

**GUIDE TO  
THE  
LEADERLESS  
REVOLUTION**

**CARNE ROSS**



Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.\*

**T**hings do not seem to be going as planned. The system is broken. Meant to bring order, it foments instead disorder. We need something new.

The end of the Cold War was supposed to presage the triumph of democracy and, with it, stability. Globalization was supposed to launch everyone upon an eternally rising wave of prosperity. Some called it “the end of history.” But history has instead opened another, unpredicted, chapter.

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\*William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” 1921.

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While the opening of markets in India and China has released hundreds of millions from poverty, globalization has also triggered violent and uncontrolled economic volatility. Trillions of dollars shift from asset to asset (or from debt to debt), sometimes faster than a human can press a computer key—for it is an algorithm that controls the trade. Banks and whole countries crash, almost without warning. Meanwhile, the gap between a tiny number of the very rich and everyone else has accelerated rapidly, in every region and in every country.

The profits of this modern economy flow to a minuscule minority that holds the wealth closely. All the rest—the middle class and the poor—have seen their incomes stagnate over the last decade or so. And stagnation in reality means decline, as food and energy prices, driven by rising shortage, have risen faster and faster. And for those in the bottom 10 percent, incomes have declined in absolute, as well as relative, terms. Though they live cheek by jowl with the rich and share the same cities, the poor are getting poorer. In New York City, one in five children is dependent on food stamps for survival.

In every profession and trade, global competition means that jobs and careers once thought of as safe are no longer. Industries that have stood for generations can collapse in a few years. Few people now can look forward to a secure retirement.

The promise of capitalism seems more and more hollow. As its benefits are ever more unevenly shared, it has created a culture that cherishes much that is worst in human nature. Too much modern work is demeaning or humiliating, or simply boring. Little offers meaning.

In the exhausting yet often banal race to get ahead or at least to

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make ends meet, there is little time for others, for the community that seems ever more fractured, or for an ever more poisoned planet. Nature is no more, there is only what we have made of it. As *The Economist* recently put it, we live in the Anthropocene era: an Earth formed primarily by man.

Despite the dismal familiarity of these problems, credible solutions are hard to come by. Celebrities launch simplistic “single issue” campaigns, absurdly claiming that an e-mail to a representative will solve the problem. Each new cohort of politicians offers to fix this malaise, but they are less and less believed by others, and, one suspects, themselves (for they too can sense the mounting unease). Indeed, the political class now appears more part of the problem than the solution. Even politicians complain about “politicians.”

In Britain, politicians and media crow over the humbling of press baron Rupert Murdoch, but barely admit that both estates were grossly corrupted by him, and for decades. In Washington, needless political bickering has managed to worsen America’s debt problem—and increase the cost paid, eventually, by all Americans. “Washington” has become synonymous with ugly partisan argument and deadlock.

In democratic systems, it has become evident what is more obvious in autocracies—power is monopolized by the powerful. In the U.S., corporate lobbyists far outnumber legislators (there are now lobbyists for the lobbying industry). Legislation is sometimes created simply for political parties to extract rents from corporate interests. Big business donates to all parties, careful to ensure that its interests are protected whichever prevails. For it is still money that wins elections, and it is still large corporations that contribute the most.

In the 2008 “credit crunch,” irresponsible and untransparent lending by banks and inadequate legislation (loosened by well-funded

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lobbying of both U.S. parties) combined to wreak massive and lasting damage on the world economy, affecting the poorest most of all. But despite this disaster, there is little sign of effective rules, national as well as global, judged by impartial experts as effective.

Banks lobby country by country to water down regulations, arguing that national competitiveness will be undermined—even though all the biggest banks operate in many markets at once. And at the international level, as so often is the case, governments are unable to agree on anything but the lowest common denominator, and even then often fail to implement it—as is clear with the so-called Basel III rules, which are claimed to bring banks back under control. In another equally important forum, after years of elaborate multitracked negotiations involving thousands of delegates in hundreds of meetings, there remains little prospect of international agreement on the necessary measures to limit carbon emissions.

And of the mounting evidence of this fundamental ineffectiveness and indeed corruption, the most striking piece of all is that the wealthy pay less tax, proportionately, than the poor. Returns on investment, such as hedge funds, are taxed at a far lower rate than the income tax levied on ordinary wage earners. Striking too is that complaints about this gross inequity are almost never to be heard in our supposedly representative parliaments.

So what is to be done? Voting for someone different at the next election seems a pathetically inadequate response—and it is. In Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, where the Occupy Wall Street protests have been centered, few have demanded different politicians or new laws. Instead, the protesters have shown, by the nature of their movement, a new way: debates and decisions that include everyone, a culture of collaboration and sharing, and a belief that there are many changes,

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not one, necessary to make a better world. No one claims the right to lead this movement: There are many voices that want to be heard. But although Occupy Wall Street is a sharp cry of anger echoed by many across the U.S., and indeed more widely around the world, the protest alone will not be enough.

What is needed is a much more fundamental, wholly new *method* of doing things. No longer should we look for change to emerge from untrusted politicians, arguing in distant chambers. As turkeys will not vote for Thanksgiving or Christmas, these institutions will not reform themselves. We have to accept the painful reality that we can no longer rely on government policy to solve our most deep-seated and intractable problems, from climate change to social alienation. Instead, we need to look to ourselves for the necessary action.

THERE ARE FOUR SIMPLE IDEAS at the heart of *The Leaderless Revolution*. Together, they suggest a radically different approach to conducting our affairs.

The first is that in an increasingly interconnected system, such as the world emerging in the twenty-first century, the action of one individual or a small group can affect the whole system very rapidly. Imagine the world as a sports stadium, where a “wave” can be started by just one person, but quickly involves the whole crowd. Those most powerful are right beside us; and we—in turn—are best placed to influence them. A suicide bomber acts, assaults his enemy and recruits others all in one horrible action: a technique with such effect that it has spread from Sri Lanka to Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan, Bali, London and New York within a few short years. But the same lesson is taught, with greater force, by peaceful acts, a truth shown

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by Mahatma Gandhi as well as the heroic young women, some still unknown, who refused to move to the back of the bus in the 1950s and 1960s American South. Modern network theory shows how one action can rapidly trigger change throughout the whole system. One person becomes a group, then becomes a movement; one act believed in and repeated by others becomes material, dramatic change.

The second key idea is that it is action that convinces, not words. New research is now demonstrating what good theater directors have always known: *Show*, don't tell. The actions of those people closest to us—and not government policy or even expert opinion—are the most influential. This means that Internet petitions are not likely to bring about fundamental change, although they might make the signatory feel better (which may indeed be the purpose). Likewise, social media may help organize and inform larger groups in ways that have never been available before, but unless this organization is used for a purpose—to *do* something—it is worthless.

In contrast to asking for or voting for someone else to do it, action can address the problem directly. There is an education intrinsic to action—you have to learn about the problem to solve it, for most problems are complex. This education reverses the infantilization and ignorance that authority encourages: *You* need not worry about the details, because *we* will take care of it. Equally, it demolishes the common notion that ordinary people are somehow incapable of making intelligent decisions about their own circumstances. Again, evidence shows this to be an arrogant fallacy—people know their own circumstances best of all.

The third key idea is about engagement and discussion. Again it is a simple idea: Decision making is better when it includes the people most affected. In the current Western model of representative

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democracy, we have become accustomed to the idea that politicians, elected by us, should negotiate among competing interests and make the necessary compromises to produce consensus and policy. In Washington today, it is painfully clear that this is the opposite of what is actually happening, while in Europe political consensus around the social democratic model is breaking down. The far right is emerging once more as a significant political force, in reaction to the largely unpredicted and sometimes violent changes that the world is now experiencing. In times of uncertainty, the false appeal of those who loudly proclaim certainty gains luster.

In Brazil, Britain and New Orleans, a better way of deciding our affairs together is emerging (and it is *not* the Internet, or *on* the Internet). It resembles democracy in its earliest and purest days—people gathering together, not in chat rooms, to make real decisions for themselves, not voting for others to decide on their behalf, or merely ventilate their frustrated opinions in town hall meetings or on the World Wide Web. When lobbyists fill what used to be called the people’s parliaments and congresses, this alternative “participatory” democracy offers something unfamiliar yet extraordinary.

When large numbers of people make decisions for themselves, the results are remarkable: Everyone’s views are heard, policies take all interests into account (as all lasting policy must), and are thus fairer. Facts and science are respected over opinion. Decision making becomes transparent (and thus less corrupt), respectful and less partisan—people who participate in decisions tend to stick to them. More responsibility and trust in society can come about only by giving real decision-making responsibility to people. If you do not give people responsibility, they tend to behave irresponsibly, and sometimes violently. Happily, the converse is also true: Give people

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power and responsibility, and they tend to use it more wisely—and peacefully.

This hints at the fourth idea that suffuses the argument throughout *The Leaderless Revolution*: agency—the power to decide matters for ourselves. We have lost agency. We need to take it back. We have become too detached from the decisions most important to us; we are disconnected, alienated, including from one another. This has contributed to a deeper ennui about modern life: What is it all for? Where is the meaning? What is the point? And in the solution to this crisis, which is both personal and political, something profound may be available.

If we take back agency, and bring ourselves closer to managing our affairs for ourselves, then something else may also come about: We may find a fulfillment and satisfaction, and perhaps even a meaning, which so often seems elusive in the contemporary circumstance.

These four ideas form the core of the philosophy of *The Leaderless Revolution*. Adopt these ideas, above all act upon them, and things will change. The book is intended as a guide and not a prescription. It sets out a *method* of doing things and taking action, and not what the outcome of this method should be. That is for everyone—acting together—to determine, and no single individual can pretend to know it, let alone a writer tapping away on a laptop. No one can claim to know what others truly want. These needs and concerns—and dreams—can be expressed only through action, shared decision-making and discussion with those most affected, including those who might disagree. But this method is the essence of a new form of politics, indeed a new way of living together on our crowded planet.

How might these ideas play out in practice? While the aspirations of this philosophy are grand, the steps needed to embody it are simple: small steps, things that everyone can do, every day.

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It is no small struggle merely to live out the ideals that you aspire to. The first step, and perhaps the most important, is to work out what your ideals are. The slogan “Be the change you wish to see” is often associated with the environmental movement, but it applies more universally. At the simplest level, you cannot expect a political goal of “equality” if you treat people unequally or tolerate that treatment for others. People are not mere factors of production (or “utility-maximizing consumers”), as economists would depict them. By altering our conduct and thus our impact, we may incite change in others far away, with surprising force and speed.

One essential of any method of change is this: Consult those most affected. Those suffering from the problem (which may include you) will know far more about its dimensions and likely solutions. People will reject strident argument; they rarely reject informed interest. When I served as a diplomat, I was subjected to both. The reader will already know which had the more effect.

And it’s important, in all this, to reject the easy sanctimony of the so-called Golden Rule: It exhibits a profound solipsism, if not arrogance, that we can know the requirements of others. Instead, the maxim should be to *ask* others what they want, and not assume. They always know, and now, thanks to the Internet, we can hear their voices, all over the world, with more clarity and vigor than ever before. If in any doubt, addressing those in most suffering is a good place to start, as Karl Popper once suggested, for unlike “happiness,” suffering is all too easy to recognize and measure.

So much for the personal; now, how to change the workplace?

Here, the dominant model is the private company whose primary and overriding purpose is to maximize profit. The volatile flow of “hot money” from poor to well-performing stocks in the stock market, usually based on very short-term actual or predicted returns,

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reinforces this tendency. Meanwhile, a culture has arisen where bosses pay themselves hundreds of times more than what their average employees earn, sometimes regardless of performance. And government ownership has been proven a disastrously inefficient alternative. But there is another way to run a business, less often mentioned.

Consider cooperative companies, like Britain's retail chain John Lewis, that share ownership, as well as agency, in the company. All partners (not "employees") share in the profits and, notably, in decisions about the company's future. Differences in pay between the bosses and the others are far lower. Yet this company, for example, has been an enduring success, profiting and growing year after year in the most ferocious of markets. It has lasted nearly a century.

Such enterprises are not created by government legislation, or by the inevitable machinations of the market. They are established by the free choice of their owners and founders—people who choose to follow and propagate a different way of doing things, without abandoning the entrepreneurship that drives innovation and growth. And by their very nature, and embodiment of values other than mere profit seeking, these companies produce benefits that are today rarely associated with the modern company: equality, solidarity and a satisfaction of real involvement—as well as sustained economic stability. Contrast this with the feelings most wage slaves associate with their employers. Typically, one New York store owner told me that his biggest management problem was to create a sense of "ownership" in his business. But it is absurd to hope for "ownership" among employees who do not own any part of the business.

Then there are the banks. The current system drives banks to lend recklessly in boom times as they are forced to compete for profit and share price, or else face buy-out. A more robust system might consist of depositor-owned banks offering mutualized loans, where risk is

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spread transparently.\* There is no intrinsic reason why such a bank should not be set up—indeed, there are already such—but it takes a decision by a brave group to take the first step, and decisions by depositors to reward institutions driven by values other than pure profit. This is a politics of personal action: at home, with one another, and in the workplace, incorporating the political goals we desire into everything we do.

In turn, consumers can reward these companies with their dollars. There are websites that offer competitive alternatives to the products of companies that exploit their workers or the environment. At the most extreme, customers can organize a boycott of the most egregious offenders, as depositors at one European bank did to protest the bonuses paid to executives after a huge government bailout (the bonuses were withdrawn and the government outlawed them for all bailed-out banks). When you're buying, you're voting. Every act becomes political. Indeed, it always was.

This simple method of action applies at the global level too. The Internet is now witnessing the genesis of online *movements*, where people sharing a common concern unite across borders to address it, not through campaigns but through action. We all know intuitively it simply isn't enough to fight genocide in Darfur or sex trafficking by clicking a button.

In the 1930s, forty thousand foreign volunteers traveled to Spain to fight fascism. Ten thousand never returned. These were extreme circumstances but illustrate the debilitating late-twentieth-century decline from acting to campaigning, a shift that has entirely suited

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\*A crucial factor behind the crisis wrought by the selling of "credit default options" (or "credit default swaps") in the 2008 financial crisis was that these products, initially designed to *spread* risk, in actual practice obscured it, because purchasers of the CDOs did not properly understand the risk they entailed.

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the powerful. It is now abundantly clear, as it ever was, that it is action that makes a difference. If concerned about refugees from a distant war, give refuge. Boycott the aggressor's corporate partners. Build systems of cooperation and action, so it is no longer necessary to rely on the cumbersome reaction of our governments, which, as I have seen as a diplomat, too often act upon an artificial calculus of "national interests" that relegate human needs beneath those of the state or commerce.

No one pretends that it is easy to set up these alternative systems, but neither is it impossible. Like a modern-day version of Voltaire's Pangloss, who endlessly repeated that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds," it is tediously restated that the current status quo is immutable and, certainly, incapable of improvement. We are encouraged to believe that no one has the power to change it. Thus paralyzed, we are frozen into inaction. This paralysis of thought is the greatest obstacle to overcome. Defeat it, and everything becomes possible.

*THE LEADERLESS REVOLUTION* is not demanding the violent overthrow of government, or anything else. Everything worth changing can be changed without resorting to violence; this should be a gentle revolution, using force more lasting and convincing than any violence—our own actions and convictions. The most extreme cases of savage repression or attack may justify violence, and then only rarely, and only after all nonlethal alternatives including isolation, boycott and sabotage have been exhausted.

*The Leaderless Revolution* instead advocates the construction of an alternative and better system, step by small step.

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Power must be taken back to where it rightfully belongs—to those who have, until now, let it be given away. No government will decree this. No politician will declare his own irrelevance. But we do not need orders from authority to take control. It can succeed at the simplest level, as well as on a broader canvas.

Self-organization need not and should not be an antagonistic process. Simply start talking to your neighbors. Identify shared concerns, and take action. Establish forums to discuss common issues, moderate these respectfully and inclusively, invite all those concerned to attend—and to speak.

In this way, these new forms of organization will gain legitimacy, a legitimacy of real popular consent, delivered through participation. Soon politicians will start to refer to these new forums, then bow to them, and one day perhaps give way to them. An alternative system is created.

At work, the same thing is possible. Unions once performed this organizing purpose, and still can, if they are truly inclusive and democratic—and not outlawed. But it can happen informally too. It can start with a few people meeting weekly over coffee, but as it builds and others join, those in charge will have to take notice. True power comes not from the assertion of rules and threats, but from the aggregation of honest and sincere voices, and their concerted heartfelt action. When sustained, uncorrupted and driven by real concerns, such power is ultimately irresistible. Thus is power taken back.

*The Leaderless Revolution* challenges the stale choice between free markets and government control. There is a better way that celebrates and releases the power of individual passion and enterprise, yet also expresses that equally deep-seated but less celebrated human trait: concern for others, responsibility for the common good and a belief

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that the most important things in life—community, love, purpose, one another—cannot be bought, but have to be enacted, striven for, *lived*.

But before any of this, the fear must be overcome—fear of one another, fear of ridicule or failure and, perhaps most inadmissible of all, fear of our own considerable power, as yet unleashed. It is this fear that authority plays upon, indeed relies upon: Only *we* can protect you. But that claim is ever less plausible in the face of global forces that are, increasingly, out of control, whether terrorism, climate change or economic volatility. Indeed, governments' attempts to impose order, through force or legislation, not only seem ineffective but may exacerbate the problems they are claimed to solve. Worse, they have convinced us, who have in fact the greater power, that we are powerless.

We have been silenced by the pervasive belief that there is no better system than the current one of profit-driven capitalism and representative democracy, when in fact our democracy has been hijacked by those with the largest profits. We have been intimidated by the bullying repetition that the status quo represents the summit of human progress to date, when in its inequality, its carelessness for our planet and its inhumanity to our fellow humans, in many ways it represents the worst. Our silence permits this outrage to continue, and profound injustice to be perpetuated. And it is this silence that must now be broken, through a thousand acts of construction to build a better world, a thousand acts that declare that there is a much, much better way of organizing and deciding our lives together. Though peaceful, these are revolutionary acts.

And with those acts, a new vista may open up, a possibility for the human endeavor far more exciting and inspiring than that offered by the current way of thought. Economic progress is not the measure of

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who we are, just as bickering politicians should not define our ability for cooperation. We are far more than merely this. And this possibility cannot be defined; it can only be enacted. This revolution can only succeed, indeed can only begin, without leaders: led by us—*in control*, at last.

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New York City  
October 2011



**Excerpted from**

**THE LEADERLESS REVOLUTION:  
HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE WILL TAKE POWER  
AND CHANGE POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**Available in:**

**EBOOK NOVEMBER 29, 2011**

**HARDCOVER JANUARY 19, 2012**

**by Blue Rider Press**

**[www.theleaderlessrevolution.com](http://www.theleaderlessrevolution.com)**



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