

FLASH MOB DANCE REVOLUTION: PT 2

By Michael Ventura

November 18, 2011

To overthrow a tyrant is dangerous and difficult, but it is a great deal easier than overthrowing a worldwide economic system.

If economies simply stop, everyone suffers. So a nonviolent economic revolution must rebuild as it destroys. That's no mean trick. In fact, it's never been done. This does not mean it cannot be done.

Nonviolence is the key. Tiananmen Square made it clear that nonviolence can lose, but Tahrir Square made it just as clear that nonviolence is the only way to win – and it is the only way to keep economies moving while working people win.

How to win? That question finds its answer only through experiment in action. The Velvet Revolution of the Soviet bloc, the ongoing Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement share a means. Employ a decentralized action-response-action process as events present themselves, a process of plan-improvise-plan, a process that adheres to nonviolence as its first principle and depends upon the truth power fears most: You cannot arrest a population.

Involve significant elements of a population in a movement, and there aren't enough jails or guns to stop it. Syrians facing vicious repression have proven this daily for months. The question "How will workers around the world neutralize corporate power?" will be answered as this question is not asked but dared and acted upon.

Keep the target firmly in mind. The target is not government (the U.S. constitution works pretty well when corporate money cannot buy politicians); the target is a corporate-dominated economic system.

We can win. (You cannot arrest a population.) But a workers' revolution will test us most critically *after* we win. Then the crucial question will be: When the economy is ours to rebuild, can we apply those nonviolent and decentralized principles that gave us victory? For only by extending the principles of nonviolence and decentralization into commerce can we create an economics worthy of us, remembering every moment of every day that the ends never justify the means. The means become the ends. The means determine the institutions we shall create.

The task is to create modes of commerce in which all concerned are treated fairly. All means *all*, including the people we oppose. I am as committed to their freedom as I am to my own. Without commitment to everyone's freedom, freedom is ultimately impossible. If I am to be free, I must commit to your freedom, whomever you are. That is the law of liberty.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) tried to address these issues. His mistake was to assert that the value of a product consists of the labor that goes into it. On paper, that looks logical. It's logical to assume, as Marx did, that all products are created by labor, hence the amount of labor that goes into a product is what makes it valuable, so the laborer *is* the value and should therefore own the means of production. It's logical, but it's not real.

This is real: Three elements – labor, invention, and investment -- are essential to any commercial enterprise. A workers' revolution organizes these elements not for the wealth of a few but for the health of communities.

It is easy to claim, as Marxists do, that invention and investment consist of stored-up labor, since any invention builds on all previous human effort and investment comes from profits squeezed out of others' previous labor.

There are two problems with that analysis: It makes anything that is not labor an enemy, and it defines change as a redress of the past. But an us vs. them vision dooms society to continual conflict. And we cannot make the past behave because the past no longer exists. What's real is that everyone exists in the present, and the present, to be livable and just, must profit the many.

After a victorious workers' revolution, the same factories, farms and stores will exist. Communist Russia and China attempted a drastic, immediate reorganization of their factories, farms, and stores; this caused decades of deprivation and oppression. We can thank Russia and China for proving that drastic, doctrinaire reorganization does not work.

So what can work? The answer depends on how we value those three essential elements: labor, invention, and investment.

The value of labor has been quantified by assigning an hourly wage as low as the market will bear. But that is not how to quantify labor. When you subtract labor from commerce, invention and investment become useless. Without labor, invention and investment cannot function. *That* is the true value of labor, whether skilled or unskilled. The necessity of labor puts labor on equal footing with invention and investment.

Next, consider invention. An invention may be no more than the decor and menu of a restaurant, or it may be as sophisticated as a smart phone. But, whatever the invention, without it investment and labor have nothing to do. Invention's function is equal.

In a just economy, function determines value.

As for investment, invention and labor can't get far without it. The mistake has been to assign investment *all* the power, when, in practice, without invention and labor the money of investment is useless. Neither of these elements – labor, investment, invention - can function without the others.

The formula for justice, then, is simple: Labor, invention and investment deserve equal profit, equal freedom, and equal decision-making power.

To claim that investment is the paramount element is as abstract, as unrealistic, as Karl Marx's claim that labor deserves all. Yet this has been the logic of the so-called "free market," a system in which investment gets the lion's share, invention gets a cut, and labor gets as little as possible. The logic of Karl Marx creates stagnation and oppression; the logic of the so-called free market (in which no one behaves freely but the rich) also creates stagnation and oppression. A workers' revolution must replace the free market, not with the restrictions of socialism, but with truly free commerce – freedom *alive in the workplace*.

Partial examples of a free workplace exist now, as described by the *Chronicle's* Mike Crissey in an email to me:

"The cooperative business model has been around since 1844. We don't need to Occupy Wall Street, we need to abandon Wall Street, to stop giving our money to plutocratic banks and financiers. We need to put our money in cooperatively owned businesses (credit unions, for example), democratically run by their owners who also happen to be the sole beneficiaries of the businesses -- by law, all profits must be reinvested in the cooperative or returned to owners. They have clearly stated business practices, open records and are accountable to democratically elected boards."

Good as far as it goes, but nothing is good enough until workers earn not mere wages but equity, plus equal say at the power-table.

In the so-called free-market system, investment, invention and labor became antagonists, but when you consider their functions – how they actually *work* – they are functionally allies. They became antagonists because one element, investment, has been allowed to buy dominance.

When the so-called free market devalues labor, even small businesses profit from job insecurities created by corporations. Employers get equity; stockholders get dividends; wage earners make barely enough to live on. That's how the stock market goes up while workers' wages and benefits go way down. So how is this market free? Where is freedom for the many?

We can change this. We are the 99%. Nothing can stop our direct action.

(To be continued.)

As of this writing, city governments have moved to stop the Occupy movement. How the movement responds will be its first great challenge. This essay looks toward next spring, when we workers will be tested not only for our endurance but for our vision.

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