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The Energy Problem in a Historic Perspective of Revolutions

The world energy crisis: this term has been thrown around in liberal and scientific circles for many years, as if using the phrase will plant the idea of crisis in the minds of the public.

While a real crisis will be necessary to spark the public opinion to action, changes made in such a time are often fleeting and the public soon return to a version of the status quo. The basic world view of most people does not extend much beyond their small circle of family and friends.

This is a trait long held in social and cultural history, so is not easy to break. To prepare for an energy revolution, you need to produce a crisis that is not easily recovered from. This is a grim outlook for the future and many believe that a more gradual preparation for a time when energy becomes a crisis can help soften the blow. But the truth is that practices in the United States are set up to deal with short term and immediate problems, not prepare for issues in the far future.

Also it is sort of foolish to divide the energy crisis up into little nations and let everyone deal with the problems of their own, because when the world runs out of fossil fuels, it will be one of the first truly global revolutions, and something that has no precedent in history.

When one thinks of the word revolution, one envisions the rising of the people and mass social change achieved through acts of violence. But historically, so called revolutions have been different in aim and method. One of the first examples of a revolution was the transfer of political power from the monarchy to the Parliament of Britain in 1649. This revolution

drastically altered the government and social structure of the nation, but only one man was killed, Charles I, the king (Hughes 34-35).

The French Revolution, probably the most well known revolution, could be said to have lasted from about 1780 to 1830 and existed as a number of movements, each with their own political agenda. The early revolution was a very idealistic and was run by the members of the rising middle class against aristocratic rule. "The people," or the peasantry, really got involved during the reign of terror around 1794, where they rebelled against the liberal middle class. Then there was a conservative, militaristic backlash in which Napoleon appeased the public with thoughts of nationalism and French glory (Lewis 88-108). The final revolutions of 1830 established such things as universal manhood suffrage and brought back many of the liberal fundamentals from the original revolution. The revolutions of 1848 are interesting because they began as a radical rebellion in multiple countries, but were not strong enough at the time to effect much change. What they did inspire was a huge conservative movement that dominated European politics up until WWI (Breuilly 120-125).

The Russian Revolution is interesting because it was a revolution that was supposed to come from the oppressed city workers against the middle class. But Russia was a land populated almost entirely by peasants, so was a small group of proletariats battling against a corrupt monarchy. This revolution was supported by the peasantry because it was taken place during a time of crisis, (WWI) and peasants were being used as cannon fodder for the front lines and being slaughtered by the millions. A similar revolution was attempted in 1905 but failed, because there was no crisis to rally the peasants to a cause that was not really related to them (Perrie 151-168).

What is it then that ties all these so called revolutions together? Historian David Parker says, “What defines a revolution as such is not the precise form of state which emerges from the battle for power but the rupturing and restructuring of the state and the purposes for which it is used” (Parker 3). So basically a loose definition of revolution is a series of dynamic events which bring about political and social change. The world powers currently run under the assumption that individual liberty and freedom are among the most sacred of human rights. Underlying this philosophy is the driving force of democracy, capitalism: that it is the natural state of man to be in constant competition with nature and other men. Now with this in mind, modern global politics is about competition for natural resources. If these natural resources run out, what is left to compete over?

When the world runs low on fossil fuel, the political and social structure of the world will have to change accordingly. But how drastic and violent this revolution will have to be can be determined by the amount of planning we are able to do before the crisis hits. Unfortunately, we are far from becoming a unified world, and so each nation must be responsible for their own preparations for the revolution. In the United States we are not structurally equipped to deal with long term problems, instead being very reactionary and interested in the current public opinion. So to change the current policy, we must change the public opinion. The easiest way to do this is with a crisis. Threaten everyday life and people will react. The rising gas prices in the 1980’s made people more willing to accept spending money on alternative energy resources, but this small crisis did little to alter overall national consciousness, because by the early 1990’s the gas prices fell once again, and things could go back to the way they were. Randall Baker states that “people have a tendency to react- in terms of policy- to crisis more often than to long-term, evolving situations. What evidence do we have that the public today believes there is an energy

crisis, or that there will be?" (Baker 131). It's not that there is not any proof that natural resources are non renewable, many people know this to be a fact, but it is not a fact staring them in the face everyday, and so most are not willing to deal with it.

It is important to look into history to find examples of events that have succeeded in altering the mass of public opinion. In the middle ages in Europe, it was believed that the masses of underprivileged and oppressed peasants were part of the natural order of things. The intellectual movement, known as the Enlightenment began to question this long held belief that inequality and poverty were natural. Such ideals as individual freedom and to later extent equality were the themes that advocates of the French Revolution held onto when they dynamically overturned the government in 1789. This revolution sparked similar rebellious thoughts in other nations and despite setbacks such the backlash after the revolutions of 1848, which took WWI and WWII to overcome, liberal ideas came to the place of prominence that they hold today. In the modern developed world, we hold it sacred that all men are created equal and have basic human rights that should raise them above the level of poverty and starvation. While it is true that much of the world is denied these things, it is still popularly held that all people are entitled to these things.

Is that what it takes to break down a current thought system, a bloody rebellion, followed by 200 or so years of conservative backlash? I really hope not. But if the world ignores the energy problem until it becomes a crisis, I believe that this will have to be the path. However, we have entered a catch 22, because in order to rally the public and prepare for the loss of natural resources, there needs to be a crisis. But, the fleeting concerns of a crisis are soon forgotten if the problem does not pose a serious enough permanently threaten the current social structure. In order for real revolution, "there also is a need for an underlying nagging concern that something

is deeply and disturbingly, wrong so that this somewhat unfocused psychosis can suddenly be given direction and momentum in the arena of policy making” (Baker, 132). In my opinion this is what needs to be done to prepare people for the energy revolution. Create a deep ingraining into people that this is coming.

In my opinion, the best way to do this is not by targeting adults, who already have their world view set somewhere back in the 50’s and 60’s, but to deal with children. I don’t want any child taught how to think, or what to believe, but to acquaint them with the problems that their world will be facing. Teach children that the paper they are using comes from trees in the rainforest, and they may be more willing to recycle that piece of paper when they are done with it. Teach children, that the coal they are using to run their air conditioner at 60° F is destroying the air they breathe, and perhaps when they have houses of their own, they will use a fan instead. To change the perception of the people is the only way to give a solid foundation for the change that will have to be implemented when fossil fuels run out.

To have a successful and moderate evolving revolution there needs to be, “economic developments and conditions ... ideas or ideology and the impact of ‘external’ pressures” (Parker, 2). The world needs to prepare for a time when the basis of the global economy is gone, and the idea of progress has to be rethought, because as energy becomes more expensive, so does so called progress. This means a reorganization of our world view, based not on progressing forward conservatively, but dealing with the sustainability issues on a global level. The saddest thing of all is that these changes will be difficult to implement before the crisis hits, and even then we may have to deal with years or decades of counter revolution, before the world can adapt to this difficult but necessary change.

Works Cited

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¹ I used Palmer as a source throughout the paper, as most of the things I generally know about history and things like historical norms and patterns come from readings of Palmer.