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What would a British revolution look like – and how would it happen?

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EPA/Sean Dempsey

In the days after Britain voted to leave the EU, a febrile, volatile atmosphere took hold. Prime Minister David Cameron resigned, the Parliamentary Labour Party began an attempt to unseat its left-wing leader Jeremy Corbyn, and the pound **hit an all-time low**. For a moment, it seemed that fundamental change was on the agenda – but as has happened so many times in Britain, the country stopped well short of a truly transformative moment. A British revolution, it seems, is not yet on the cards.

This is not all that surprising. Revolutions don't come about on the back of raw anger or sheer will: all the necessary forces must come together, and certain conditions have to be in place. The crucial thing is for would-be revolutionaries to recognise them. So if we want to imagine a British revolution, we should look at what created the country's last two near-revolutionary eras.

The first one began brewing in 1910, went through a brief intermission for the first two years of World War I, then picked up again from 1916, and came to a head in 1919 as various crises and campaigns converged. The other ran from 1968 through to 1975 or so; it peaked in around 1972, with the Fisher-

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Bendix factory occupation, a national miners' strike, a national dockers' strike and Bloody Sunday all beginning or taking place in one month alone.

Both these restive periods came at moments of global upheaval that swept Britain up in a wider revolutionary wave. After World War I it seemed briefly as if Europe might follow Russia's lead and embrace revolutionary socialist and anti-colonial politics; 1972, meanwhile, came halfway through the era bracketed by the French "evenements" of May 1968 and the end of the Portuguese Revolution in 1975.

POBLAUGHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN In the name of God and of the dead generation from which she receives her old traditions of autonomy, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having bravely perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty, six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entered in, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will discover it by cowardice, inhumanity, or treachery. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE,
 SEAN Mac DIARADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,
 P. H. FEARSE, EAMONN CEASNAIG,
 JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLENKETT.

The Easter Proclamation of 1916. Wikimedia Commons

In Britain, these times drew together a range of different movements. George Dangerfield famously described the combined Home Rule crisis in Ireland, revolts of workers and the campaign for women's suffrage before 1914 as signalling "the strange death of liberal England". After receding at the start of World War I, all three factors soon resurged, starting in 1916 with the Easter Rising in Dublin, the engineers' struggle against dilution and the Glasgow rent strikes.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, meanwhile, Irish Republicanism, militant trade unionism and what was by then called radical women's liberation were all in play, but accompanied by the anti-Vietnam War movement, new student and gay rights movements, and Britain's first genuine revolutionary leftist movements since the Stalinist darkness fell in the late 1920s.

Finally, the events of both 1919 and 1972 were coloured by the struggles of trade unionists, whose mass strikes and occupations posed the biggest threat to the capitalist system. Even combined, the other forces involved did not amount to a comparable threat.

But with the assembled forces unable to seize state power – something that distinguishes all true revolutions – our rulers were able to restore control and secure lasting victories. The order established endures to this day.

So what prospect is there, really, for another revolutionary crisis in Britain?

The stars align

Some of the global conditions are clearly in place. As in 1968, we live in a faltering world economy; as in 1914, the UK is being battered by growing geopolitical instability and great power rivalry, with assorted conflicts and proxy wars underway – especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

There's also a new factor: the existential threat of catastrophic man-made climate change, which many political theorists describe as inevitable while capitalism continues. Together, these three

factors have produced another: mass migration and resulting human misery on a scale unseen since the end of World War II.

The next question, then, is whether Britain is actually primed for an epochal change.

The shattering result of the EU referendum and its chaotic aftermath show that the British ruling class is deeply divided in a way that it wasn't in 1919, or in even in 1972. And while the reign of neoliberalism has weakened the labour movement and enriched the wealth of the ruling elite and its hangers-on, it hasn't restored profit rates on any consistent basis – and there's no obvious alternative form of capitalist organisation to propose as a way of answering the mass discontent.

But if another revolutionary situation arises, it won't be because everyone wakes up one morning with the intention of overthrowing the system; it'll be because a significant minority of the population responds to a much more localised and specific attack on its interests.

The spark

The Leave vote confronts the political representatives of the British establishment with dire uncertainty. If they put a foot wrong or overplay their hand, they could overreach themselves beyond the point of retreat.

For the moment, it seems reasonable to assume that the Conservative party will hold the reins throughout the post-referendum chaos – but we can imagine the sort of miscalculation that might provide the spark. Perhaps restrictions on in-work benefits or healthcare could be extended not just to migrants but to “native” Britons who haven't paid into the system for whatever reason. The NHS could face full privatisation. Britain could get involved in a war between Russia and the NATO states.

The forces involved, though, might be very different from the UK's last two revolutionary moments. Today, not just Ireland but also Scotland threatens the integrity of the union; among the oppressed, migrants are likely to be at the forefront of the struggle for rights.

The working class remains essential to any revolutionary project – not the caricatured “white working class” supposedly in thrall to racism and xenophobia, but the actual multi-ethnic working class employed in call centres, shopping malls and transportation hubs across the country. This potentially revolutionary class is very different to the industrial proletariat of old; it incorporates a vast mass of private sector workers who aren't currently in trade unions.

That rather changes the mechanics of what revolutionary mobilisation would mean. Mass unionisation is obviously one component, and also relevant here are the three sustained community-based mass mobilisations that have rocked Britain since the defeat of the miners in 1985: the campaign against the “poll tax” (1987-90), the Iraq War (2002-04), and the grassroots independence campaigns “from below” in the Scottish Referendum (2014).

But while the sort of self-organisation that arose at these moments is likely to re-emerge, we might also expect the process to involve such random explosive and damaging episodes as the riots of 2011 –

for which there are a great many competing explanations.

One thing is certain: the British capitalist state has entered a deep crisis, one that's territorial, political and economic all at once. Revolution may not be a utopian solution – but it's not hard to imagine a group or groups of dissenters deciding it's the only way out.



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