# Don’t move, Occupy! Social movement vs social arrest

by Mehmet Döşemeci on November 5, 2013

**Our view of social movements has remained enthralled to an obsolete liberalism. It is high time to call the occupations what they are: social arrests.**

On 17 December 2010, the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit seller set off a wave of uprisings that spread, with mercurial speed, around the Mediterranean basin and across its democratic divide. Within months, permanent occupations or tent cities had become fixtures of the urban landscapes of Spain, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. By fall 2011, these uprisings had cascaded as far North as the UK and, jumping the Atlantic, inspired both the form and name of the Occupy protests in the United States. In the summer of 2013, Turkey, Brazil, and Bulgaria all followed suit.

The global interconnectedness and resonance of these uprisings, so evident to the protestors, has largely been ignored by its commentators. While notable exceptions exist, the overall tendency of most accounts has been to compartmentalize and classify. Middle-Eastern resistance to dictatorship, Northern Mediterranean unrest against externally enforced austerity measures, and an Anglo-American revolt against the tyranny of the financial sector, have been analyzed as discrete cases each with their own structural and contingent dynamics. The results of this compartmentalization are all too predictable. Two years on, instead of a single image of global rebellion, we are left with fractured portraits of localized discontent.

*Image: A neighborhood forum in Istanbul, Turkey (2013)*

In an effort to examine the uprisings since 2011 through a global lens, I want to focus on a form they shared in common: the continuous occupation of public space. Beginning in 2011, people from all walks of life came to the central squares of the world's cities and formed various types of semi-permanent sites of protest. What happened during these uprisings, how the people who were present took part in them, presents a radical challenge to two assumptions common to the liberal understanding of contemporary politics: the association between democracy and representative government; and the association between contentious politics and the category of movement.

These challenges have to a great degree gone unnoticed because our conceptions of revolution and political struggle have remained to a large degree under the shadow of liberalism. Rather than view these uprisings within the recently sanitized history of revolution and an increasingly ineffectual grammar of social movements, it is high time to call the global occupations of public space what they are: social arrests.

In what follows, I outline a theory and praxis of social arrest and underscore how its politics has come to define the global uprisings since 2011, a politics that has turned these uprisings into immanent sites of democratic self-institution. Part historical, part speculative, part anecdotal, and part theoretical, this piece offers a meditation on the significance of the first major mass uprisings since "the end of history".

*Image: The occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo (2012)*

**The Police Conception of Revolution**

The participants in the uprisings since 2011, whether in Madrid, Benghazi, Cairo, New York, or Istanbul, all believed they were carrying out a democratic revolution. The reactions of the Western media and governments were more cautious.

The first striking aspect of the Western response was its bifurcation almost exclusively along the world's democratic divide. The uprisings against authoritarian rule in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt were uniformly proclaimed as "expressing the will of the people", while the strikingly similar manifestations of their Spanish, Greek, and American counterparts were all but ignored. This bifurcation in Western responses, one equally evident in governments and the mainstream media, is indicative of how we have come to perceive the role of mass political protest in the first decade of the 21st century. In the tradition of the French Revolution, uprisings against authoritarian rule are signified as acts of popular sovereignty — legitimate manifestations of a people unable to express their will through alternate channels — whereas similar protests within liberal representative democracies are marginalized as the acts of a raucous minority.

Alain Badiou has correctly remarked on the irony of Western responses in this regard, which nominated 500.000 protesters in Egypt's Tahrir Square as legitimate representatives of 80 million, when within their own societies, reasonable and legal people express their will through opinion polls or elections. When similar numbers of Americans protested against the Iraq war in 2003, the White House condemned the demonstrators to insignificance with a single sentence: "The president is a strong advocate for freedom and democracy. And one of the democratic values that we hold dear is the right of people to peacefully assemble and express their views."


*Image: Protest against the Iraq War in London (2003)*

When things get a little nastier, as Erik Swyngedouw has pointed out, participants in mass uprisings in the Global North are described as rebels or anarchists and every effort is made to assure that the 'rioters' are not identified with The People. The most important effect of this split response, wherein mass protest against dictatorships take on world-historical significance while those within democracies go all but unrecognized, has been to obfuscate the global nature of these uprisings.

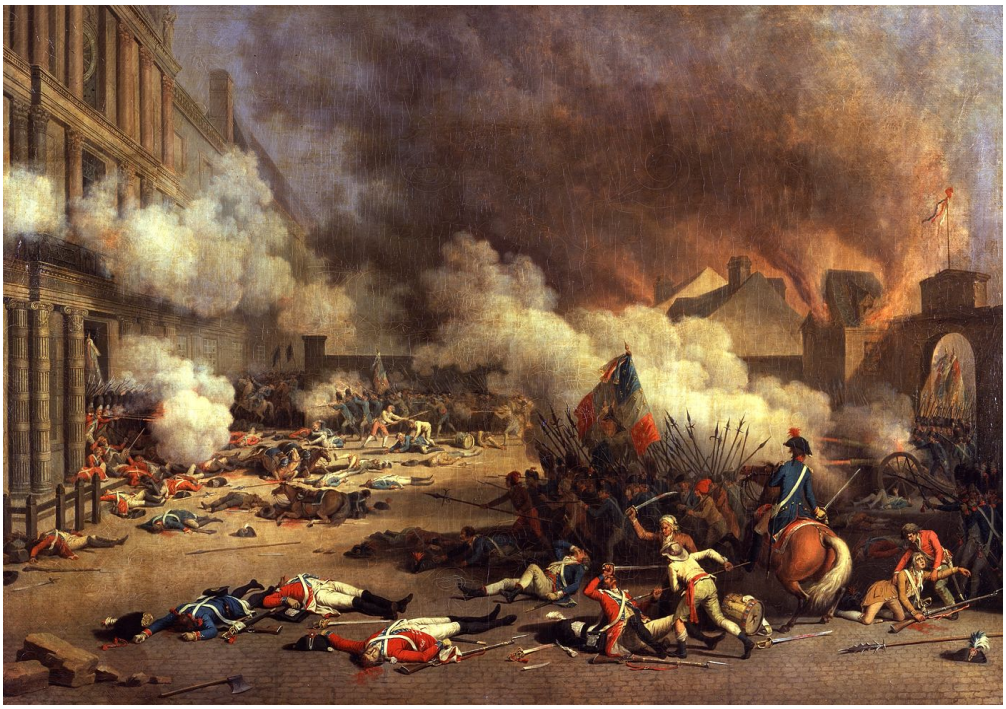
The second continuous refrain of the Western response was the repeated exhortation by Western governments to ensure an "orderly transition to democracy" in the Arab states. In one respect, this refrain can be viewed as a strategic attempt by the West to exercise some control over the events unfolding in the 'Arab Spring,' to ensure that whatever emerged, the new shape of these societies would be both capable of, and amenable to, maintaining international political and economic commitments. But these statements, coupled with the differentiated response to mass uprisings along the democratic divide, are also testaments to something much more profound, something that goes to the core of our collective contemporary understandings of revolution, democracy, and their epistemological relation.

Taken together, these responses are the latest manifestation of a silent yet powerful recalibration of the terms democracy and revolution within our collective imaginations, a recalibration that has been ongoing since 1989. The revolutions of 1989 and their afterlives inaugurated a historical taming of the term, a taming that has carried over into the 21st century. This historical taming consists of two interrelated "police operations" conducted by Western liberal democracies: the first involving a particular way of talking about non-democratic revolutions, the second consisting of a conservative periodization of their own foundational pasts.

*Image: Mass demonstration during the Romanian Revolution (1989)*

The first operation takes aim at the historical baggage acquired by the term revolution over the course of the 20th century: the violent overthrow of a political regime in an orchestrated action, commanded by a secular (as in Russia in 1917) or religious (Iran in 1979) vanguard. From a 21st century perspective, these revolutions are increasingly being judged not by what they achieved (the overthrow of the previous socio-political order) but by the new regime's convergence or divergence from a free-market liberal democratic state. The same criteria that were used to assess the success or failure of the 1989 revolutions are now being applied to the revolutionary legacy of the entire 20th century. In this way, the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions (and their offshoots) are increasingly qualified as failed or hijacked revolutions, tossed alongside the 1933 Nazi "revolution" into the dustbin of history. As Timothy Garton Ash aptly put it during the height of Egyptian uprising, "Forget 1917, 1848 or 1789. There is no longer any doubt that 1989 has become the early 21st century's default model and metaphor for revolution."

The second police operation against the history of revolution entails a conservative re-reading of liberal democracy's own foundational past. It makes the link between revolution and democracy, but does so through a periodization that temporally separates the two. This is especially true of the two foundational revolutions of the 18th century. The dominant narrative of both the American and French Revolutions acknowledges revolution as a period enabling, but distinctly preceding, democracy. Within this narrative, revolutionary acts from the Boston Tea Party and the Declaration of Independence to the Tennis Court Oath and the storming of the Bastille, are given their due importance but also separated from the actual functioning of democracy that followed them. The mass political uprisings that occurred after the establishment of democracy have, by this same narrative, been interpreted in a markedly different light. In the new American Republic, the crushing of the Whiskey and Shay's Rebellions have been seen as the (necessary) assertion of federal power and sovereignty, while in France the continued intrusions of the will of the French people into the National Assembly after 1789 are commonly cited as causes of the descent of the French Revolution into demagoguery and terror.



*Painting: French Revolutionaries storm the Royal Palace (1792)*

This periodization has had two major effects on our understanding of democracy, revolution, and their interrelation. First, it has effectively bracketed off revolution as a period of transition between a non-democratic past and a democratic future. Bookended by the old and new regimes, the time of revolution becomes momentary, a lightning strike that changes the affairs of human beings and not a temporality that humans themselves inhabit. Second, it has constructed two different sets of rules and acceptable practices that apply separately to transitional revolutionary time and the democratic regime that would follow it. This is especially the case concerning the fundamental issue of what does and does not constitute an act of sovereignty. One need hardly mention how the events surrounding July 4th and 14th, self-nominated as the first sovereign actions of the American and French people respectively, would today constitute acts of high terrorism.

This dual standard is by no means a historical accident of modern representative democracy but rather a contradiction fundamental to its operation. Mass rebellion against perceived injustice was at once canonized as the foundational act of a democratic revolution while subsequent iterations of the same act became criminalized within the newly emergent democratic state. This dual standard has historically allowed the elites of Western representative democracies to legitimate their governments as those of “the people” while simultaneously circumscribing all expressions of popular sovereignty outside of the new representative bodies which they themselves controlled. Policing this contradictory posture toward their past and present has been one of the constant historical tasks of liberal democratic regimes — amplified whenever a new generation of activists has invoked this revolutionary past to sanction their own (now criminalized) practices.

These two police operations against the history of revolution have sanitized the term and with it our political imagination. Taken together, the two-pronged police action has turned contemporary revolutions into nothing more than the correction of a historical aberration, a momentary and bracketed upheaval directed towards regimes on the losing side of history, and judged according to the revolution's successful subsequent institution of the world's hegemonic political regime.

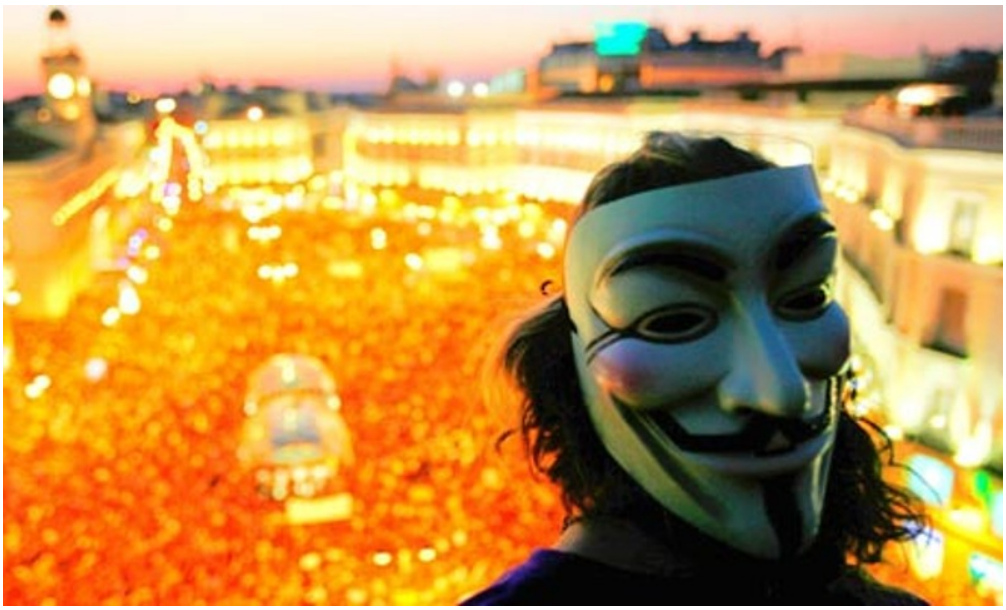


*Image: The temporary re-occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid (2012)*

The response of Western governments and mainstream media to the 2011 uprisings bears the markings of this police conception of revolution. The geopolitical bifurcation of the uprisings along the world's democratic divide, as well as the repeated exhortations to authoritarian Arab states for an "orderly transition to democracy" are testaments to the normalization (at least officially) of the new conceptions of revolution, democracy, and their interrelation since 1989.

Yet this is only half of the story. The participants in the 2011 global uprisings have another story altogether, one that not only fundamentally disrupts this police conception of revolution, but also challenges the dominant form and practice of global contentious political struggle over the last half century. To understand this story, it is useful to take a closer look at the mass political protests of the 21st century and ask what is new about the global uprisings that began in 2011.

**Social Movement vs. Social Arrest**

To get an idea of what differentiates the 2011 uprisings from previous forms of popular political struggle, let's start with a short vignette from a protest action that typified the expression of extra-parliamentary discontent with governments before the 2011 uprisings.

The vignette is from an anti-war rally I attended in Washington D.C. in February 2003 where half a million Americans assembled to protest the US invasion of Iraq. They had bussed in from

up and down the East Coast to gather, march, sing, and shout. Everyone was excited; there was a sense of collective energy, fueled in part by the sheer size of the demonstration. But then a curious thing happened. The march, whose time and route had been pre-planned and pre-approved, ended at 2pm on the Washington Mall. Nothing else had been organized and the demonstrators, mulling around for a moment, began to disperse.

As the crowd thinned, I saw a group of young Middle Eastern males waving Palestinian flags, staring in confusion at an activists' table set up on one corner of the large grass field. Behind the table stood four rather skinny women and in front of it was a bright purple banner that read "modern dancers against war and anorexia." The two groups — standing 10 meters apart — looked at each other, in perhaps one of the most bizarre encounters in the history of social movements. The men particularly were dumbfounded, literally unable to comprehend or give meaning to what they saw. Behind them, at some distance, were a die-hard group of white Rastas chanting "show me what democracy looks like. This is what democracy looks like!"

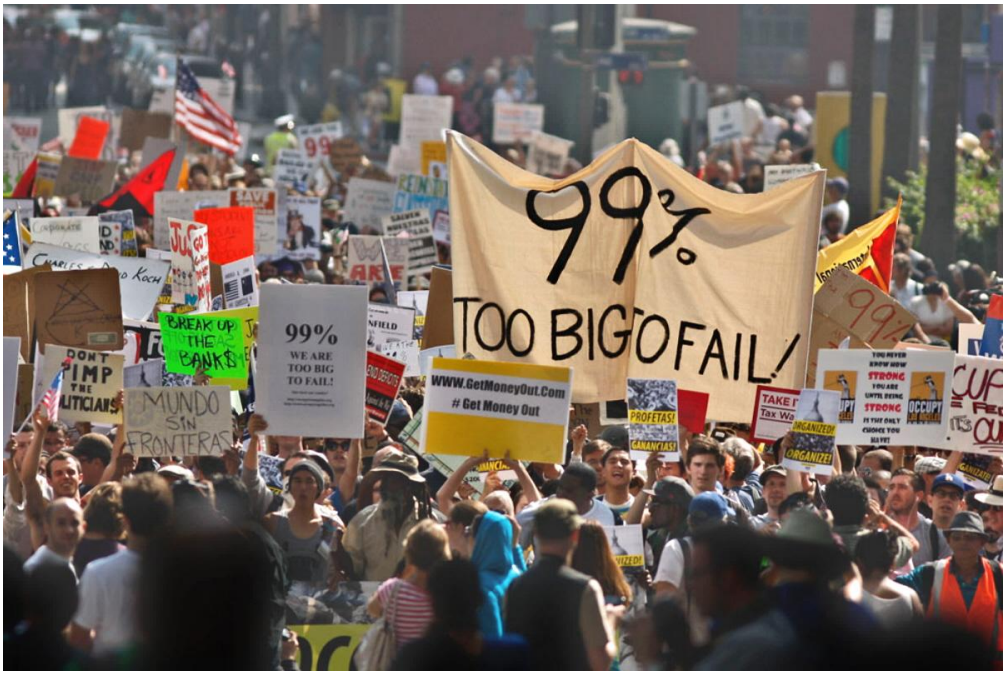



*Image: Protest as part of Occupy Wall Street movement (2011)*

Given the time and space, perhaps these human beings would have found that they had quite a bit in common. Perhaps they would have realized that their particular worldviews and languages were too far apart to form a shared ground. But the fact is that they had neither the time nor the space, and, after a few catatonic seconds, they all went their separate ways.

An odd scene, no doubt. But this anecdote underscores, albeit in hyperbolic fashion, the effective crisis in the theory and practice of social movements that defined the closing decades of the 20th century — a crisis linked to the very category of motion itself. It was the death rattle of a type of politics which — from the calls to abolish world slavery to the struggle for gender equality, from communism to civil rights — has defined contentious political struggle over the past 200 years

through the category of movement. Instead of asking what kind of movement the new uprisings of the 21st century represent, the time has come to review the relevance and efficacy of the term itself. To do so we need to reconsider, both epistemologically and in praxis, the kinetics of contentious political struggle.

One of the key images of the uprisings that brought down the Eastern Bloc was that of East Germans "voting with their feet" across the Hungarian-Austrian border to the other side of the Iron Curtain. Nothing better encapsulates the kinetics of a struggle against the final bastions of an outmoded, oppressive, and above all static state structure than this image. Yet, rather than serving as the model for future revolutions, 1989, I argue, stands as the last of the revolutions of movement.

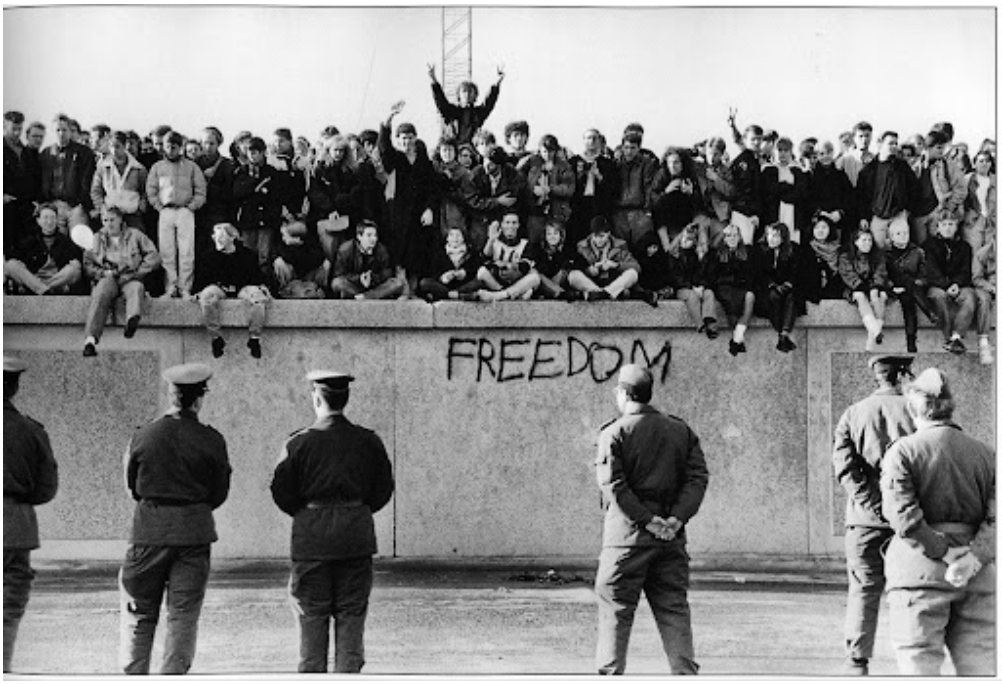



*Image: The Fall of the Berlin Wall (1990)*

To see why, it's useful to turn to the French political theory and their evolving ideas about the social function of the police. Forty years ago, the French philosopher Louis Althusser described how individuals are interpellated as subjects by the state. To illustrate his point, he gave the now famous example of a police officer shouting out "Hey, you there!" in public. Upon hearing this exclamation, an individual turns around, and, "by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject." In the act of acknowledging that it is indeed s/he who is addressed (arrested), the individual thus recognizes his subjecthood. Althusser's image of the hailing of the police officer speaks of a state apparatus (and a correlative subjectivity) that is premised on the idea of arrest. The policeman's shout essentially stops whoever hears it in his/her tracks, freezes the comings and goings of people.

In 21st century liberal democracies, this arresting function of the state apparatus, while by no means inoperative, has gradually been ghettoized (in that it has been pushed out of the

mainstream culture and squeezed into immigrant and minority communities). In its place, as another French political theorist, Jacques Rancière, has pointed out, has come an altogether different policing function, one encapsulated by the police officer urging bystanders to "move along!", that "there is nothing to see here." While the former is predicated on disruption, the latter above all ensures the constant circulation of people, goods, and services: "The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done but to keep moving, circulating; they say that the space of circulation is nothing but the space of circulation." In this newer function of the police, whatever happens, whether a simple accident, an ethical dilemma over cheap clothes produced in sweatshops, or a mass protest, the role of the police is always the same: keep people, goods, and services moving at all costs. For Rancière, the police are less concerned with arrest and repression as they are with making sure that nothing appears which may itself arrest the functioning of society, cause society to pause.

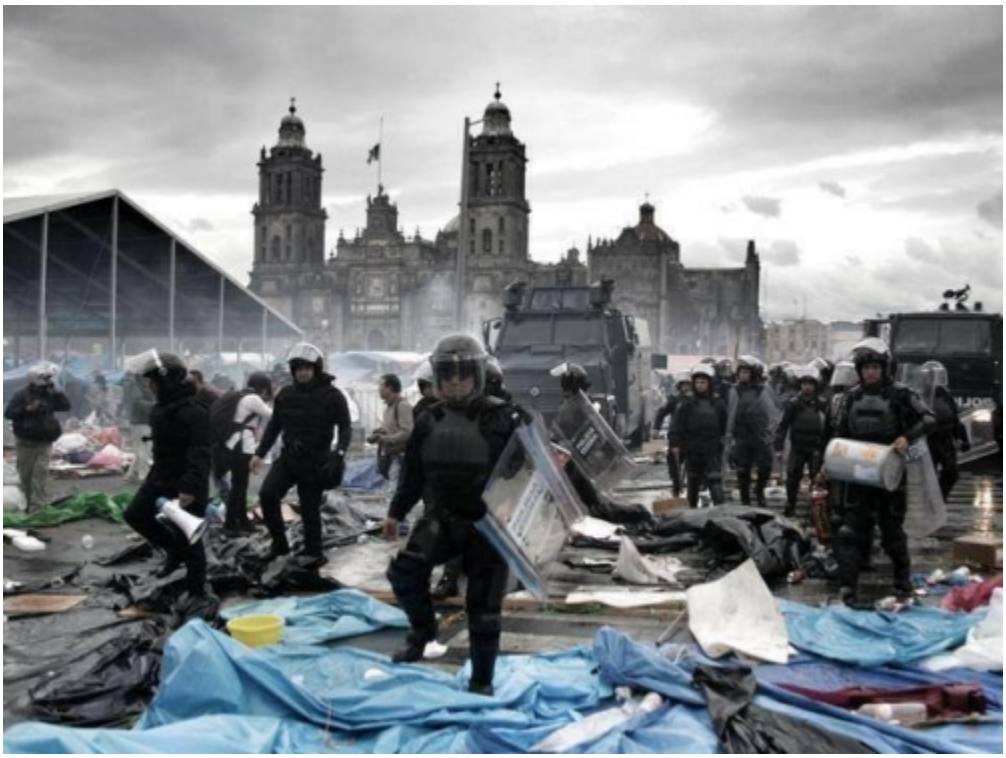


*Image: Police break up occupation of the Zocalo in Mexico City (2013)*

The gradual reversal of the police function in recent years has, I argue, also changed the aim of contemporary political struggle. Slow Food, Conservationism (be it ecological or local-cultural), Anti-War, Anti-Globalization, Radical Environmentalism — all of these sites and banners of contentious politics are directed not at a static state structure that arrests movement but are themselves in fact about stopping or arresting an unbridled and accelerating capitalist system. In this light, the very names given to struggle — the environmental movement, the anti-globalization movement, the slow food movement — become at best oxymoronic and at worst open to co-optation by the very forces they oppose (green-washing, the fair trade industry, etc.). We need to ask ourselves: why do we — and should we — still use the term movement to

characterize contentious politics? What political conceptions and practices does this term privilege? What forms and histories of resistance has it obfuscated?

**"Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But the situation may be quite different. Perhaps revolutions are not the train ride, but the human race grabbing for the emergency brake."**

***~ Walter Benjamin***

Equally important to the epistemological question surrounding movement is a crisis in the practice of political struggle that the term has perpetuated. Here the scene at the end of the 2003 anti-war rally on the Washington mall is a portrait of a larger problem. From licensed protests with pre-defined march routes to illegal direct actions, from flash mobs to the cyber-attacks of Anonymous, a logic of collection and dispersal has more and more come to define how we practice social movements. Aggrieved humans momentarily gather, coalesce around some site or issue, then, all too predictably, re-atomize into their daily routines and routes of circulation and consumption. Besides the obvious point that these tactics have done very little to change the policies, much less the course, of contemporary society, we need to critically evaluate their structural affinity with the investment and withdrawal of international capital itself.

The police conception of revolution and the crisis in the theory and practice of social "movements" form the dual backdrops for the global uprisings of 2011. Beginning in January of that year, a new form of revolt emerged in North Africa and spread, within months, around many parts of the globe. What actually took place at the sites of these revolts, in Zuccotti and Gezi Park, in the squares of Tahrir, Puerta del Sol and Syntagma, offered a seismic challenge to both the police conception of revolution and the theory and practice of political struggle. What happened in these squares was not movement but arrest, not dispersal but permanent occupation.

*Image: The temporary re-occupation of Puerta del Sol (2012)*

**The Democratic Space of Occupation**

Starting on January 25, 2011, hundreds of thousands of people from all over Egypt descended on one square in Cairo and, what's more, decided to stay. As the state apparatus withdrew (though not before committing 800+ murders), upwards of a million people, left to their own devices, had to figure out how they would live together in a square in order to sustain a revolt aimed outside of it.

Alain Badiou once wrote, "In the midst of a revolutionary event, the people is made up of those who know how to solve the problems that the event imposes on them." The people of Tahrir organized and orchestrated their own security, dealt with human and regular waste, and opened and operated a kindergarten so that mothers with small children could come to the square. They converted a Hardees restaurant into a free kitchen, a Kentucky Fried Chicken into a free clinic, organized networks for digital and print information, set up a pharmacy, handled hired agitators, and protected each other's religious practices.

It was in this manner that Tahrir Square became something more than a central site where a million atomized and individuated Egyptians came together to protest their president. It became, through the life of the occupation, the stage on which the new Egyptian society was performed and presented. In their generosity, their tolerance, their humor, camaraderie, and song, the Egyptian people asserted their values and boundaries both to themselves and the whole world. Surrounded by international cameras soaking up their every gesture, soldiers and children, artists and vendors, became increasingly aware that they were spotlighting what it meant to be an Egyptian, as if it were the unscripted opening ceremony of the Olympic Games of the new Egypt.

A few months later, a similar restructuring of social space took place in (lower) Syntagma Square, the heart of the uprising in Greece. The people occupying the square instituted nightly General Assembly meetings, various subcommittees charged with food, protection, outreach, horticulture, information, tattoos, and media, creating plural (physical and conceptual) spaces informed by the uprising and redefining it daily. Yet perhaps even more telling has been the extreme detail the occupation paid to the structure of participation itself. In this respect, the minutes of the People's Assembly of Syntagma Square make for fascinating reading. There is as much attention devoted to how political and social life should be structured in the square — the ban on party and union insignia, the drawing of lots and time limits governing speech in the assembly, the coordination of meetings with public transit to assure greater participation, etc. — as there is to the what: articulating political manifestos and the position of the Assembly to its outside (whether in relation to the protests in the upper square or to Greek society more broadly).


*Image: A General Assembly at Syntagma Square in Athens (2011)*

In the American Fall, similar scenes took place beginning on September 17, 2011, when an initial group of about 1.500 people gathered to occupy Wall Street. Having found the street symbolizing global finance capital heavily barricaded by the police, they marched up Manhattan's financial district to Zuccotti Park. Instead of shouting and going home, those 1.500 humans all sat down. Over the course of the next five hours, they broke up into small groups of 15-30 people and began to talk to each other. They talked about what had brought them there and what they felt should be done. They collected their stories and ideas and presented them to the other groups in the first General Assembly meeting of the Park that evening. Through this talking with and talking through, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was born.

Over the course of the following weeks, Zuccotti Park became both a site of protest against the hegemony of the financial sector and a miniature of the just American society in which the occupiers believed. The permanent encampment became a thorny injunction to the ceaseless traffic of goods, people, and transactions that defined lower Manhattan. Its kinetic structure was not one of movement, but one of arrest. The occupation forced one to stop, and said: "look at what we have set up here."

Nearly two months later, at 2am on November 15, hundreds of New York City riot police descended on the park and brutally evicted the occupation. A partial list of the items they threw into waiting dump trucks:

- 5.554 books from the People's Library;
- Hundreds of musical instruments;
- Three stationary bike generators;
- A fully working kitchen;

- Over 200 tents and air mattresses;
- A WikiLeaks truck;
- A medical center;
- Hundreds of children's toys;
- A gray water filtration system;
- Three TVs, countless laptops, and a giant projection screen.

To understand Occupy Wall Street and the other sites of global occupation, one needs to think about these items, to contrast them with the abandoned signs and cigarette butts that littered the Washington Mall after the voluntary dispersal of the anti-war rally. In these destroyed items lay the true significance of the occupation. They stand as the material objects of an organic society instituting itself in democratic fashion.


*Image: Library at Occupy Wall Street camp (2011)*

Within two years, when large segments of the Turkish people had risen up against the ruling AKP government, the 2011 script had gone global. In the first week of June 2013, the actions taken by a coalition of activists against the destruction of a public park in central Istanbul spread to more than 60 cities and provinces, bringing several million people onto the streets. By June 8, the police had withdrawn from Taksim Square, leaving it at least temporarily in the hands of protesters. The protesters erected networks of makeshift barricades at 50 meter intervals along all major routes leading to the square. Within a week, Taksim and the adjacent Gezi Park became a "liberated zone", a fragile oasis amidst the ongoing and increasingly violent clashes with police forces throughout much of Turkey.

Inside, the resistors set up a people's library; dozens of free food, blanket, and medical supply stations; LGBT and gender awareness tents; and areas for musical performances and political speech. For the religious holiday of Kandil, protesters set up alternate spaces for prayer and dance and invited all those in the square to find a stranger with differing political beliefs with whom to sit and chat. These spontaneous structures and initiatives that mushroomed amidst the ubiquitous graffiti and political banners offered a stark contrast to the scripted choreography and corporate sponsorship of festivals previously organized by the municipal-capitalist alliance. More than an assertion of the right to the city, the self-organization of life in the square attests to the power of ordinary people to actively structure the social space itself.

Following the brutal police assault that cleared Gezi a week later, dozens of local decentralized parliaments bloomed in the neighborhood parks of Turkey's major cities, each holding nightly assembly meetings to discuss both local matters and their contribution to the national resistance. They organized free exchange days in the parks, a kilometer long communal iftar banquet laid on newspapers to break fast during Ramadan, and adapted models of direct democratic practice popularized by the occupations in Spain, Greece, and the United States.

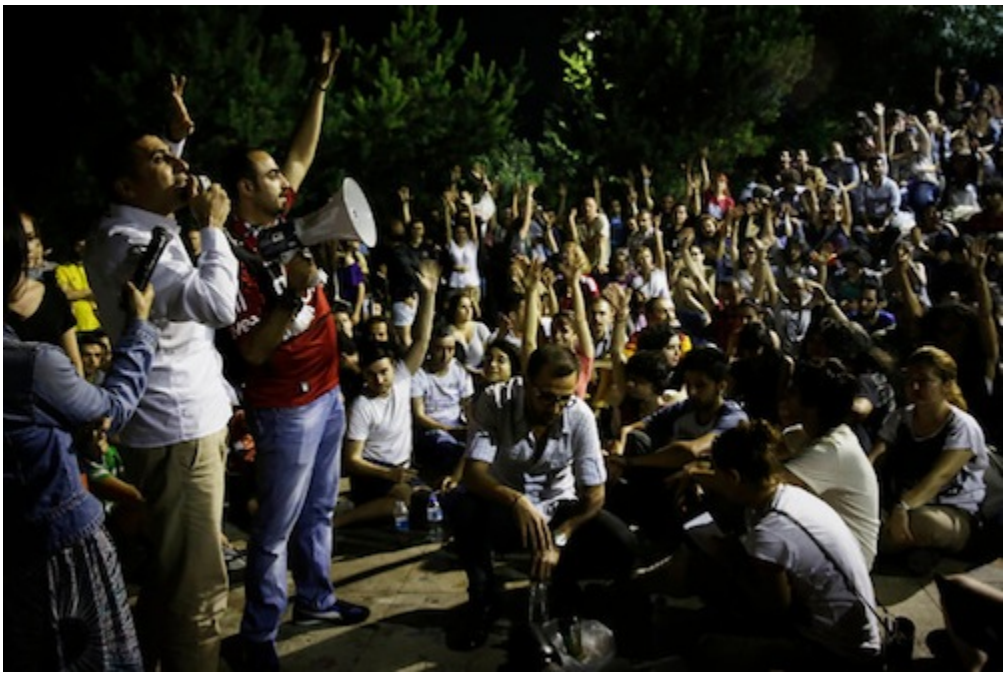


*Image: A popular forum in Istanbul, Turkey (2013)*

**The Birth of the Democratic Subject**

There is no doubt that the Greeks, Egyptians, Americans, Spaniards, Tunisians, and Turks first occupied the public spaces of their urban centers to voice political opposition. They came, as Stathis Gourgouris has pointed out, to "withdraw their consent" from the forces governing their lives. As the days passed, however, people had to figure out how to live and act together inside a square in order to sustain a revolt outside of it. In these sometimes very quotidian decisions, they came to define themselves by how they occupied and existed together.

This communal aspect of the occupations has gone almost completely unrecognized by the global mainstream media and governments. But it is in this aspect of the collective occupations of public space that democracy and revolution became conjoined. The journalist Fareed Zakaria expressed this interdependence and simultaneity of democracy and revolution when he tweeted "Tahrir Square is the only democratic place in Egypt right now. And I constantly go there just to experience this revolutionary freedom." So too was this dual subjectivity (both revolutionary and democratic) evident in the powerful statement of a young Egyptian who was among the first to occupy the square, "Starting today, the 25th of January, I take charge of the affairs of my country."

This same refrain heard countless times in Tahrir was repeated a few months later by the People's Assembly of Syntagma Square, whose May resolution read as follows: "For a long time decisions have been made for us, without us. We are workers, unemployed, retirees, youth, who have come to Syntagma Square to fight and struggle for our lives and our future. We are here because we know that the solutions to our problems can come only from us. We call all residents of Athens to come to Syntagma Square, and all of society to fill the public squares and to take life into their own hands." A resolution with striking affinity to the Declaration of the Central Committee of the 1871 Paris Commune, which proclaimed, "The proletarians of Paris, amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs."


*Image: Workers on top of barricade in the Paris Commune (1871)*

The appropriation and re-determination of social relations forms a common thread across the global democratic divide. The occupations were just as much about setting up a new society as they were about criticizing the chains of the old one. Whether revolting against an authoritarian regime or a nominally democratic society that denied their existence, the occupiers of the world's squares, through their very occupation, put into practice the democracy they believed should take its place.

It is this communal and democratic re-organization of public life that presents the greatest threat to the world's states, whether or not they are "democratic." More than any slogan or protest, these communal occupations challenge the state's self-nominated role to regulate the lives of human beings on earth. They have shown, not by their words but through their daily actions, that a cross-section of humans not only have no need for the state, but in fact they do a much better job of organizing life without it.

**Enter the Police State**

Authoritarian states have not taken this challenge lightly. The 800+ plus murders committed by the Egyptian security forces unfortunately paled in comparison to the atrocities later carried out in Libya and Syria, respectively, by Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad. Overt police brutality, by contrast, is usually the last resort of well-functioning liberal democratic regimes. It appears when the movies, the football rivalries, and the soul-deadening holiday music no longer suffice. Its entrance into the mainstream spotlight, in the United States, in Turkey, Greece, and Spain, is an indication that the urban occupations pose a fundamental challenge to representative democratic states and the clearest signal that its "soft" ideological apparatus is malfunctioning.

If, for example, Occupy Wall Street could simply have been incorporated into the liberal democratic system, effectively absorbed by a slight left-ward shift in Democratic Party policy, there would have been no need for tear-gas, sonic cannons, and pepper-spray. Yet, within two months of the birth of OWS and over 1.000 sister occupations throughout the US, the federal government coordinated a collective assault on these democratic spaces. The FBI and the Bureau of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the mayors and police departments of over 18 cities, forcibly evicted every major occupation throughout the US.

*Image: Police assault a protester at OWS, 2011 (photo by Paul Weiskel)*

The same story has been repeated in the Northern Mediterranean democracies, the most recent being the crackdown in Turkey, where over 130.000 gas canisters were fired in the span of two weeks. Coupled with this reappearance of an increasingly militarized police force on the streets of representative democracies has been the more shadowy infiltration and surveillance of non-violent "movements" by the intelligence apparatuses of these states. That the monitoring and entrapment of non-violent dissidents has been funded and conducted under the banner of counter-terrorism task forces is an even greater cause for alarm. These signs of an emergent police state within liberal democratic regimes (or more aptly: its passage from shadowed ghettos to front-page visibility) are the strongest testament to the novelty and latent strength of the 2011 uprisings.

Though a sign of weakness, the state's frontal assault on the global occupations has nevertheless been effective. Despite the new slogan of OWS following the evictions — "You Can't Evict an Idea!" — there is no denying that the police actions have been a severe setback. By dismantling their physical space, the state has in effect transformed the manifestation of direct democracy from the reality of the occupations to a homeless "idea", an "idea" wandering through online forums and materializing in sporadic actions. That is to say, the evictions of the protesters from urban squares transformed these uprisings from a permanent occupation predicated on the logic of arrest to the ephemeral tactics of collection and dispersal predicated on a logic of movement.

**Towards A Global Script**

Regardless of their final present political fate, the global uprisings since 2011 have already established mass continuous occupation of public space as the dominant form of political struggle in the early 21st century: the coming together of people who have both withdrawn their consent to be governed by the existing order and, equally importantly, discovered the responsibility, dignity, difficulty, and — above all — joy of instituting a society outside of it. In so doing, they have challenged the periodization that separated a mass political uprising from the democracy that may follow it. The common feature of all these occupations was the creation of democratic forms within the space and time of the uprising itself. This was made possible not through a politics predicated on movement, but rather one of arrest, of occupation, in order to create sites for the collective restructuring of social relations and space.

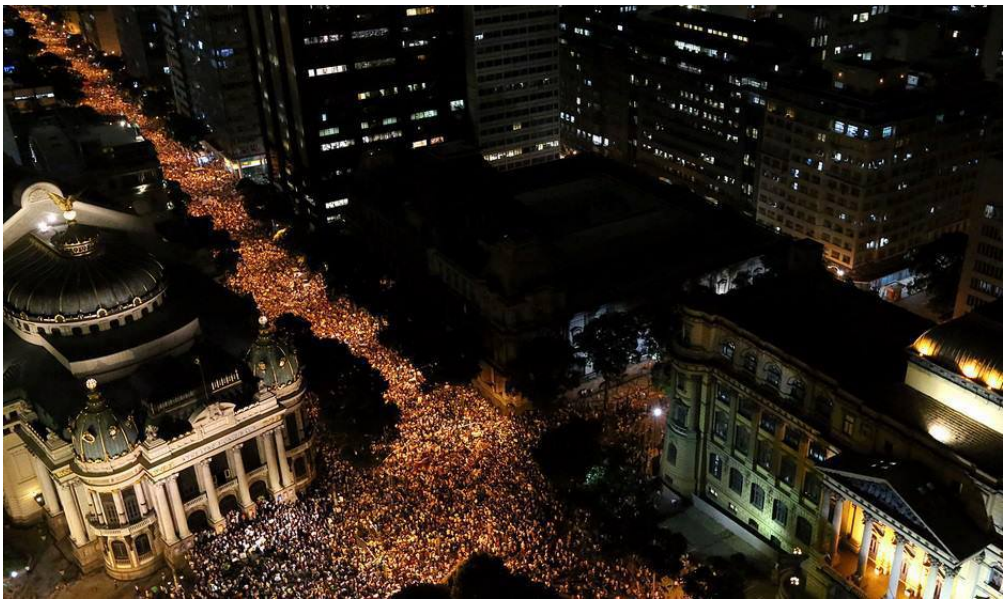


*Image: Masses of protesters in Rio de Janeiro (2013)*

Yet there is also no denying that almost all of these uprisings have ended in failure. The urban occupations have been dismantled and the aims of the occupiers have either been largely ignored (representative democracies), brutally suppressed (Libya, Syria), or their victories shown to be premature (Egypt). Nevertheless there are signs for hope. Contacts between the global occupations, formed during the height of the uprisings, have persisted after their evictions. The common form of these occupations has allowed participants not only the opportunity to escape their individual isolation by talking and acting collectively, but more importantly, to draw connections across national grammars of discontent.

There is an increasing recognition, evident in the many instances of Brazilian-Turkish solidarity, that people are engaged in a common global struggle. These connections have also drawn attention to the increasingly international nature of an emerging global police apparatus, encapsulated so perfectly by the photograph of a "made in Brazil" teargas canister used by riot police in Istanbul, with its bitter irony sending it viral on Turkish and Brazilian social media. Whether these connections will be enough to dislodge future occupations from their national contexts towards a global uprising against the neo-liberal order and its police must remain, until it occurs, a speculative question.

One thing, however, is certain: the 2011 uprisings that began in North Africa have already resonated across the world's democratic and income divides, forging connections between peoples and their circumstances that have not been made since the 1970s.

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