

**The Sparks of Rebellion**

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By Chris Hedges

*Editor’s note: Chris Hedges will be giving a talk titled “The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies” on Oct. 13 in the Los Angeles area.* [*Click here*](https://truthdig.wiredforchange.com/o/5225/p/salsa/event/common/public/?event_KEY=422746) *for more information.*

I am reading and rereading the debates among some of the great radical thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries about the mechanisms of social change. These debates were not academic. They were frantic searches for the triggers of revolt.

Vladimir Lenin placed his faith in a violent uprising, a professional, disciplined revolutionary vanguard freed from moral constraints and, like Karl Marx, in the inevitable emergence of the worker’s state. [Pierre-Joseph Proudhon](http://www.ohio.edu/chastain/ip/proudhon.htm) insisted that gradual change would be accomplished as enlightened workers took over production and educated and converted the rest of the proletariat. [Mikhail Bakunin](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/49654/Mikhail-Aleksandrovich-Bakunin%20) predicted the catastrophic breakdown of the capitalist order, something we are likely to witness in our lifetimes, and new autonomous worker federations rising up out of the chaos. [Pyotr Kropotkin](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAkropotkin.htm%20), like Proudhon, believed in an evolutionary process that would hammer out the new society. [Emma Goldman](http://jwa.org/womenofvalor/goldman), along with Kropotkin, came to be very wary of both the efficacy of violence and the revolutionary potential of the masses. “The mass,” Goldman wrote bitterly toward the end of her life in echoing Marx, “clings to its masters, loves the whip, and is the first to cry Crucify!”

The revolutionists of history counted on a mobilized base of enlightened industrial workers. The building blocks of revolt, they believed, relied on the tool of the general strike, the ability of workers to cripple the mechanisms of production. Strikes could be sustained with the support of political parties, strike funds and union halls. Workers without these support mechanisms had to replicate the infrastructure of parties and unions if they wanted to put prolonged pressure on the bosses and the state. But now, with the decimation of the U.S. manufacturing base, along with the dismantling of our unions and opposition parties, we will have to search for different instruments of rebellion.

We must develop a revolutionary theory that is not reliant on the industrial or agrarian muscle of workers. Most manufacturing jobs have disappeared, and, of those that remain, few are unionized. Our family farms have been destroyed by agro-businesses. Monsanto and its Faustian counterparts on Wall Street rule. They are steadily poisoning our lives and rendering us powerless. The corporate leviathan, which is global, is freed from the constraints of a single nation-state or government. Corporations are beyond regulation or control. Politicians are too anemic, or more often too corrupt, to stand in the way of the accelerating corporate destruction. This makes our struggle different from revolutionary struggles in industrial societies in the past. Our revolt will look more like what erupted in the less industrialized Slavic republics, Russia, Spain and China and uprisings led by a disenfranchised rural and urban working class and peasantry in the liberation movements that swept through Africa and Latin America. The dispossessed working poor, along with unemployed college graduates and students, unemployed journalists, artists, lawyers and teachers, will form our movement. This is why the fight for a higher minimum wage is crucial to uniting service workers with the alienated college-educated sons and daughters of the old middle class. Bakunin, unlike Marx, considered déclassé intellectuals essential for successful revolt.

It is not the poor who make revolutions. It is those who conclude that they will not be able, as they once expected, to rise economically and socially. This consciousness is part of the self-knowledge of service workers and fast food workers. It is grasped by the swelling population of college graduates caught in a vise of low-paying jobs and obscene amounts of debt. These two groups, once united, will be our primary engines of revolt. Much of the urban poor has been crippled and in many cases broken by a rewriting of laws, especially drug laws, that has permitted courts, probation officers, parole boards and police to randomly seize poor people of color, especially African-American men, without just cause and lock them in cages for years. In many of our most impoverished urban centers—our internal colonies, as Malcolm X called them—mobilization, at least at first, will be difficult. The urban poor are already in chains. These chains are being readied for the rest of us. “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets or steal bread,” Anatole France commented acidly.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan examined 100 years of violent and nonviolent resistance movements in their book “Why Civil Resistance Works.” They concluded that nonviolent movements succeed twice as often as violent uprisings. Violent movements work primarily in civil wars or in ending foreign occupations, they found. Nonviolent movements that succeed appeal to those within the power structure, especially the police and civil servants, who are cognizant of the corruption and decadence of the power elite and are willing to abandon them.

“History teaches that we have the power to transform the nation,” Kevin Zeese said when I interviewed him. Zeese, who with Dr. Margaret Flowers founded PopularResistance.org and helped plan the [occupation of Freedom Plaza](http://www.nationofchange.org/three-weeks-occupying-freedom-plaza-1319729591) in Washington, D.C., continued: “We put forward a strategic framework that would allow people to work together in a common direction to end the rule of money. We need to be a nationally networked movement of many local, regional and issue-focused groups so we can unite into one mass movement. Research shows that nonviolent mass movements win. Fringe movements fail. By ‘mass’ we mean with an objective that is supported by a large majority and 1 percent to 5 percent of the population actively working for transformation.”

Zeese said this mass resistance must work on two tracks. It must attempt to stop the machine while at the same time building alternative structures of economic democracy and participatory democratic institutions. It is vital, he said, to sever ourselves from the corporate economy. Money, he said, has to be raised for grass-roots movements since most foundations that give grants are linked to the Democratic Party. Radical student and environmental groups especially need funds to build national networks, as does the [public banking](http://publicbankinginstitute.org/about-us.htm%20) initiative. This initiative is essential to the movement. It will never find support among legislative bodies, for public banks would free people from the tyranny of commercial banks and Wall Street.

The most important dilemma facing us is not ideological. It is logistical. The security and surveillance state has made its highest priority the breaking of any infrastructure that might spark widespread revolt. The state knows the tinder is there. It knows that the continued unraveling of the economy and the effects of climate change make popular unrest inevitable. It knows that as underemployment and unemployment doom at least a quarter of the U.S. population, perhaps more, to perpetual poverty, and as unemployment benefits are scaled back, as schools close, as the middle class withers away, as pension funds are looted by hedge fund thieves, and as the government continues to let the fossil fuel industry ravage the planet, the future will increasingly be one of open conflict. This battle against the corporate state, right now, is primarily about infrastructure. We need an infrastructure to build revolt. The corporate state is determined to deny us one.

The corporate state, unnerved by the Occupy movement, has moved to close any public space to movements that might reignite encampments. For example, New York City police arrested members of Veterans for Peace on Oct. 7, 2012, when they stayed beyond the 10 p.m. official closing time at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The police, who in some cases apologized to the veterans as they handcuffed them, were open about the motive of authorities: Officers told those being taken to jail they should blame the Occupy movement for the arrests.

The state has, at the same time, heavily infiltrated movements in order to discredit, isolate and push out their most competent leaders. It has used its vast surveillance capacities to monitor all forms of electronic communications, as well as personal relationships between activists, giving the state the ability to paralyze planned actions before they can begin. It has mounted a public relations campaign to demonize anyone who resists, branding environmental activists as “ecoterrorists,” charging activists under draconian terrorism laws, hunting down whistle-blowers such as Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden who shine a light on the inner secrets of power and condemning them as traitors and threats to national security. The state has attempted—and in this effort some in the [Black Bloc](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_cancer_of_occupy_20120206%20) proved unwittingly useful—to paint the movement as violent and directionless.

Occupy articulated the concerns of the majority of citizens. Most of the citizenry detests Wall Street and big banks. It does not want more wars. It needs jobs. It is disgusted with the subservience of elected officials to corporate power. It wants universal health care. It worries that if the fossil fuel industry is not stopped, there will be no future for our children. And the state is using all its power to stymie any movement that expresses these concerns. Documents released under the Freedom of Information Act show Homeland Security, the FBI, the Federal Protective Service, the Park Service and most likely the NSA and the CIA (the latter two have refused to respond to FOIA requests) worked with police across the country to infiltrate and destroy the encampments. There were 7,765 arrests of people in the movement. Occupy, at its peak, had about 350,000 people—or about 0.1 percent of the U.S. population.

“Look how afraid the power structure was of a mere 1/10th of 1 percent of the population,” Zeese said. “What happens when the movement grows to 1 percent—not a far reach—or the 5 percent that some research shows is the tipping point where no government, dictatorship or democracy can withstand the pressure from below?”

The state cannot allow workers at Wal-Mart, or any other nonunionized service center, to have access to an infrastructure or resources that might permit prolonged strikes and boycotts. And the movement now is about nuts and bolts. It is about food trucks, medical tents, communications vans and musicians and artists willing to articulate and sustain the struggle. We will have to build what unions and radical parties supplied in the past.

The state, in its internal projections, has a vision of the future that is as dystopian as mine. But the state, to protect itself, lies. Politicians, corporations, the public relations industry, the entertainment industry and our ridiculous television pundits speak as if we can continue to build a society based on limitless growth, profligate consumption and fossil fuel. They feed the collective mania for hope at the expense of truth. Their public vision is self-delusional, a form of collective psychosis. The corporate state, meanwhile, is preparing privately for the world it knows is actually coming. It is cementing into place a police state, one that includes the complete evisceration of our most basic civil liberties and the militarization of the internal security apparatus, as well as wholesale surveillance of the citizenry.

The most pressing issue facing us right now is the most prosaic. Protesters attempting to block the Keystone XL pipeline can endure only for so long if they have nothing to eat but stale bagels. They need adequate food. They need a system of communication to get their message out to alternative media that will amplify it. They need rudimentary medical care. All of these elements were vital to the Occupy movement. And these elements, when they came together, allowed the building of a movement that threatened the elite. The encampments also carried within them internal sources of disintegration. Many did not adequately control some groups. Many were hijacked or burdened by those who drained the political work of the movement. Many found that consensus, which worked well in small groups, created paralysis in groups of several hundred or a few thousand. And many failed to anticipate the numbing exhaustion that crushed activists. But these encampments did provide what was most crucial to the movement, something unions or the old Communist Party once provided to militants in the past. They provided the logistics to sustain resistance. And the destruction of the encampments, more than anything else, was a move by the state to deny to us the infrastructure needed to resist.

Infrastructure alone, however, will not be enough. The resistance needs a vibrant cultural component. It was the spirituals that nourished the souls of African-Americans during the nightmare of slavery. It was the blues that spoke to the reality of black people during the era of Jim Crow. It was the poems of Federico Garcia Lorca that sustained the republicans fighting the fascists in Spain. Music, dance, drama, art, song, painting were the fire and drive of resistance movements. The rebel units in El Salvador when I covered the war there always traveled with musicians and theater troupes. Art, as Emma Goldman pointed out, has the power to make ideas felt. Goldman noted that when Andrew Undershaft, a character in George Bernard Shaw’s play “Major Barbara,” said poverty is “[t]he worst of crimes” and “All the other crimes are virtues beside it,” his impassioned declaration elucidated the cruelty of class warfare more effectively than Shaw’s socialist tracts. The degradation of education into vocational training for the corporate state, the ending of state subsidies for the arts and journalism, the hijacking of these disciplines by corporate sponsors, severs the population from understanding, self-actualization and transcendence. In aesthetic terms the corporate state seeks to crush beauty, truth and imagination. This is a war waged by all totalitarian systems.

Culture, real culture, is radical and transformative. It is capable of expressing what lies deep within us. It gives words to our reality. It makes us feel as well as see. It allows us to empathize with those who are different or oppressed. It reveals what is happening around us. It honors mystery. “The role of the artist, then, precisely, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through the vast forest,” James Baldwin wrote, “so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.”

Artists, like rebels, are dangerous. They speak a truth that totalitarian systems do not want spoken. “Red Rosa now has vanished too. …” Bertolt Brecht wrote after [Luxemburg](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSluxemburg.htm%20) was murdered. “She told the poor what life is about, And so the rich have rubbed her out.” Without artists such as musician Ry Cooder and playwrights Howard Brenton and Tarell Alvin McCraney we will not succeed. If we are to face what lies ahead, we will not only have to organize and feed ourselves, we will have to begin to feel deeply, to face unpleasant truths, to recover empathy and to live passionately. Then we can fight.

*An earlier version of this column incorrectly attributed the sentence “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets or steal bread.” The author of the quotation was Anatole France.*



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