

# Session 1: Philosophy for revolution: What's theory got to do with it?

## Slide 1: Revolution and Philosophy – Uniting the opposites

Revolution and philosophy might seem to you like extreme opposites that will never meet in practice. This course sets out to show that, not only is there a deep connection between the two, but that without a theory of revolutionary change, a revolution won't happen. Especially in an advanced capitalist country like the UK.

Why is this so? Surely if enough people come together against the present system, then we will get the kind of society we all want. After all, we are the 99%. However, the ruling classes have the distinct advantage that they hold not only state power, but also influence how we think.

Their education system school to university disparages the entire notion of revolutionary change. The mainstream media and corporate propaganda want people to believe that there is nothing better out there.

Antonio Gramsci, the noted Italian revolutionary, who died after his health was destroyed in a fascist prison, developed the notion of **hegemony or dominant** ideas to explain the challenge. The "state", he concluded, is:

"The entire complex of **practical and theoretical** activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but **manages to win the active consent over** whom it rules"

Which is why we are doing this course. Because **if our rulers are doing "theoretical activities" then we are obliged to do the same – only better – to help create the conditions for ending their rule.**

The course will show you how philosophers and theoreticians down the centuries have struggled to grasp the world around them. Some became "influencers", long before the term came into use in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Their ideas helped create the basis for modern science and for dramatic and sometimes revolutionary changes.

## Slide 2: Influencers

So, we'll look at how ancient thinkers theorised the nature of the world and human thought. Then, we'll and fast forward to meet a variety of personalities – including monks, scientists, philosophers and revolutionaries – including Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, Che Guevara, Lenin and Audre Lorde.

We'll set out some key ideas and concepts. We need these to help us grasp and implement how fundamental change takes place. We'll trace **the vital concept of "dialectics", a fundamental way of thinking which was lost for many centuries, but eventually rediscovered. This is essential if we are to theorise and implement our ideal of democratic transformation.**

Given the nature of revolutionary change, theory cannot be reduced to a few slogans or formulas or dogmas. Co-creating our own "theory of knowledge" is crucial. We cannot just rely on our common sense or day-to-day experiences, or the latest report in the news. Deeper investigation and drawing on a whole range of skills is needed. We must be alert to the fact that what may be true for one period of time, or even one moment, may not be right for another. But, with concrete and careful analysis, and shared examination of the results of what we do, judgements can be made to plan and implement effective strategies and tactics.

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### 3. Getting ahead of the curve



To challenge, and when needed, replace, existing ways of thinking requires enhanced levels of theory and a deep understanding of political and social processes. We need to be ultra-alert to sudden changed conditions which can make revolutionary transformation possible. An advanced approach must embrace contradiction, a range of concepts, as well as immediate social and political events. This course will therefore build the argument for the development of a revolutionary, dialectical, and materialist outlook.

Without this approach, and a movement built on that foundation, mass movements, and even insurrectionary ones, will perforce remain relatively blind. Meanwhile, those in power are acutely conscious of the threat to their own rule. Therefore, they constantly act and adapt ideologies to preserve it.

To become a popular, truly revolutionary alternative we must not be blinded by surface impressions, anger, or despair. Rather, **we must probe below the surface to grasp the movement as a whole.** Discontent with inequality, awareness of the fragility of our planet under assault from capitalist production and worry about the pandemic are the common denominator which unite the majority and can become a driving force. The self-interest of the mass of people can never be satisfied by illiberal capitalism.

Making this change must be **a collective co-creation** by many people, social movements, and organisations. At the same time, in today's world of instant communication what you and others on this course do to develop theory is decisive.

**The challenge is to create a democratic organisational form that elaborates a concrete way forward.** Let's discuss how we can co-create such an organisation towards the end of the course.

A social revolution is not simply "natural" or "evolutionary". If only. Instead, it involves individual decisions and choices. It includes psychological logjams, processes, and people, which come into being and pass away. Things don't simply "emerge". They may clash and one opposite can be transformed into another. Thus, there are not only transitions but abrupt leaps from one quality, or state, to another. There are moments when an individual action can be decisive in tipping the scales. An example of this was the action of one fruit seller which sparked the Tunisian revolution and the Arab spring.

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### Slide 4: Ideas and Ideals become a physical force

A revolution involves the interaction of **ideas and ideals**, whereby large numbers of people have plans and intentions. The oppressed mass of people suddenly realise they can take power away from the old ruling classes. During a period of rapid social change, **old outlooks and dogmas may be shattered in seconds**. Powerful and lasting change comes when inspiring and emancipatory ideas take hold of masses of people because they identify with them.

**History shows that no ruling class relinquishes power voluntarily**. It's in the nature of those in power to cling on to it. Experience also shows unequivocally that without a conscious leadership element that understands the nature of the struggle and seeks to overcome and defeat the ruling class, revolutions cannot go beyond a certain point. Making half a revolution has dangerous consequences.

The evidence for this has been particularly strong in recent years, in the 21st century the Arab and "colour" revolutions of eastern Europe. But the fleeting nature of democratic victory is such that these 21st century revolutions we have seen so far may indeed be described as "fragile revolutions". Nonetheless they reveal an overwhelming mass desire to overcome a system which is destroying our ecological life support systems, and the possibility of a viable future.

That's the significance of this course. We want to **build our own theoretical, philosophical framework** that can inform and shape what we do in practice. That will help us go **from precarious revolutions to lasting ones**.