

**Book Review: Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below*. London: Repeater Books, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-910924-36-5 (Paperback). 261 Pages. \$14.95.**

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Richard Gilman-Opalsky has spent the past several years reflecting on recent revolts in countries such as Brazil, Egypt, Greece, Mexico, and the United States. His reflections have led him to the conclusion that these insurgencies have a great deal to teach us about political change and his latest book is an exploration of the lessons to be learned from these events embedded in an unabashed championing of revolt in all its forms: from culture jamming to violent insurrection. As such, *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below* speaks to those who study as well as to those who seek to engender political transformations.

While *Specters of Revolt* speaks to scholars and activists alike, it seems destined to violate the sensibilities of constituents in both camps: being too partisan for some scholars and too densely theoretical for some activists. Nevertheless, this book suggests a number of directives that warrant the attention of anyone interested in the dynamics of political change. Among the most important such directives are the following:

First, we need to reconsider the conventional “social movement” approach to political change. Specifically, we need to rethink the notion that momentous political change occurs almost exclusively through the efforts of large scale organizations (however loosely structured) with

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signature and clearly defined agendas: through social movements. We need to rethink this approach, Gilman-Opalsky suggests, for two reasons.

To begin with, the conventional social movement approach underestimates the prevalence of calls for political change. That is, with its focus on social movements as distinct and temporal entities and its virtual inattention to revolts, this approach fails to recognize how common such calls have been historically. After all, Gilman-Opalsky observes, all social movements and all revolts are manifestations of the same impulse: a rejection of the status quo. As such, they are all connected despite temporal and spatial distances. By ignoring this motivational continuity, he suggests, the conventional social movement approach blinds us to the ubiquity of political dissent.

In addition, the conventional social movement approach overstates the difficulty of engendering political change. This overstatement is made evident by recent events in Egypt which demonstrate that profound political transformation can be brought about without resort to a prolonged social movement. In fact, Gilman-Opalsky asserts, these events reveal that such transformation can be brought about rapidly (in a matter of weeks) through the relatively spontaneous actions of loosely affiliated individuals and groups whose political agendas converge only in that they all deem the status quo to be unacceptable. By ignoring the power of revolts, he suggests, the conventional social movement approach blinds us to the possibilities of extemporaneous political action.

In sum, the conventional social movement approach both balkanizes and privileges large scale collective actions and thereby distorts our understanding of the dynamics of political change. Hence, Gilman-Opalsky suggests, we need to supplement this approach with a theory of the micropolitical.

Second, we need to recognize revolt as a desirable means for achieving political change. Revolt is desirable in that not only is it capable of engendering profound political transformation relatively quickly; it expresses the immediate and ever-changing hopes and desires of the masses in a way that large scale social movements simply cannot. Moreover, revolts are far more attractive to the already overburdened masses than social movements with their clarion calls for tireless struggle and sacrifice, not to mention their less than stellar records. And, lest we fear that revolts are dangerously open-ended, Gilman-Opalsky assures us that any undesirable outcomes of a given revolt – a prospect that he readily acknowledges – can be rectified through further revolt, as was recently accomplished in Egypt on more than one occasion. Thus,

Gilman-Opalsky suggests, we need to recognize the advantageousness of revolt.

Third, we need to recognize that the potential for revolt is ever-present. It is ever-present first because it exists in the daily workings of any social, political, or economic institution that impinges upon the interests of the masses: in virtually all institutions in a world dominated by capitalism in his opinion. Furthermore, it is ever-present because the ghosts of human suffering and past revolts inhabit the collective memory as well as countless places associated with their occurrences. Consequently, Gilman-Opalsky suggests, we need to recognize that society is perpetually haunted by the specter of revolt.

A final directive suggested by Gilman-Opalsky for the purposes of this review is that we need to recognize the philosophical richness of revolt. Specifically, we need to abandon the notion that revolts are simply irrational outbursts to be explained by social scientists and realize that underlying every revolt is a set of principles regarding how we should live our lives; a critique of existing conditions; and a vision (however inarticulate) of what is possible. Therefore, Gilman-Opalsky suggests, we need to recognize that revolts are philosophy in action and as such can contribute to our heretofore elitist and largely ineffectual interrogation of existence.

Gilman-Opalsky proffers the foregoing directives not as ends in themselves but as steps in the process of developing a theory of revolt as “philosophy from below”. Pursuant to that theory, the final chapter of this work provides “a rudimentary sketch of the content and logic of revolt” (245). This sketch describes revolt in terms of its language (non-textual), disposition (critical), imagination (revolutionary), constituency (the marginalized), and resolutions (theory and praxis). In doing so, this sketch distinguishes revolt from other forms of metaphysical interrogation while simultaneously establishing its logical parallels with those forms. Gilman-Opalsky closes his work with a delineation of the philosophical, psychological, political, and ethical merits of philosophy from below and a resultant championing of “permanent revolt” as a vital component of a progressive society.

If I have done *Specters of Revolt* justice in the preceding synopsis, it should be clear that Gilman-Opalsky’s recent reflections call for a repositioning of revolt in the social sciences and in the minds of social activists. Specifically, they call for an end to the trivialization and vilification of revolt as a route to political transformation along with an appreciation of its formidable analytical content in both settings. I found the fact that Gilman-Opalsky was able to present a convincing case for

such radical repositionings in a relatively short and extremely engaging work (always passionate and oftentimes sardonically humorous) quite impressive. Here, I thought, is a work that seeks to go beyond the safe and detached exploration of social minutia that so dominates the social sciences of our day. Here is a work that challenges the theoretical and moral complacency of contemporary social scientists. Here is an example of what social science should be: the original, systematic, and politically engaged exploration of things that matter. My enthusiasm for this work was, however, accompanied by a bit of consternation.

One source of consternation is my fear that *Specters of Revolt* will not receive the attention it so richly deserves from mainstream social scientists. I fear that this will be the case for two reasons.

First, as mentioned earlier, this work is likely to violate the sensibilities of many scholars owing to its blatant partisanship. This seems particularly likely in the case of mainstream social scientists with their conflation of objectivity with amorality. This, despite the ways in which such conflation betrays the legacies of the greatest social thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all of whom objectively examined the impact of social phenomena (capitalism, authority, the division of labor) on the collective good and subsequently condemned or endorsed those phenomena accordingly. Nonetheless, it is not hard for me to imagine the disapproval that Gilman-Opalsky's overt disdain for capitalism and open championing of revolt are likely to elicit from many contemporary social scientists.

Second, much of this work is likely to be dismissed by mainstream social scientists for its lack of adherence to their scholarly protocols. As noted earlier, Gilman-Opalsky's insights regarding the implications of revolts for understanding political change are not presented as ends in themselves but as steps in the process of developing a theory of revolt as philosophy from below. As a result, they are oftentimes found in summary statements strewn throughout the text with no regard for the claims-making conventions that social scientists have come to expect (thus my persistent use of the term "suggests" in the previous synopsis). While Gilman-Opalsky's somewhat dogmatic approach to revolts is quite appropriate for the purpose of this work, I fear that many social scientists will dismiss much of what I find important in *Specters of Revolt* as mere (partisan) conjecture.

These comments should not be read as condemnation of Gilman-Opalsky's approach to scholarship, for as noted earlier I find his treatise quite compelling. Rather, they should be read as regretful recognition of the chasm that exists between that approach and the sensibilities of those

whom I think would benefit most from a sympathetic reading of *Specters of Revolt*: mainstream social scientists. Hence, some consternation on my part.

Another source of consternation is the fact that I am not entirely convinced of the need for “permanent revolt”. Gilman-Opalsky spent a great deal of time railing against global capitalism and its increased intrusion upon, and desecration of, the lives of the overwhelming majority of the world’s citizens and I understand why we need to revolt against this system. He also made numerous references to the undesirability of States, no matter how progressive, and I understand why we need to revolt against these entities as well. However, I am convinced that we can create a world devoid of both capitalist and State subjugation – communist anarchism as described by Peter Kropotkin ([1899] 2002) – and I am not sure where revolt would fit into that world.

Gilman-Opalsky’s only direct reference to the value of permanent revolt is his statement that “even after the establishment of some new life-world, revolt would return again to challenge its limits and failings” (259). While I understand the need to continually strive for social betterment, I am not convinced that there would be a need for permanent revolt in the life-world I envision (or many other possible life-worlds for that matter). Critique? Yes. Challenge? Yes. Conflict? Probably. Revolt in any meaningful sense? I am not so sure. I don’t know exactly how I would conceptualize the process by which redress would occur in a society sans subjugation but it would surely differ greatly from the conceptualization of revolt (from culture jamming to violent insurrection) presented throughout this work. That being the case, I fail to grasp the need for permanent revolt.

The foregoing comments should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of Gilman-Opalsky’s call for permanent revolt, as I am open to being convinced of the legitimacy of that call. Rather, they should be interpreted as concern over what I see as his lamentably foreshortened treatment of this critical concept. Hence, additional consternation on my part.

A final source of consternation is the fact that I am not comfortable with Gilman-Opalsky’s conclusion that “professional thinkers have more to learn from insurrectionary movements than they have to teach them” (27). That professional thinkers have a great deal to learn from revolts is quite clear as Gilman-Opalsky demonstrates through his development of the ideas of an assortment of scholars, all of whom have recognized the philosophical content of revolts and all of whom have stopped far short of developing a theory of revolt as philosophy from below. That said, it

is quite clear to me that actual or potential participants in revolts as defined in this work have much to learn from professional thinkers as well.

To begin with, some such revolts strike me more as public displays of the petulant narcissism that Lasch (1979) observed in the latter half of the twentieth century than meaningful philosophy in action. I am sure that there are philosophies underling revolts following sporting events and bar closings, for example, but they strike me as among the most unenlightened of philosophies.

In addition, other such revolts strike me more as hate mongering than meaningful philosophy in action. I am also sure that there are philosophies underlying revolts over the removal of racially offensive symbols or the establishment of shelters for displaced Syrians, for instance, but they strike me as philosophies of the basest order.

Furthermore, even some of the revolts touted by Gilman-Opalsky for their progressiveness – those that occurred in Ferguson following the police killing of Michael Brown – strike me as limited in their analyses of the sources of the problems they seek to redress. That is, if there is a sociological imagination as defined by Mills (1959) at work in these revolts, that imagination is in an embryonic stage at best. I find this most evident in the fact that even the reading list generated by Black Lives Matter after the revolts – a reading list meant to contextualize racial issues in the United States for revolt participants, potential participants, and opponents alike – is devoid of writings by history’s most radical and imaginative social thinkers. The accounts of racial injustice and the journalistic forays into social science that dominate this list are no doubt valuable, but if people are to truly understand the origins of systemic racial (or any other) injustices, they need to be reading and discussing works from the pantheon of social thought in my view. Consequently, while I accept that revolts like these have underlying philosophies, I am convinced that those philosophies are not nearly as critically sophisticated as they might be.

These observations on the philosophical shortcomings of the revolts referred to above are not meant to categorically disparage those revolts (though they are meant to disparage those rooted in narcissism and hatred). These observations are simply meant to point out that there are few actual or potential revolt participants who would not benefit from the insights of professional thinkers as both theorists and mentors.

That revolts need the support of professional thinkers is not entirely lost on Gilman-Opalsky as he urges these thinkers to “participate in the production of epiphanies, or in the moments of their realization” (28).

However, he never addresses which epiphanies professional thinkers need to produce or how they might participate in their realization and instead focuses exclusively on what such thinkers have to learn from revolts. He does so, in my opinion, to the extreme detriment of philosophies from below.

The preceding comments should not be understood as a rejection of Gilman-Opalsky's claim that revolts constitute philosophies from below and therefore warrant our attention, for he has thoroughly convinced me that this is the case. Rather, they should be understood as concern over the surprisingly short shrift he gives professional thinkers as contributors to such philosophies. Hence, a final bit of consternation on my part.

After much reflection on the consternation that I have expressed at some length above, I find myself standing by my initial characterization of *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below* as an example of what social science ought to be and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the processes and possibilities of political change. I do so based on my near certainty that no reader will look at revolts, however apparently senseless, in the same way after completing this work. This, no matter how attached that reader is to conventional approaches to collective behavior; an attachment that I shared prior to reading *Specters of Revolt*. And, while this work's unconventionality might result in some readers following me in calling for more – more concessions to academic protocols, more explication of critical concepts, more practical guidance – calling for more from an author is not always such a bad thing. Especially not when one has been engaged, challenged, and perhaps enlightened along the way.

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