote in elections. Other times (and too often), they've been mere band-aids, just temporary improvements that were later undone or simply ignored. For instance, the movements to unionize labor in the early 20th century involved heroic sacrifice, but the gains have proven short-lived. Despite massive effort, the Civil Rights movement for black equality of the mid-20th century didn't make much of a dent in racism.

Does this mean that I would advise idealistic activists to give up their efforts? No. Each of us commits ourselves to doing whatever we feel we must. It's just that I don't regard reform from within as a viable "solution" to human depravity.

So, if revolution — intentionally overturning the system — doesn't work to move the fulcrum of personal gain versus greater collective good a little in the direction of the latter, but evolution — working toward reform from within the system — doesn't either, then what could work?

One possible answer is nothing, but I won't go there. In my view, it's not necessary that anything work all the time or in a fail-safe way for it to be a possible solution to how things might change for the better. And there is definitely a process that can work, at least partially and some of the time:

Natural disasters.

By "natural disasters," do I mean sporadic upheavals of environmental disruption, such as hurricanes, floods, fires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis? Or do I mean somewhat longer and slower periods of disruption, such as droughts that cause multiple seasons of crop failure and result in famines? Or disease epidemics and pandemics, such as what we're going through now? Well, yes, all of the above and more.

Environmental disasters have played a significant role in the history of civilization. The road down which humanity travels has been altered often by unexpected and/or unforeseen natural calamities. What's different about the 21st century is that these "interventions by nature" are no longer sporadic in time,

but cumulative — one after another after another in an unrelenting cascade. In addition, natural disasters are no longer isolated in terms of place — they may arise or begin in a specific region, but, due to the enabling of widespread travel and the interdependence of the global economy humans created over the past century, they tend now to spread into worldwide crises. A world that was once localized is now globalized.

The increasing impact of the age of anthropogenic climate change is upon us, although that vanilla term (climate change) hardly does justice to the scope of what's happening. No longer is the possibility of catastrophic disruption within the biosphere as a response by nature to human activity merely a concern for the future. It's here now, happening as I write, and we've reached critical mass.

The ramp-up is over. The Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is hardly the first warning we've received, but it is the most obvious and potent in its dramatic impact on civilization. As of now, however, it's not yet working to inspire us to collectively change for the better. At the individual level, we see countless examples of some people rising to the occasion while others don't. This seems to be a built-in feature of disasters, that they bring out both the best and worst of human nature. At the collective level, however, no real or substantive change is yet apparent. Most of the public and the vast majority of the ruling elites who dictate policy still cling to the illusion that, once through the current crisis, we can and will return to our previous condition of "business-as-usual" and a state of "normalcy."

So, we have the Federal Reserve running the presses day and night to print money, pumping liquidity into an economy that is suddenly comatose and on life-support. And Congress has begun legislating "relief" packages currently totaling four trillion dollars, with much more to come, where 90% of the money goes to the most privileged and wealthy among us, the top 10%.

This is "disaster capitalism" at its finest (or, I should say, most despicably toxic). The Haves get damn near everything, and the Have Nots are shut out. That's the game that's been played for a long time in what passes for "civilization," and it's still ongoing. More wealth is transferred upwards in legalized fraud. Sure, voices are raised in protest, including the voices of many who serve in elected office, but their efforts to insure more equitable distribution of the relief money and protection of the most vulnerable among us count for damned little. Both the design and the practical structure of the system itself prevent such reform.

Meanwhile, we wait for some sign of collective awakening into sanity, some tangible movement toward maturity, even if only in baby steps. So far, I don't see much evidence of that. Doesn't mean it won't happen, though. Beliefs send down deep roots, and habits are hard to change.

Our situation isn't bad enough yet to challenge the existing proportions of the Us-versus-Them dynamic. Billions of people are still "Them," which means that they don't matter to "Us" and can be thrown under the bus without any conscience or remorse. Things will have to get much worse before that gets better. And shifting the balance will require some suffering for Us and much suffering for Them — suffering that can't be discounted, ignored, or swept under the rug. The hard truth is that suffering works. Not always, but sometimes. And, given where we are, suffering may be the only thing that works to shoehorn us out of our arrogant separation from all other life. We are part of the web of life on this planet, and we are sure as hell not superior to it.

My most optimistic take on the astrology of the 2020s is that the next truly major crossroads where we might begin to get our heads screwed on straight is mid-decade, around 2025. By that point, America's devastating Pluto return of 2021-2023 will be fading away, along with the political and social disruptions of the global Saturn-Uranus last-quarter square. In addition, the global Jupiter-Neptune and Jupiter-Uranus cycles (starting in 2022 and 2023 respectively) will have some legs by that time, promoting at least the opportunity for a greater philosophical sense of social inclusion and different ways to understand freedom, while the next Saturn-Neptune cycle that begins in 2025 will infuse reality with new and hopefully more sensible dreams. Until then, however, I think it's going to be one hit after another in a series of devastating shocks from nature's wrecking ball that will knock down much of the fragile structure of modern civilization.

Could I be wrong about any or all of this? Of course. Reality is vast and mysterious and routinely reveals our puny human understanding (and mine as well) to be not only incorrect, but damned foolish, or even tragically mistaken. Maybe the road ahead will be easier and better than I think. Maybe it'll be worse.

In any case, take my opinion with a grain of salt.