

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Leaderless Revolution: How Ordinary People will take Power and Change Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Simon and Schuster, London, 2011, pp. 261

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*The Leaderless Revolution* is an easy read, easy to carry around and easy to understand the argument of the author, a former senior British diplomat. There are 9 chapters, excluding an introduction. The book has a helpful index, and is introduced by Gill Scott-Heron's dramatic statement, '[t]he revolution will not be televised.' To be sure, the author resigned his post as a senior diplomat, 'after giving secret testimony to an official inquiry into the Iraq war.' Mr. Ross, the author, clearly comes across as a radical, so it is not surprising that the *Guardian* likens him to Naomi Klein – a well-respected member of the global progressive movement seeking not just a change but a *just* change in our world.

So what is this book all about? Mr. Ross' thesis is that we can bring about the good society if we reclaim individual agency. The thesis is expressed in different ways such as changing the way we think about politics by taking action ourselves and ignoring the government; that governments cannot solve our problems, and that we should reject the state, institutions, hierarchy, authority, and exercise

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greater agency ourselves. It is only by so doing, according to Mr. Ross, that we can bring about the happy and good society. The book's tagline is '[t]he world is in your hands'. Mr. Ross' thesis is built on evidence of the current problems we face in our world, the activities of some 'dissidents', including suicide bombers, and what he believes to be the powerlessness or declining power of the state. Communism is not an option, Mr. Ross says, because it is against individual liberty. There is only one way: we must act now, as individuals and as empowered agents.

I think Mr. Ross is an erudite analyst, an unsurprising skill given his years of experience as a senior British diplomat. He believes he has recanted his old ways and that his thesis is radical and hence inconsistent with the dominant neoliberal discourse widely espoused by the totems of global neoliberalism such as the World Bank and the torch bearers of free market ideology in the academy, found mostly in orthodox economics departments.

Mr. Ross is passionate about ending the current problems of our world and eloquently exposes the limitations of international institutions and diplomats seeking to make a difference in the lives of people. These lessons ought to be brought to the attention of the general public, and Mr. Ross does so effectively. However, I feel Mr. Ross makes many mistakes. He conflates 'state' with 'government' and assumes that communism is state capitalism. Further, Mr. Ross makes no distinction between administrative problems and structural challenges plaguing our world, so he argues that all problems facing us today are 'government problems'. Methodologically, Mr. Ross' analysis does not take the dynamics of modes of production seriously. Surely, a bottle of red wine produced under feudalism may resemble one produced under capitalism, but the social conditions of their production would differ substantially. Yet, Mr. Ross' analysis implies that merely because problems appear similar they are, in fact, identical. In my opinion, Mr. Ross' inattention to the mode and relations of production and their varieties yesterday, today, and tomorrow is a major weakness in his well-written book. I agree with Mr. Ross that 'we' have agency, but disagree with him, when he suggests that this agency has nothing to do with structure (the mode and relations of production). In what ways are people's agency shaped or constrained by economic structure? Can individuals agency alone help to really escape the clutches and continuing influence of colonial-capitalism, for example? In what way

can individual agency penetrate the web of contradictions spat out by economic structure, locally and globally? Mr. Ross provides no answers here. Rather, he is quick to rebuke governments as mostly self-interested and powerless. This orientation is strange when one considers that it is governments that cede power to transnational corporations, for example. Indeed, the whole advance of capitalism and the so-called progress of *laissez-faire* politics are at the instance of state power, as Karl Polanyi's historical research ('double movement') shows. It does not follow, however, that the state, and especially governments, are only instruments of capital. The 'government' can be checked by other arms of the 'state', but of course Mr. Ross makes no distinction between 'government' and the 'state', so his analysis does not capture the nuances of the struggle played out in the arena of the state.

While this book claims to be radical, it is likely to be well received by conservatives. This was evidently the case with John Turner's *magnum opus*, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (1976) in which he advocated that people should trust their own skills and agency and ignore the government. Turner believed he was being 'progressive'. Yet, his thesis played into the hands of 'opponents' – neoliberals, especially Robert McNamara and his team of orthodox economists at the World Bank, as Mike Davis recalls in his *Planet of Slums* (2006). Neoliberals commonly argue that governments are inefficient, so markets need to be promoted. While this assumption shows a leap of faith from cause/problem to solution, it is pervasive. Mr. Ross' argument that the less free are individual citizens, the more likely they are to rebel against the government is persuasive. However, it neither proves that we do not need governments nor that all governments restrict individual liberty for which reason Mr. Ross believes we need anarchy. Indeed, absolving governments of their responsibilities for markets (individual actions/interactions between free choices) to take over is the touchstone of conservative, right wing, pro-market politics. Mr. Ross' thesis of ignoring the government and doing it 'ourselves' sits quite well with the neoliberal idea of small governments, big markets. Unfortunately – and I say this because I do not think that Mr. Ross intended it to be so – *The Leaderless Revolution* is likely to have a consanguine relationship with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992), John Turner's *Housing by People*, and Johan Norberg's *In Defence of Global Capitalism* (2005). It stands in opposition to Douglas Lummis' *Radical*

*Democracy* (1996), Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright's *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (2003) and, contrary to the claim of *The Guardian*, Naomi Klein's work such as *The Shock Doctrine* (2007).

The chilling implication of heeding Mr. Ross' call for a 'leaderless revolution' is that we should neither demand of our governments to improve slum conditions, nor require them to address crime and grime. Thus, while on face value, this book appears progressive, in essence it contains a disturbing thesis.