

COVID-19 and the Process of Social Change

by Phillip W. Weiss

June 5, 2020 was the fourth night that a curfew was in effect in New York City. It is too bad that the city had to experience a wave of destruction before the city government could mount an effective response. What happened was truly frightening. The police could not stop the rioting. The hooligans had control of the street. Now, it is known beyond all doubt that the hooligans are out there, waiting for the opportunity to again go on a rampage and terrorize the public. Even the liberal politicians who promote the politics of permissiveness acknowledge that there is a hooligan element out there that poses a threat to society.

It is bad enough to have hooligans embedded in a community. It is infinitely worse if these hooligans are organized and are driven by politics. That transforms their violent acts into insurrection. Insurrections sometimes succeed. They can bring down a society.

Insurrections have occurred throughout history. Mob rage becomes a political tool for those who want to grab power. It is something not to be taken lightly because once society is destabilized, law and order cannot be easily or cheaply restored. Sometimes, restoration of law and order require drastic actions that are distasteful and repugnant to our political and social values but necessary to ensure the survival of the state.

There is a maxim: violence begets violence. This is not a cliché. It describes what happens when civil order breaks down. It unleashes pent up violence. Once unleashed, violence will run its course until it is expended. Violence carries no political label. It obeys no law except the law of primal power. Violence is productive potential going to waste, an expenditure of energy that destroys instead of builds. It is a force of nature that brings on change, like a volcano or an earthquake or a hurricane. Once it erupts, it sweeps away everything, leaving a new landscape in its wake.

The same result occurs with societies. After the violence, the social, political, economic, and cultural landscape is changed, but at a price because unlike natural events, this transformation involves humans who are vulnerable and can and do get hurt. The violence takes the form of war, rebellion, insurrection, often followed by an equally violent counter-reaction by lawful authority. Sometimes lawful authority totally breaks down and a free-for-all ensues as political factions, now free from all legal restraints, make war against each other.

There is another maxim: It can't happen here. Well, it can. It can happen anywhere, anytime, and without warning. One moment there is peace and the next moment all has been thrown into a state of chaos, which is exactly what the proponents of violence want to produce. Chaos produces power vacuums ready to be filled by fanatics who are greedy for power. Fanatics will do ANYTHING to attain power including, but not limited to, burn, loot, smash, and terrorize. Once in power, they will institutionalize and codify into law the very violence that

propelled them into power. That creates a new set of problems and lays the groundwork for the next cycle of social disintegration.

Society is not static. It is dynamic and fluid. It is in a state of flux. Why this is the case defies easy explanation. In fact, all attempts at trying to come up with an explanation just clouds the picture even further. It is enough just to recognize it as a given. It may not inspire feelings of security but at least it can allow people to prepare for the worst so that when trouble again erupts, they can survive.

Meanwhile the COVID-19 crisis continues to vex us. It is difficult enough for society to deal with one life-threatening crisis, but to deal with two is asking a lot, in fact, maybe too much. Or maybe it is all one big crisis, the mayhem being the product of a weakened virus-infected society. Whatever the case, the results are the same: a pervasive feeling of insecurity that erodes confidence in government, weakens the forces of law and order and empowers the fanatical fringe to act with impunity and with confidence in the possibility that they could win.