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# How to Make a Revolution?

## Socialist Strategies in Different Countries

Erkin Özalp

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## A Few Notes About the Translation

This is a translation of the original text of my book, first published in Turkish in 2023. I have not made any significant revisions.

As I discuss in the seventh chapter (pp. 160-166), I make a distinction between "populism" and "peopleism" (*halkçılık*, in Turkish). Therefore, I also use the word "peopleist," which will not sound familiar to the reader.

Instead of the term "welfare state," I prefer to use the term "social state" (*sosyal devlet*, in Turkish), because it emphasizes the "social" aspect.

In the original text, the quotations from Marx and Engels are my translations into Turkish. Here, I have used the English translations in the *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (MECW).

# Introduction

Is it possible to enable people to make all kinds of decisions about themselves freely by themselves, by ending the domination of small minorities over large majorities?

According to many, it is, "unfortunately" or "fortunately," not possible. After all, in order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to carry out radical transformations in economic, social, and political relations, i.e., to make a revolution. And apart from the difficulty of making a revolution, none of the revolutions to date could enable people to make all kinds of decisions about themselves freely by themselves. The steps and achievements toward this goal could not be made permanent. There is no guarantee that future attempts will be any more successful.

Of course, to those who say "unfortunately," one might reply, "Without a world revolution, i.e., without ensuring the emancipation of the majority of humanity, the gains that can be attained in individual countries will inevitably be limited; moreover, in a world dominated by imperialism, the danger of losing these gains cannot be eliminated." But what does this general theoretical truth mean in practice? Should we, until the arrival of the world revolution, which we cannot foresee, be content with revolutions that aim to meet people's basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, vacations, etc., without enabling them to make decisions about themselves freely by themselves?

Friedrich Engels, one of the founders of Marxism, wrote in 1895:

> "The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul. The history of the last fifty years has taught us that."[1]

I think the history of the last 128 years has taught us this again and again. If the direct participation of the masses in social transformation processes cannot be ensured, i.e., if their involvement cannot be raised above passive support or consent, "conscious minorities" will not be able to advance social transformation processes, and the concern to preserve past gains (e.g., political power) can take precedence over everything else.

Some see the solution in the initiation of local self-government. They argue that all social relations can be transformed by spreading practices of local direct democracy. But, in a country where a very large portion of social resources belongs to a tiny minority, that minority will decide for what purposes these resources will be used. Moreover, individuals who make up the majority may have to support or accept decisions that serve the interests of the minority, in order to survive or maintain their living standards. Without an economic transformation that brings social resources under the control of the majority, it will not be easy for people to make all kinds of decisions about themselves freely by themselves. In order to raise local self-government to a national level, it is necessary to gain the power to change the existing relations of property. The seizure of political power is therefore crucial. If this is not or cannot be done, the achievements that can be attained through local self-government will be limited, and therefore, the willingness of the masses to participate in decision-making may gradually weaken. After all, people do not see participation as an end in itself.

Some others, who formulate radical demands in order to seize the political power, suggest abandoning the goal of revolution.

However, the seizure of the political power (political revolution) is important because, and to the extent, it can pave the way for radical transformations in economic and social relations (social revolution). A political power that does not serve a social revolution may have to serve the interests of the capital owners, no matter through which radical demands it has been seized, as countless examples have proven.

In this book, drawing on the experiences of struggle after the collapse of the socialist system led by the Soviet Union, I will discuss how revolutions that are the work of the masses themselves can be made today.

Undoubtedly, every revolution is the product of certain local and concrete conditions. Discussions on the goals and methods necessitated by a revolutionary struggle cannot be carried out independently of local and concrete conditions.

Past experiences also show that those waging a revolutionary struggle may adopt very different goals and methods:

(1) Overthrowing the present government by waging armed struggle, taking over the state completely (establishing a one-party regime), and initiating the process of social revolution. (For example, the Chinese and Cuban revolutions).

(2) Overthrowing the present government by waging armed struggle, coming to power, and using this power as an instrument of the process of social revolution in a multi-party regime. (For example, the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979.)

(3) Taking the lead in a national liberation struggle against occupying forces and achieving success, taking over the state, and initiating the process of social revolution. (For example, the Albanian and Vietnamese revolutions at the end of the Second World War.)

(4) Struggling, armed or unarmed, for the independence of a certain region and initiating the process of social revolution when this is achieved. (For example, the successful independence struggle of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front against Ethiopia.)

(5) Taking over the state completely and initiating the process of social revolution, thanks to the intervention/support of a socialist country. (For example, the establishment of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany] after the Second World War.)

(6) Taking over the state completely through a military coup and initiating the process of social revolution. (For example, the coup of the Free Officers Movement in Egypt in 1952.)

(7) Overthrowing the present government through a military coup and establishing a multi-party regime that offers the possibility to come to power to revolutionary parties as well. (For example, the Carnation Revolution of 1974 in Portugal.)

(8) Taking over the state completely (establishing a one-party regime) thanks to the overthrow of the present government by a people's (or working class) uprising (armed or unarmed), and initiating the process of social revolution. (For example, the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia.)

(9) Coming to power through elections immediately after the present government is overthrown by a people's (or working class) uprising (armed or unarmed), and using this power as an instrument of the process of social revolution in a multi-party regime. (For example, the 2006 Nepalese Revolution.)

(10) Overthrowing the present government by a people's uprising (armed or unarmed) and abolishing the state immediately thereafter; initiating people's self-government. (Anarchism's goal, which has no concrete example yet.)

(11) Coming to power through elections and using this power as an instrument of the process of social revolution in a multi-party regime. (For example, the process that started in Chile with Allende's election as president in 1970.)

(12) Coming to power through elections and using this power to take over the state completely (establishing a one-party regime). (There is no complete example yet.)

(13) Rejecting the goals of coming to power and taking over the state, fighting for a process of social revolution that will gradually render the state irrelevant. (For example, the Zapatistas in Mexico.)

ADDENDUM: Putting aside the goal of revolution; striving for taking power through elections, implementing policies for the benefit of the people, and deepening democracy ("radical democracy"). (For example, Podemos in Spain.)

This list can easily be expanded by considering other details and possibilities.

Additionally, goals and actual results may differ. For example, the Maoists, who played a very important role in the 2006 Nepalese Revolution, had initially aimed to overthrow the government and take over the state through armed struggle, but when they were not able to do so, they agreed to compromise with other opposition forces and become part of a multi-party regime.

On the other hand, changes in local conditions may lead to changes in goals and methods. For example, some revolutionary organizations that had waged armed struggles in countries ruled by dictatorships began to struggle to come to power through elections, when a transition to democracy occurred more or less independently of them. In countries where new dictatorships were established, some revolutionary organizations initiated armed struggle.

Some methods of struggle do not provide much opportunity for mass participation. While preparations are being made to seize power through a military coup, it is almost impossible for the masses to participate in decision-making. A progressive coup can only be planned by a narrow group. Even if such a group succeeds, it will have to find external cadres capable of governing the country and make compromises with a significant part of the existing power centers, i.e., share power with segments that have different interests. And even if the initial goal of the narrow group is to mobilize broad masses for social transformations, the alliance relations that must be established to stay in power will pose an obstacle to this. Moreover, differences in preferences regarding what needs to be done to remain in power will endanger the internal integrity

of the narrow group, making it possible for those who completely abandon the initial goal to neutralize others.

A party that comes to power through a people's uprising or elections will face similar problems if it lacks a sufficient number of cadres capable of governing the country and the support of a sufficiently strong mass movement.

Undoubtedly, those who struggle to take political power in order to pave the way for the social revolution are somewhat unlikely to achieve their goals at an "ideal" moment when all the subjective and objective conditions of the social revolution are sufficiently mature. Moreover, the requirements of waging a struggle for power cannot fully coincide with the requirements of leading social transformations while in power.

But when the links between the struggle for the seizure of power and the goal of social revolution become too weak (or when they are weak from the beginning), the danger of abandoning the revolutionary goals altogether, even before coming to power (in order to come to power) or while in power (in order to stay in power), increases considerably.

In order to minimize this danger, it is necessary to aim, firstly, to have a sufficient number of cadres who carry the lessons drawn from historical experiences of struggle and who can truly lead the masses, and secondly, to create and strengthen a mass movement that actively participates in decision-making and implementation processes (both during the struggle for power and after coming to power).

As I will discuss in light of the struggles carried out after "the fall of the Wall," I think it is not right to put the cadre-based approach on one side, the mass-based approach on the opposite side, and prefer one over the other. I believe that without cadres, no lasting mass movement can be created, and without a mass movement that actively participates in the decision-making and implementation processes, the cadres' commitment to the revolutionary goals cannot be maintained.

So far, even though I have quoted Friedrich Engels, one of the founders of Marxism, I have not mentioned Marxism, socialism, and communism. For two reasons. First, our subject of discussion touches not only Marxists and those who use the concepts of Marxism, but everyone who wants the emancipation of humanity. Secondly, "we," the Marxists, must also draw on the contributions of non-Marxists to the struggles for the emancipation of humanity and on their experiences.

On the other hand, non-Marxists will also acknowledge that Marxists have made very important contributions, both in theory and in practice, to the struggles for the emancipation of humanity. The majority of the experiences of revolutionary struggle to date bear the mark of Marxists. In my opinion, it would be not only unnecessary but also wrong for me to try to deal with these experiences without using the concepts of Marxism.

Since I had shared my general comments on Marxism in my book *Your Theorist Was a Revolutionary:* Marxism and Socialism in the 21st Century*,[2] I will not dwell specifically on Marxism itself. I will only write, where appropriate, my views on how to interpret some concepts of Marxism.

The first chapter of the book is about Chile, because the history of revolutionary struggles in this country has provided countless examples that are referred to by those who wage revolutionary struggles in many different countries. The election of Salvador Allende, a Marxist, as president in 1970 and his overthrow by a military coup in 1973 remain among the most important cases in the debates on the "peaceful transition to socialism." Chile, which had been turned into a laboratory of neoliberalism from 1975 onwards, witnessed a referendum in 1988 that ended the dictatorship of Pinochet, the fascist coup plotter. While the Communist Party of Chile, which followed a relatively moderate line together with Allende before the coup and initiated an armed struggle after

* A paraphrase of Nâzım Hikmet's verse, "Your lover is a communist," in which the poet refers to himself.

the coup, became ineffective during the transition to democracy, the Socialist Party, which followed a radical line before the coup and made self-criticism on this issue after the coup, came to power together with the Christian Democrats and continued neoliberal policies. Then, while the Communist Party of Chile adopted the strategy of entering the government by forming an alliance with the Socialist Party, the mass student protests that began in 2011 led to the emergence of a new leftist movement. On the other hand, the mass protests that began in 2019 led to a constitutional referendum and then to the election of a constituent assembly. In the 2021 presidential elections, the Communist Party of Chile formed an alliance with the new leftist movement, and Gabriel Boric, the leader of this movement, was elected president.

After Chile, I will deal with the experiences of armed struggle in Peru and Nepal. While the former did not produce brilliant results for the left, the latter showed what kind of transformations those who wage armed struggle may undergo in the course of events.

Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution" was one of the most important developments that revived revolutionary hopes in the world after the collapse of the socialist system. The revolutionary process in Venezuela, which in the recent past has been characterized mainly by its economic troubles and emigration, provides, of course, numerous lessons. One is about how those who attempted to create "21st century socialism" viewed the past experiences of socialism.

In Bolivia, named after Simón Bolívar, a party founded as an instrument of social movements came to power through elections, following people's uprisings that took place two years apart and forced two presidents to resign. The transformation that this party experienced while in power is a cautionary case for everyone engaged in the struggle for revolution.

The movement of the landless peasants in Brazil and the Zapatistas in Mexico are among the major examples of movements "from below." The Zapatistas were among the first to use the inter-

net to mobilize international support for their struggle. The achievements of these movements are as important as the limits they have not been able to overcome. Besides, Bookchin, one of the theorists of revolutions "from below," was among the inspirations for many progressive local governments in different countries, as well as the experience of Rojava in Syria. I will briefly dwell on these.

The Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government in Greece had initially created a wave of excitement, at least on a European scale. Syriza, which managed to come to power in 2015 by leaving behind the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), which for many years had been much stronger and received more votes, could not resist the aggressive policies of the European Union, despite the support of the people. But Syriza's capitulation did not lead to the rise of the Left Platform, which broke away from it, or of the KKE. Thus, it is necessary to look at what happened in Greece in a little more detail.

One of the parties that tried to ride the wave created by Syriza was Podemos ("We Can"), founded by leftist intellectuals who attempted to put Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of "populism" into practice in Spain. This party, which was organized via the internet, made decisions through online voting, and held primaries, quickly moved away from genuine participation, put winning elections above everything else, and highly centralized its decision-making processes. Both Podemos' managing to turn into one of the largest parties in Spain within a few years of its foundation and losing its upward momentum deserve attention. The France Unbowed (LFI), founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who drew on the views of Laclau and Mouffe as well, is another populist project that I will examine. I will also discuss whether we can make a distinction between "populism" and "peopleism."

Can left-wing parties and organizations, which were unable to go beyond being "negligible" for many years, manage to put an end to this state of affairs? The Workers' Party of Belgium, which had been a Maoist party that condemned the Soviet Union as "revi-

sionist," managed to become one of the important political parties of its country after the collapse of the socialist system, by changing both its view on the past experiences of socialism and, more importantly, its mode of struggle. The Graz organization of the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ), on the other hand, had previously made a successful change in its mode of struggle at the local level. I will also deal with the successes of Bernie Sanders, who participated in the presidential primaries in the United States, which can be considered the country remotest from socialism, and those of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which supported his campaigns.

Finally, there is a general discussion, in which I also consider the requirements of the revolutionary struggle in Turkey. Besides, in the last chapter, I share some of my comments on the concrete experiences I have dealt with.

Any revolution, or even just coming to power, is too particular an event to fit into any template, as concrete examples repeatedly show. Thus, I will not attempt to offer a "recipe for revolution." But if the discussion of how revolutions can be made remains at a purely abstract level (or if this discussion is not held at all), it becomes extremely difficult to draw useful lessons from past successes and failures, to avoid falling back on past mistakes, and to avoid exhibiting past weaknesses (especially if the revolution is imagined as the product of very particular interventions made by a very particular subject at a very particular moment, and the discussions on these are postponed entirely to the future). Therefore, in this book, while discussing "in broad strokes" how revolutions can be made, I also make concrete suggestions so that this discussion does not hang in the air. The extent to which and how such suggestions can be applied to real life depends, of course, on the concrete conditions.

1

# Revolutionary Struggles in Chile from the *Unidad Popular* to the Present

When Salvador Allende was elected president in 1970 as the candidate of the Popular Unity (*Unidad Popular*), he had a 40-year history of consistent political struggle.

He was among the founders of the Socialist Party of Chile in 1933. This party, formed by the unification of socialist groups and intellectuals outside of the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Chile, contained various tendencies but generally defended a revolutionary interpretation of Marxism.

Within the Socialist Party, Allende was among those who advocated an alliance with the Communist Party. In 1937, he played a role in the establishment of the Popular Front, which included the Radical Party, a center-left establishment party. In 1938, Pedro Aguirre Cerda, a member of the Radical Party supported by this front, won the presidential election. In 1939, Allende became health minister in Cerda's government, and he increased his prestige in the eyes of the people by spearheading some social reforms.

The Cold War waged by the United States against socialist countries after the Second World War facilitated the rise of anticommunism in Chile as well. When a bill to ban the Communist Party and deprive its members of political rights led to a split in the Socialist Party in 1948, Allende joined the People's Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Popular*), founded by those who opposed the

bill. When the People's Socialist Party supported former dictator Carlos Ibáñez in the 1952 presidential election, he returned to the Socialist Party, which changed its policy toward the Communist Party (the People's Socialist Party also returned to the Socialist Party in 1957).

In 1952, 1958, and 1964, he was the presidential candidate of fronts that included the Communist Party. He was elected vice president of the Senate in 1953 and president of the Senate in 1966.

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 had caused the idea that power could only be taken through armed struggle to gain strength in the Latin American left. At its congress in 1965, the Socialist Party disavowed the electoral road to socialism, and at its congress in 1967, the party declared that it would be necessary to wage an armed struggle at some stage of the political process in order to come to power.[1] On the other hand, Allende, who was not elected to the party's central committee,[2] argued, as did the Communist Party, that a peaceful transition to socialism was possible.

Although the central committee of the Socialist Party was inclined to nominate another candidate in the presidential election in 1970, Allende, supported by the party base and the Communist Party, led the formation of the Popular Unity, which was joined by some smaller parties and organizations as well as the Radical Party. Whereas in 1937 the Radical Party had been the major and decisive party of the Popular Front, this time the Socialist Party and the Communist Party jointly assumed the same role.

Of course, Allende's victory in the presidential election cannot be explained by his personal history alone. The historical process that made it possible for the Chilean left to come to power was much more important.

Before the Great Depression of 1929, Chile was a country that followed liberal economic policies, exported raw materials and imported industrial products, and was ruled by a military dictatorship. When the crisis of world capitalism led to both a decline in exports and a fall in commodity prices, the country's export

revenues fell by 88 percent between 1929 and 1932, and the resulting economic collapse brought an end to the military dictatorship.[3] Meanwhile, a military coup in 1932 led to a twelve-day experience of a "socialist republic."

Chile entered a period of import substitution industrialization, as did many other underdeveloped capitalist countries. That is, import duties on domestically produced industrial goods were increased to protect their domestic producers. The state, which directly transferred resources to the capital owners on the one hand, indirectly supported them through infrastructure and strategic sector investments, which they avoided due to lack of capital or low profit rates, on the other. In other words, the policy of import substitution industrialization was fully in line with the interests of the Chilean bourgeoisie. The state development organization (CORFO), established in 1939 by the Cerda government, which had come to power in 1938 with the support of the Popular Front, to promote industrial production, became one of the main instruments and symbols of this policy. The minister in charge of this organization was a member of the Socialist Party.

The Popular Front helped the left parties to expand their mass base. In the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, the socialists and communists received approximately 6.7 percent of the vote in 1932 and 33.3 percent in 1941.[4] Although this percentage declined in the following years, import substitution industrialization continued to strengthen the most important social base of the left parties: Between 1932 and 1970, while Chile's population grew from 4.5 million to 9.8 million (an increase of nearly 120 percent),[5] the number of the unionized workers in the mining and industrial sectors rose from 54,801 to 436,974 (an increase of almost 700 percent).[6]

In 1953, trade unions in Chile were united into a single federation (CUT). This federation, which had a Marxist program, argued that workers should fight not only for their daily interests but also for a socialist transformation of society.[7] The strongest political organizations within the federation were the Socialist Party and

the Communist Party. From its foundation until its dissolution in 1973, the CUT supported fronts that included these parties.

Although the import substitution industrialization model, which was intended to be in line with the interests of the bourgeoisie, allowed the Chilean economy to grow rapidly for a period of time, it was doomed to come to a halt. Because this model, which was implemented to reduce the country's imports and thus its need for foreign exchange, actually increased the need for imports and made it difficult to increase foreign exchange revenues. Thanks to customs walls, domestic capital owners were able to sell relatively low-quality industrial products at relatively high prices. It was not possible to export these products and thus generate foreign exchange inflows. Moreover, foreign dependency in technology necessitated both the import of many capital and intermediate goods, and the payment of royalties to foreign companies for many domestically produced goods. Therefore, the need for foreign exchange increased along with domestic production. After the Second World War, the "aid" provided by the United States (to Chile, as well as to other capitalist countries) both directly and through international organizations, or more precisely, the loans it granted in return for the fulfillment of certain conditions, allowed this problem to be solved temporarily. But in the meantime, the country's most important source of foreign exchange earnings, the mines, were brought under the control of US companies. On the other hand, it was also necessary to borrow to make interest and principal payments on previous loans. By 1970, Chile became one of the countries with the highest per capita foreign debt in the world.[8]

From the 1950s onwards, Chile's growth rates declined, and inflation rates increased. Between 1967 and 1970, the growth rates of gross national product per capita varied between 0 (zero) and 1 percent, while the inflation rate reached 32.5 percent.[9] This led to higher unemployment rates and a decline in real wages.

The program that the Popular Unity presented to the Chilean people for the presidential election campaign in 1970[10] envisaged

the initiation of the construction of socialism in Chile by ending the rule of imperialists, monopoly capitalists, and large landowners.

For this purpose, large-scale copper, nitrate, iodine, and coal mines, the country's financial system, especially private banks and insurance companies, foreign trade, large distribution companies, and strategic industrial monopolies would be nationalized. By utilizing national resources and technologies necessary for national development, job security and adequate wages would be guaranteed for everyone of working age. By increasing and diversifying exports, devaluations would be stopped and price increases prevented.

The program contained the first 40 measures to be taken by the People's Government, including those aimed at putting an end to enormous salaries, people to hold simultaneously various paid posts, unnecessary foreign trips, the use of state vehicles for personal purposes, nepotism, and corruption. It was also emphasized that economic and political power would be concentrated in the hands of the organized masses to achieve these goals.

To mobilize the people and involve them in decision-making, Popular Unity Committees would be set up in factories, farms, poor neighborhoods, offices, and schools. These committees would not only carry out electoral work, but also fight for the immediate demands of the masses and, most importantly, learn to exercise power. The program would be enriched by the contributions of these committees, and at a certain stage, a People's Law (*Acta del Pueblo*) would be drafted that would be binding on both the new People's Government and the Popular Unity. In other words, the aim was to create a much larger people's movement that would not be composed solely of the members of the parties and organizations that made up the Popular Unity.

The People's Government would ensure the participation of trade unions and social organizations in the decision-making processes in their respective fields. A new constitution would be drafted to give the people a greater say in government, and a single People's Assembly would replace the bicameral (Chamber of

Deputies and Senate) Chilean National Congress. Members of this assembly and of all other bodies representing the people would be audited by those who elected them, and they would be recallable. The judicial system would be reorganized and placed under the control of a Supreme Court whose members would be appointed by the People's Assembly. The army, whose primary duty would continue to be to protect national sovereignty and the independence of the country, would contribute to social life and the economic development of the country. Remunerations, promotions, and retirements of army members would be regulated by a just and democratic system.

It was known that a victory of Salvador Allende in the presidential election would not, on its own, be enough to bring about radical transformations in Chile. The United States, which had spent millions of dollars to ensure Allende's defeat in the 1964 presidential election,[11] had already begun to make attempts to prevent him from being elected and to ensure that he would be overthrown by a coup d'état if he became president against all odds. The big capital owners and the media under their control saw Allende as a threat and portrayed him as such. The last elections for seats in the Chilean National Congress were held in 1969, and the parties that made up the Popular Unity were in the minority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Even if Allende surpassed other candidates in the presidential election, if he did not receive more than 50 percent of the vote, the Congress would decide which of the two candidates with the most votes would become president. And even if Allende became president, control of key state institutions such as the legislature, the judiciary, and the army would remain, at least during the initial stages, in the hands of representatives of the establishment. They would resist policies against their interests.

Karl Marx wrote: "… the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."[12]. Whether the existing state machinery is seized by force and by a single coup or by coming to power through elections