

Discordia Americana

Restoration Wars and Social Maneuvers: Is political and social chaos an opportunity for revolution or for further clampdown?

Jack Bratich

Daily life has a new rhythm: routine disruptions. DPacing an accelerated news cycle and affective bursts from smart phone notifications, our subjective autonomous systems are increasingly synced up with crisis-state and techno security tempos.

We don't know what the next surprise is going to be, but we know it's coming.

The "strategic surprise" has been an object of study for the security state for some time. The State wants to detect and disrupt such emergent surprises, especially as they coalesce into an insurgent event. State and Capital have for years tried to subsume surprise, whether deploying "shock and awe" military operations, governing via outrage-inducing tweets, or buzz-marketing through offensive ads. Most relevant here is the way corporations have integrated "creative destruction," "innovation" and "disruption" into its management commands.

Rather than think of this process as a final subsumption, let's consider it the last desperate resistance-grab. Ultimately the State cannot control the stochastic character of any extreme direct action. The stochastic refers to something being randomly determined. Eruptive events will inevitably recur, but the particular concrete details are unpredictable (think here of mass shootings and incel terrorism).

The result is an entropy of bursts of randomness. Controlled disruptions, like controlled demolitions, are an engineering reality, but a political fantasy. Instead, we have a security state characterized by disrupted controls. This State itself is no longer unified—it unleashes surprises on itself.

Such internal rifts can be traced to two simultaneous "wars of restoration." In a previous issue of FE (See "Reality Wars," FE #399, Fall 2017), I focused on the more obvious one: The trumpists' MAGA, an ethno-nationalism enacted via what I call a downsurgency (not an uprising, but a rapid down sinking while taking others with them).

The charismatic authoritarianism of Trump's version is matched by a parallel combatant, one that seeks to preserve a political center by implementing techno-controls on access and political expression. We can call this one a centrist techno-nationalism.

Since 2016, liberal politicians, mainstream journalists, and corporate digital platform executives have been crystallizing into a state-corporate nexus. What binds them is their accusation against Russia of not only election interference, but also "sowing discord," "spreading divisiveness," even "a broad chaos campaign" to "generally undermine trust in the democratic process."

As though reading from the same Cold War cosplaybook, agents in this nexus regularly called Russia's interference an "act of war" against the U.S., even comparing it to Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Special Counsel Robert Mueller, investigating Trump's collusion with the Russkies, called Russia's activities "information warfare" (after also using the "sowing discord" meme).

What results from these networked declarations? New civil defense alliances, including Federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies forming partnerships with tech companies and well-funded NGO counterintelligence

units. Their goal is to restore an American people via unity against divisiveness. They wish to defend civil society by any means necessary, even if it means waging a massive decentralized stealth cyberwar on its citizens.

Trump and his team have replied by mimicking the discourse. Presidential hatchet-maiden Kelly-Anne Conway accused the anonymous author of the early September, “I am Part of the Resistance” *New York Times* op-ed of intending to “sow discord” and “create chaos.” Trump has repeatedly called the mainstream corporate press “the enemy of the people,” de facto declaring war on them as commander-in-chief.

When putative adversaries can only preserve social order by denouncing each other for secret subversion via deliberate disorder, we’ve entered a different phase of State power. The State’s internal conflicts are no longer squabbles, but *mêlées*. If internally everyone is sowing division, who will be there to reap it? And, how grimly?

The US government is now actor and terrain for an amplified internecine warfare. War has lost its status as metaphor because it now frames the action thoroughly. Politicians and their mouthpieces (people or news platforms) name others as enemies and invoke wars: performative utterances that summon war into being.

Since we’re already being asked to revive the Cold War, we might as well update that old canard “mutually assured destruction” with something like “mutually assured disruption” (M.A.D.). With mutually assured disruption, the State cannot control its own sowing of discord when it targets divisiveness.

With the “whatever enemy” now haunting its own ranks, the State acts in a frenzied manner while stymieing many of its own operations. But let’s not comfort ourselves with the residual fantasy of a standoff.

In these M.A.D. wars of restoration, each camp invokes a unified America now under threat by adversaries who have become enemies. The double headed eagle found on the flags of many nations now lands in the US, which has been converted into a cockfighting arena. The victor will likely add more razors to its claws to ensure no velvet glove will ever cover it.

The future is unwritten, however, as the Security State begins to incapacitate itself, we find ourselves caught in multiple concurrent wars (civil, cold, social, cyber) where anything can happen and openings present themselves.

The game is afoot! But what kind of game, and what maneuvers are possible within such an unstable terrain?

From Social Movements to Social Maneuvers

As these mutual wars of restoration are being waged within the State, some seek comfort in conventional (visible, audible, measurable) movements. Others, recognizing the return of other wars (social, civil, popular), will be in the shadows formulating maneuvers.

Let’s briefly reflect on this common, but complex word. Maneuver’s generic meaning dates from the mid 18th century: an “artful plan or adroit movement.” It signifies moving skillfully, with craftiness.

A maritime version of the concept refers to changing the direction of a moving ship “as required.” We are here reminded that the roots of “cyber” in cybernetics is in the Greek *kyber* (governance) and specifically the *kybernetes*, or boat steerers. But the captain is not the only one who can change a ship’s course, or the only one with maneuvers.

Maneuvers, of course, have military origins. Contemporary war theorist Martin van Creveld identifies surprise as one of the six features of maneuver warfare. This military strategy advocates actions that defeat the enemy by incapacitating their decision-making through shock and disruption, often via simulation.

To put it simply, a movement is a maneuver by other means. There is a whole inventory of maneuvers that could be accounted for here; operational gestures with roots in guerrilla, insurgent, anti-colonial, and network-centric warfare. Lamentations over the Occupy and #blacklivesmatter operations ignore their innovations in direct action, especially ones that took police, journalists, and the population by surprise.

There will be Surprises

We are currently spectators to the internecine warfare between (deep and deeper) State factions. We can begin speculating (even planning logistics) by asking, “What are our adroit moves and skillful proceedings amidst the return of internecine war and ensuing games of chaos?”

In this ecology of continuous yet condensed crisis, we will inevitably see cycles of insurrection also act stochastically. The State's ongoing counterinsurgency operation now takes place in the internecine State war, potentially putting the ability to pacify a population into crisis.

A State, emerging out of colonial, civil, and religious wars in the name of subduing them, now reverts back to its origins as a social war (or war to defend society).

What would it mean to become ready for the next surprise event? We could develop a keen eye for the emergent, finding ways to outflank these competing coups.

Let's remember the historical instances where collective power generated such surprise. Disruptions, in the moments they were becoming ungovernable, have created a legacy of social maneuvers.

A new repertoire of such maneuvers, in a ripe moment of crisis and internecine chaos, create clearings for events that might even lead us to surprise ourselves.

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