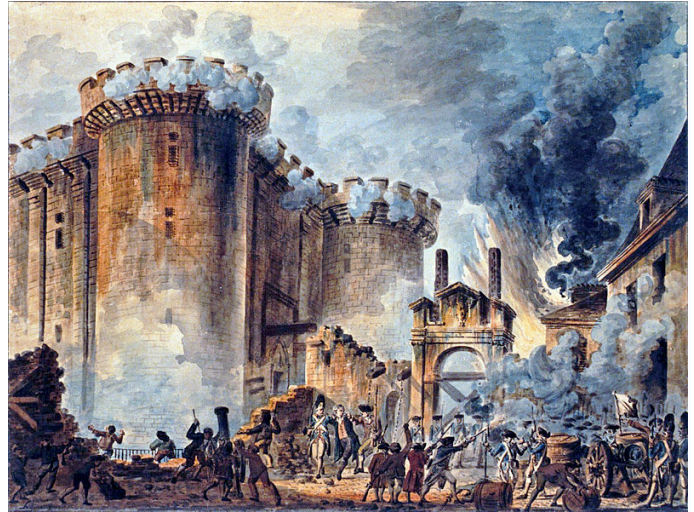


# THE WORLD REVOLUTIONS OF 1789, 1848, AND 1968

In today's selection -- in his book, *The Democracy Project*, David Graeber writes on the Occupy Wall Street movement, and reflects provocatively on the broader subjects of democracy, revolution and change. In one passage, he notes that the worldwide revolutions of 1848 and 1968, though they failed in their immediate objectives, succeeded at another level by re-setting the world's political agenda:

*"By the time of the French Revolution, [historian Immanuel] Wallerstein notes, there was a single world market, and increasingly a single world political system as well, dominated by the huge colonial empires. As a result, the storming of the Bastille in Paris could well end up having effects on Denmark, or even Egypt, just as profound as on France itself -- in some cases, even more so. Hence he speaks of the 'world revolution of 1789,' followed by the 'world revolution of 1848,' which saw revolutions break out almost simultaneously in fifty countries, from Wallachia to Brazil. In no case did the revolutionaries succeed in taking power, but afterward, institutions inspired by the French Revolution -- notably, universal systems of primary education -- were put in place pretty much everywhere. Similarly, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was ultimately responsible for the New Deal and European welfare states as much as Soviet communism. The last in the series was the world revolution of 1968 -- which much like 1848 broke out almost everywhere, from China to Mexico, seized power nowhere, but nonetheless changed everything. This was a revolution against state bureaucracies, and for the inseparability of personal and political liberation, whose most lasting legacy will likely be the birth of modern feminism.*



*"Revolutions are thus planetary phenomena. But there is more. What they really do is transform the basic assumptions of what politics is ultimately about. In the wake of a Revolution, the ideas that had been considered veritably lunatic fringe quickly become the accepted currency of debate. Before the French Revolution, the idea that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called 'the people' were considered the sorts of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spend their time debating in cafes. A generation later, even the stuffiest magistrates, priests and headmasters had to at least pay lip service to these ideas. Before long, we had reached the situation we are in today: Where it's necessary to lay the terms out, as I just did, for anyone to even notice they are there. They've become common sense, the very grounds of political discussion.*

*"Until 1968, most world revolutions really just introduced practical refinements: widening the franchise, introducing universal primary education, the welfare state. The world revolution of 1968, in contrast, whether it took the form it did in China -- of a revolt by students and young cadres supporting Mao's call for a Cultural Revolution -- or Berkeley and New York, where it marked an alliance of students, dropouts, and cultural rebels, or even Paris, where it was an alliance of students and workers, it was in the same initial spirit: a rebellion against bureaucracy, conformity, of anything that fettered the human imagination, a project for the revolutionizing not just of political or economic life, but every aspect of human existence. As a result, in most cases, the rebels didn't even try to take over the apparatus of state; they saw that apparatus as itself the problem.*

*"It's fashionable nowadays to view the social movements of the late 1960s as an embarrassing failure. A case can surely be made for that view. It's certainly true that in the political sphere, the immediate beneficiary of any widespread change in political common sense -- a prioritizing of ideals of individual liberty, imagination, and desire, a hatred of bureaucracy, and suspicions over the role of government -- was the political right. Above all, the movements of the 1960s allowed for the mass revival of free market doctrines that had largely been abandoned since the nineteenth century. It's no coincidence that the same generation who, as teenagers, made the Cultural Revolution in China was the one who, as forty-year-olds, presided over the introduction of capitalism. Since the 1980s, 'freedom' has come to mean 'the market,' and 'the market' has come to be seen as identical with capitalism -- even, ironically, in places like China, which had known sophisticated markets for thousands of years, but rarely anything that could be described as capitalism.*

*"The ironies are endless. While the new free market ideology has framed itself above all as a rejection of bureaucracy, it has, in fact, been responsible for the first administrative system that has operated on a planetary scale, with its endless layering of public and private bureaucracies: the IMF, World Bank, WTO, the trade organizations, financial institutions, transnational corporations, NGOs. This is precisely the system that has imposed free market orthodoxy, and allowed the opening of the world to financial pillage, under the watchful aegis of American arms. It only made sense that the first attempts to re-create a global revolutionary movement, the Global Justice Movement that peaked between 1998 and 2003, was effectively a rebellion against the rule of that very planetary bureaucracy."*

*"In retrospect, though, I think that later historians will conclude that the legacy of the 1960s revolution was deeper than we now imagine, and the triumph of capitalist markets and their various planetary administrators and enforcers, which seemed so epochal and permanent in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, was, in fact, far shallower."*