



**Insurgencies don't have a plan –
they *are* the plan:
Political performatives and vanishing
mediators in 2011**

Benjamin Arditi

*Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales,
UNAM Mexico*

Email: barditi@unam.mx

Keywords

Insurgencies
Programmes
Politics
Performatives
Arab Spring
Chile
Marshall McLuhan
Fredric Jameson

Abstract

2011 turned out to be an extraordinary year. The clustering of insurgencies around time and geography gave a political ring to the seasons: commentators spoke of the Arab Spring, the European Summer and the US Fall. *TIME* magazine even named 'the protester' person of the year. Yet many faulted these revolts for their lack of plans and proposals. This criticism misses the point by confusing the disruption of the given with the task of reconfiguring it. They are not standard political practices or policy-making exercises. Insurgencies are about saying 'enough!', refusing to go on as before and opening up possibilities that may or may not prosper. This article argues that they are the plan in the sense that they make a difference by moving the conversation, they are political performatives – participants start to experience what they strive to become – and vanishing mediators or passageways to something other to come. These three points reappear in the final section in a discussion about the material remainder of two revolts: the Arab Spring and the student revolt in Chile.

Contributor Note

Benjamin Arditi is Professor of Politics at the National University of Mexico (UNAM). He received his PhD from the University of Essex in the UK, taught at the Universities of Santa Catarina (Brazil), Maryland (US) and Essex, and has been a Visiting Fellow at the Universities of Edinburgh and St. Andrews. In Paraguay he combined work as research director at an NGO with journalism and activism. After the fall of the Stroessner regime he founded a national civic education campaign. His latest book is *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism. Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh, 2007) and he co-edits 'Taking on the Political', a book series on Continental political thought published by Edinburgh University Press. His recent work focuses on viral connectivity as part of post-hegemony and post-liberal politics.

In 'Shoplifters of the World Unite' (2011), an article whose title might be a play of words on Marx's 'Proletarians of the world, unite!' or a homage to the song by The Smiths with that same name, Slavoj Žižek characterizes the riots in the UK as a 'zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing'. Participants had no message to deliver and resembled more what Hegel called the rabble than an emerging revolutionary subject. The problem for him is not street violence as such but its lack of self-assertiveness, 'impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival'.

Žižek then shifts his focus to the Arab uprisings that toppled ruling dynasties of corrupt autocrats and on the Spanish *indignados* (the outraged) who camped in public squares just before the May 2011 elections to protest against the disconnect between elected officials and the bleak life prospects of the unemployed youth. Žižek is openly sympathetic towards these revolts but also pessimistic about their prospects. He asks us to 'avoid the temptation of the narcissism of the lost cause: it is too easy to admire the sublime beauty of uprisings doomed to fail'.

What makes this piece of advice so disconcerting is that it comes from someone who wrote a book titled *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Why are his lost causes worth defending and others narcissistic dead ends? Why are Egypt and Spain false positives of emancipation if the lost causes Žižek endorses fail just as unceremoniously? His criterion is whether they have a plan, a programme of change. The recent ones didn't, which is why they 'express an authentic rage which is not able to

transform itself into a positive programme of sociopolitical change. They express the spirit of revolt without revolution'. Their failure is the failure to come up with a proposal to replace the given. Without a plan, revolts lack the dignity of revolutions and are doomed to become lost causes of the narcissistic kind.

This is unconvincing. The insurgencies of 2011 provided political thought with the opportunity to come to terms with the loss of the loss, a Hegelian trope that Žižek once described most elegantly and persuasively as the realization that we never had what we thought we had lost. It is a loss without mourning, an affirmative loss because it dislodges thought from essentialist arguments about the plenitude of freedom, oppression, evil, justice, identity and so on. There is no such thing as a robbed, distorted or misplaced core of freedom and so on to be reclaimed. This is because these concepts never had a core anyway. In the case of insurgencies the loss of the loss means parting ways with a grammar of emancipation that was never there to begin with, at least not in actual uprisings: an alternative to the existing order comes in handy but has rarely played a central role in rebellions. One can then begin to think the difference between insurgencies and programmes as a difference in nature instead of framing their relationship within a hierarchy of stages that commits us to place programmes above revolts in the political food chain.

The nod to Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1994) in the title of this article is a cue for displacing our understanding of insurgencies: it tells us that their happening is significant in

itself. McLuhan contended that by focusing on the message or content one misses the more radical impact of new media, namely, that the medium itself is the message: it creates a new environment or modifies the pre-existing one by changing the way people do things and relate with one another. He illustrates this by reference to the light bulb, a medium without a message: the light bulb redefined the way we partition the day by making the regime that allocates work, play and rest in accordance to daytime and nighttime largely irrelevant. Insurgencies from the North of Africa to New York endeavor to perform a similar re-partitioning of the given. They *are* the plan in the sense that their occurrence is meaningful regardless of what they propose. Demands, manifestos, programmes and other things we associate with content are figured out on the go because insurgencies are more about opening up possibilities by challenging our political imaginaries and cognitive maps than about designing the new order. To put it slightly differently, and perhaps more strongly given that it involves something in excess of programmes, policies and policymaking are not the higher moment of insurgencies – markers of their passage from revolts to revolution – but signs that insurgent activism has been taken over by mainstream politics.

I will substantiate these claims with two additional arguments. One is that insurgencies are passageways between worlds and therefore ways of enacting the promise of something other to come. They show us political performatives at work – activities through which one already lives what one is fighting for – and the fleeting nature of politics and

the people, both of which are seen as events rather than as representations. The other argument looks at insurgencies as vanishing mediators yet modifies this notion by reloading Fredric Jameson's original arguments. I will finish with a discussion about the material remainder of two revolts, the Arab Spring and the student revolt in Chile.

About programmes and insurgencies

The insurgencies of 2011 spearheaded by a very diverse and eclectic mixture of rebels – from the Maghreb, Yemen and Syria to Spain, Chile, Israel, New York and elsewhere – generated a stage for a very public articulation and mise-en-scène of grievances and desires. Protesters were fed up of living in places where the powerful are unaccountable and social justice is a farce. They spoke of human rights and democracy, free and secular education, affordable housing, the accountability of financial companies responsible for the crisis, the obscenity of massive income inequality, the lack of jobs and life prospects for most people, the dissatisfaction with corrupt and incompetent politicians, and so on. Their rage manifested itself in poetic inscriptions like 'If you don't let us dream we won't let you sleep', 'Just because you can't see it doesn't mean that it's not happening' and 'Nobody can predict the moment of revolution' as well as in identity-forging cries like 'We are the 99%' and 'Wall Street is Our Street'. What you don't find in these protests is a programmatic outline of what a future society will look like. This is because the insurgents of 2011, like others who have embarked on emancipatory struggles, were moved into action by the belief that

present-day conditions harm equality, freedom and social justice and that they can make a difference by acting to make another, more equal and just world emerge from this one. They might have wanted to have descriptions of how a different order might look, but organizing the future was not their top priority because they were already making a difference by merely demonstrating, occupying and generally defying the given.

The paradox is that critics are right when they say that the revolts of 2011 lack a sociopolitical programme, but they don't realize that this is not necessarily a fault or a weakness. Paul Krugman put it nicely: when one looks at something like the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York (and its subsequent replication on a global scale) 'we shouldn't make too much of the lack of specifics' because their main thrust is to change the political climate; the specifics will be filled in later (Krugman 2011).

Insurgencies that preceded these ones had no discernible plan either. You won't find one in the Venezuelan *Caracazo* of 1989 – which Jon Beasley-Murray (2010: 285, 289) describes as the first of the social ruptures indicating the end of modernity's social pact, an index of the continued presence of the multitude and a presage of the left turns in Latin America – nor in the Water and Gas wars that undermined the privatization of utilities in Bolivia in 2000 and 2003. Nor was there one in the protests that mobilized Argentinean society in 2001, encapsulated in the chant *Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo* ('All of them must go, not a single one can stay', where 'all' stands for corrupt and incompetent politicians) and that

eventually led to the resignation of the president. The same is true of pro-democracy movements in the Mediterranean rim, Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. These had a hazy understanding of democracy, a term that functioned less as the name of a regime than as a surface of inscription for a variety of demands and desires. Democracy meant that they wouldn't risk losing their jobs, going to prison or having various parts of their anatomy beaten to a pulp for expressing opposition to the ruling Junta, party or strongman. It was also seen as a means to empower people to demand accountability to authorities. But systematic proposals about what a democratic regime would look like were rare. Those who gathered under the banner of democracy were fighting for their dignity and their future and had no programme of what would come later. Like the participants in the revolts that made 2011 memorable, they wanted to re-partition the given to have their voices counted.

These experiences remind us that to rebel is to say 'enough!' – because you don't want things to go on as they are. Talking points about greater participation, justice or the prospect of a better life hardly count as a plan or alternative to the existing order. This is the norm rather than the exception. To think otherwise is to look at the poetry of revolts through the rear mirror of traditional narratives of emancipation.

What Jacques Derrida described as the promise of justice, democracy and hospitality to come is closer to the frame of mind of rebels. 'To come' doesn't mean that today we have no justice, democracy and so on but that in the

future we will. This would be a passive and thoroughly religious view of the promise, something that oscillates between waiting for Godot and praying for the Messiah to show up. You act to make it come about. This is how Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig and others who dissented from mainstream rabbinical Judaism saw messianicity. They were the *dohakei haketz*, says Michael Löwy, those who do not wait for the Messiah but hasten the end of times by engaging in messianic activism to precipitate the arrival of the Messiah, a name Benjamin used as shorthand for revolution (Löwy 2005: 104). One does not remain clueless about what is coming our way either; rebels are not like expectant parents who prefer not to know the sex of their unborn child. Every epoch dreams the next, says Michelet; it tries to imagine how things will turn out. This dreaming occurs in a polemical setting where people experiment with multiple, contradictory and provisional images of thought that circulate among communities of action that are continually caught in controversies about what is to be done. None of this adds up to a model or a programme, although some might have interpreted it as if it did. Hence the loss of the loss I mentioned above; rebellions never had clear plans of what would come later but we assumed they did. The opening to something to come involves a passage through the experience that we never had what we thought we had lost. Democracy, like justice and hospitality, is always to come in the sense that all these will never cease to arrive (they have no final figure/destination) but already start to occur as we strive to make them happen.

To say that things start to occur *en route* is not wishful thinking, an embracement of voluntarism or a variation on Humpty Dumpty's musings: in everyday politics as in insurgent processes words don't mean what we want them to mean and actions don't happen because we will them to occur. When I say that things start to happen as we work for their realization I am referring to the way in which political performatives work. John Austin's speech act theory defines performatives as utterances that are inseparable from the actions they announce, like 'I swear' or 'I pronounce you husband and wife'. They are ritualized utterances that require specific contexts of validity – a court proceeding in the example of swearing or a civil ceremony in the case of a wedding. What I call political performatives have a family relation with these. They are actions and statements that anticipate something to come as participants begin to experience – as they begin to live – what they are fighting for *while* they fight for it. They do so even if such experience has a precarious life outside communities of action. David Graeber expresses this point well with regard to the tactic of direct action in the Occupy Wall Street movement: 'For those who desire to create a society based on the principle of human freedom, direct action is simply the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free' (Graeber 2011).

This 'as if' of freedom – as much as of equality or justice – is the bread and butter of emancipatory politics. It provides us with a bridge to connect political performatives with what Žižek calls enacted utopia. To quote him:

in the short circuit between the present and the future, we are – as

if by Grace – for a brief period of time allowed to act *as if* the utopian future were ... already at hand, just there to be grabbed. Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations but as the present hardship over which this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow – we *already are free fighting for freedom, we are already happy while fighting for happiness*, no matter how difficult the circumstances. (Žižek 2002: 559, his italics)

It is clear that for him not all utopias are created equal. Conventional ones designate a universal without a symptom, a non-place forever stuck in the limbo of discursive purity, whereas the enacted variant tells us something about the performative layer of emancipatory politics. It anticipates something to come as people start to experience what they aim to become. Žižek toys with acknowledging the performative nature of this utopia in the shift from the hypothetical 'as if' of freedom and happiness to the affirmative 'we are already' free and happy. It is *de facto* rather than *de jure* happiness, although one would have to make the case that happiness can be anything other than *de facto*. None of this calls for a programme to describe the future or a road map to get there.

Jacques Rancière has his own take on the absence of programmes. He poses it as a rhetorical question: 'Do we not need to frame a specific temporality, a temporality of the "existence of the inexistent" in order to give sense to the process of political subjectivization?' His answer is very clear: 'I prefer to reverse

the argument by saying that the framing of a future happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility. Revolutionaries invented a "people" before inventing its future' (Rancière 2011: 13). The framing of the future stands for what I described as plans and programmes. When Rancière downplays their role in emancipatory struggles he is not saying that representations of the future are a mere afterthought. He simply wants to underline that revolutionaries usually deal with them later in the game, in the actual process of addressing a wrong. For him politics begins when there is a subject of enunciation such as 'we the disenfranchised', 'we are the 99%' or, more generically, 'we, the people'. The 'people' is an operator of difference and not a sociological given; it is the name of a pariah, a part that has no part, the uncounted or those that refuse to accept what they are supposed to be, to say or see. They enact names like equality, liberty or dignity that have no place in the existing field of experience but could come into being in another configuration of sensible experience. This is what insurgents do everywhere. Emancipatory politics is about opening up new possibilities and not designing the new order. They are symptoms of our becoming other. Like rabbit-holes of the *Alice in Wonderland* variety, insurgencies are passageways that connect the present with the possibility of something other to come.

Insurgencies as vanishing mediators: Jameson reloaded

These passageways turn emancipatory revolts into vanishing mediators. Fredric

Jameson (1973) coined this expression to describe Max Weber's account of the role of Protestantism in the move from the pre-modern world to contemporary capitalism. A vanishing mediator is 'a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms' (78). Protestantism operated as a catalytic agent by disseminating the rationalization of means required by capitalism to flourish but eventually vanished from the latter's historical scene. This is not because capitalists embraced atheism or people lost their faith in God and stopped going to churches. Capitalism had simply become sufficiently entrenched to succeed without the help of the Protestant ethics. Jacobinism shared the same fate. It functioned, says Jameson, as a 'guardian of revolutionary morality, of bourgeois and universalistic and democratic ideals, a guardianship which may be done away with in Thermidor, when the practical victory of the bourgeoisie is assured and an explicitly monetary and market system can come into being' (78). Whether it is Jacobinism or Protestantism, a vanishing mediator 'serves as a bearer of change and social transformation, only to be forgotten once change has ratified the reality of the institutions' (80).

This concept is helpful for the discussion of insurgencies. Like Jameson's mediators, insurgencies aim to be connectors, passageways between the existing world and something else to come. But I have a couple of reservations. The first one is that Jameson – like Žižek, who refers to vanishing mediators repeatedly in his work – focuses on successful mediators,

those that do their job and then get out of the way. What about failure? Shouldn't we include it in the structure of possibilities of the concept too? If failure isn't contemplated, then every mediator would be successful by default or, alternatively, only success would allow us to identify, retrospectively, the function of mediation of Protestantism, Jacobinism and so on. Jameson says nothing about this, but he doesn't exclude it either. The second concern is about the vanishing of mediators. Do they disappear from the historical scene after the goal is achieved, like Soviet leaders who fell from Stalin's grace and were unceremoniously airbrushed out of the official photographs of the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath? The departed of this example die twice, biologically and historically, yet they linger in memory and have a way of finding their way back into the conversation. The Soviets had a procedure for this. They called it rehabilitation, which should not be confused with contemporary rehab: it was not a retreat from public life to get one's act together but a ceremonial way of bringing the departed back into the public eye. Again, Jameson doesn't elaborate this possibility because for him mediators are doomed to vanish and to be forgotten.

There's room to reload the concept and make it more effective by taking on board the possibility of failure and of an afterlife of mediators. I begin with failure. For this I have to return briefly to speech act theory. We saw that performative utterances are inseparable from the actions they announce. Now we must qualify the effectiveness of such utterances. When they succeed they are

called felicitous and when they miss their mark they become misfires or infelicitous utterances. When applied to insurgencies we have that those that usher in a different order and then vanish are felicitous mediators whereas combats for emancipation that go nowhere in their efforts to modify the field of experience are misfires. The outcome is not governed by necessity. Infelicitous insurgencies are lost causes not because they don't plan their itinerary and destination but because their enemies outsmart them, or because they implode under the weight of internal squabbles, or for many other reasons. Which ones will become narcissistic lost causes and which will have a chance of losing in a dignified manner (or even be felicitous and succeed) depends on the fortunes of contingency.

Let us now examine the force of the 'vanishing' in the concept of vanishing mediators. For Jameson the fate of these mediators is 'to be forgotten once change has ratified the reality of the institutions'. There's no ambiguity in his assertion: here today, gone tomorrow, and ultimately forgotten. This is an excessive claim. Nothing really vanishes without a trace – not the memory of a messy divorce, not the elation of victory, not the experience of missed opportunities. What is gone lingers and leaves telltale footprints all over the reality it helped to bring about. This is true even in the case of misfires, like when people develop a melancholic attachment to a lost object: they can't let go of missed opportunities and muse endlessly about what could have been.

Consider transitions to democracy, especially the theory resulting from the

study of democratization sponsored by the Wilson Center in the 1980s. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) wrote the tentative conclusions. They describe transitions as an interregnum – the interval between two reigns, orders of ruling or regimes, in this case, the authoritarian and democratic ones – and outline the critical path or standard itinerary they will follow. Transitions begin with the emergence of tensions and divisions between hawks and doves in the ruling coalition. This reduces the chances of consensus among rulers, relaxes the enforcement of prohibitions, enables a haphazard toleration of civil liberties that gives some breathing space for dissidents and eventually triggers the resurrection of civil society. Resurrection is the moment of glory of social movements: they lead the struggle for democracy because political parties are disbanded, harassed, in disarray or tolerated selectively as an alibi for the government to claim a semblance of democracy. Transitions end when new democratic rules are in place, political parties are allowed to operate freely and the country holds founding elections. At this point parties reclaim what is rightfully theirs – the running of politics – and social movements, having done what they had to do, leave the stage and return to the social, which is where they belong.

This narrative conceives movements as understudies of political parties, as caretakers of politics only for the duration of the state of exception of transitions. I see things differently. Movements functioned as the vanishing mediators of democracy and then stuck to the political stage instead of going

home after they did their job. This is because they didn't know they were doing someone else's job and had no proprietary habitat despite the qualifier 'social' preceding the noun. They simply did what comes naturally, so to speak, if you want to change a state of affairs – you do something or brace yourself for more of the same, usually extra time with whatever autocrat happens to rule your life. When transitions were over movements didn't leave the stage but became fixtures of politics alongside political parties and helped to configure our current post-liberal scenario. By this I don't mean to say that electoral politics are over and that we have now moved on to other things. I speak of a post-liberal setting because the democratic politics of elections, political parties and the entire paraphernalia of territorial representation coexists with other ways and means of aggregating wills, processing demands and staging opposition. Social movements are one of these ways and means. They are a supplement of representation that expands politics beyond the classical liberal democratic framework.

The continued political presence of movements in the aftermath of transitions is a reminder that mediators are more than midwives of a mode of production, a regime of a new conceptual structure. They don't simply disappear when their work is done; things vanish, but rarely without a trace. Vanishing mediators have a spectral afterlife even if they are not the architects and engineers of whatever will come. The Protestant spirit 'vanished' when the means-end rationality required by capitalism was firmly in place, but the sense of thrift and the saving for a rainy

day persisted as part of the moral education of market agents, at least until hyper-consumption – and by implication, the generalization of debt – became the engine of capitalism.

Similarly, revolts like the ones I have been discussing are passageways that open up possibilities of something other to come, which is why I compared them with the rabbit holes of *Alice in Wonderland*. they are attempts to negotiate passageways between incommensurable worlds, to connect existing and possible ones. To ask that they also provide us with blueprints of a future order is to demand from them something they are not. The traces of these mediators subsist in the aftermath of the insurgent moment. This lingering is not an accident in the otherwise normal functioning of mediators. Like failure, it is part of their structure of possibilities. This is why mediators don't stand in a relationship of pure and simple exteriority with the outcome they facilitate. They contribute to shape the scene they help to bring about and are therefore operators of constituent power.

The provisional status of unplanned insurgencies

The point, I hope, is sufficiently clear: rebellions might turn out to be lost causes but we can't peg their failure to the absence of a script. Failure will be a contingent outcome of their actions and inaction in the strategic relationship into which they enter with their various others regardless of whether they have a plan or not. So even if progressive critics assume the role of a Cartesian evil genie trying to fault rebels for the absence of a

sociopolitical programme, they won't trick them into believing they are nothing as long as they think they are something.

At this point someone might object by saying that even if this were true, by not having a blueprint of the future the events that supercharged 2011 might turn out to be episodic and fade away with the return of the repetitive rituals of politics as usual. The quick and honest answer to this objection is to say, so what? All insurgencies are episodic. Emancipatory politics is not a perpetual present of revolt but something extraordinary – literally: out of the ordinary. Rancière himself describes politics or the practice of equality he calls emancipation as a rare occurrence. Politics for him is 'the tracing of a vanishing difference' that 'occurs as an always provisional accident within the history of forms of domination' (Rancière 2010: 35). The keywords here are 'vanishing', 'provisional' and 'accident'; they underline the distance separating rebels from institutional politics. Walter Benjamin understood this well. For him, people who revolt try to stir things up to pierce the continuum of history. They aim to disrupt the time of domination, which is why he was so taken by the image of French revolutionaries shooting at clocks in different places of Paris: the rebels wanted to mark the interruption of the continuity of history, of the history of the victors. Michael Löwy (2005: 92) updates this Benjaminian trope by reminding us of something that happened in 1992, when many countries were preparing to celebrate 500 years of Columbus' arrival to America on 12 October 1492. Brazil's largest television and communications conglomerate, O Globo, sponsored a clock that kept track

of the time leading to 12 October. The indigenous population had nothing to celebrate and shot arrows at the clock to prevent it from further registering the history of their domination.

The insurgent moment is therefore of the nature of an event: a lot of dreams and organizational efforts go into it but in essence it is something unplanned and difficult to capture within a system of rules because rules are precisely what are being put into question. This is the common trait of recent experiences of rebellion from Egypt to Spain to the various 'Occupy Wall Street' initiatives. They are 'the tracing of a vanishing difference'. But we shouldn't conclude from this that the evanescent nature of insurgencies make them irrelevant. They are not. The occupation of public space gives visibility to a cause that defines itself on the go and functions both as a catalyst for public opinion and an energizer of sympathetic voices. The occupations I mentioned above have been pivotal for the inclusion of inequality, economic injustice, corruption, impunity, and the deficit of participation and accountability in the public conversation. Keep in mind the analogy with McLuhan. For him content is not irrelevant but it is not all that important either: the medium is the message because it sets out to reconfigure the lived environment. Similarly, the insurgencies rather than their proposals are the plan because they aim to modify the boundaries of the given and the narratives through which we make sense of it. Occupations and the general assemblies they trigger are the iconic, visible trait of rebellions that will eventually fizzle or morph into other modes of collective action.

Does this mean that the goal of insurgencies is to become mainstream politics? This would be a mistake. It is true that governing or becoming government may be the outcome of their actions because all rebellions exhibit a diversity of tendencies, including those that call for plans and blueprints of the future. But becoming government cannot be their destination. If it were, we would be forced to speak of a continuum between emancipatory revolts and the administration of a new status quo. This in turn would authorize critics to fault revolts for having no policies at hand. So, whether we take our cue from Rancière or from Jameson reloaded, insurgencies are 'the tracing of a vanishing difference', the vanishing mediators that put the present state of affairs into contact with other possible worlds. Theirs is a structural evanescence, not an accident that may or may not occur.

The spectral remainder of insurgencies: a material afterlife

Let us return now to the aftermath of these movements. I have mentioned repeatedly that the fact of their occurrence is already significant. Many of the revolts of 2011 will fail if we measure success in terms of regime change (assuming we agree on the critical mass or quantum of change required for us to speak of meaningful change). But even if they fail, or vanish as misfires, they will have had a spectral remainder. Immanuel Wallerstein describes the OWS movement as 'the most important political happening in the United States since the uprisings in 1968, whose direct descendant or continuation it is'. For him the impact it has is clear: it will have

succeeded and left a legacy even if it peters out due to exhaustion or repression (2011).

Sometimes the remainder is the exemplary role of insurgencies that capture the imagination of people in distant lands. They become cosmopolitan variants of Kant's index of our moral progress. For him revolutions are the sign of such progress due to the enthusiasm they generate among onlookers, people who are touched by the drama unfolding in the streets and express sympathy for one side or the other. Today this enthusiasm bursts through the cage of territoriality; taking sides manifests itself through solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed outside one's country as well as in the replication of their insurgent spirit by those who witness it from afar. The Arab Spring is one of the exemplars of 2011. 'Tahrir', or freedom in Arabic, functions as a signifier of change that has energized dissenters all over the planet. The epicentre of OWS in New York renamed Zuccotti Park 'Freedom Square', and in Israel one could see hand-written banners with the inscription 'Tahrir Tel Aviv'.

The afterlife of emancipatory struggles also appears in the displacement of the cognitive maps through which we make sense of our being in community. This displacement is as material as the change of rulers, the rewriting of constitutional texts or the crafting of new institutions. I will illustrate this with two examples.

1. The Arab Spring: debunking the myth of the omnipotence of power

The first one takes us to the North of Africa and its surroundings. An entire generation of Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians and Yemenis grew up under the shadow of a single strongman and his cronies. The continual assault to undermine their will to act reinforced what psychologists call 'learned helplessness'. Its mechanisms are familiar. There's the relentless cult of personality presenting the leader as the First Worker, First Sportsman, and First Whatever of the nation. Then there are the many forms of corruption to secure the allegiance or at least the passive compliance of business, commercial, trade union and other organized interest groups. And one cannot forget the terror generated by everyday harassment, arbitrary detention and torture. Terror seeks to instil the paranoia-inducing distrust of others and the belief that resistance is futile because the ever-present eyes and ears of the police and their network of informants will eventually find out what you are up to. Like Etienne de la Boetie's voluntary servitude, learned helplessness prevents people from seeing alternatives. They are as bewildered as the anguished characters in Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel*, who arrive at a dinner party and eventually find themselves inexplicably unable to leave the house of their host even though the doors are wide open and nobody is stopping them. Tyrants seek to replicate this predicament by fostering the paralyzing myth of an impotent population confronting an omnipotent, omnipresent and irreplaceable regime and leader.

Insurgencies show that the spell of power can be undone because the emperor has no clothes. They change people's frames of reference by offering windows of possibility, the rabbit holes I described as passageways to other (this-worldly) worlds. The encounters among strangers in the otherwise unremarkable swath of urban space of Tahrir Square meant more than a mere convergence of bodies in the manner of an arithmetic sum. People felt the exhilaration of making a difference by the mere fact of being together. This is precisely Maurice Blanchot's point about May 1968: the main thing of the *soixante-huitards* was not to seize power but 'to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility – beyond any utilitarian gain – of *being-together*' (Blanchot 1988: 30). The circulation of images of the experience of occupying Tahrir and resisting attacks of government forces precipitated an enhanced connectivity that reverberated much further than the space of Tahrir. The physicality of occupation was supplemented by a virtual being-together of those who wanted to change their world. People in the square and elsewhere in Egypt felt that they could touch the sky with their hands in the fleeting moment of their being-together.

The rhythm and direction of change can be subsequently co-opted and colonized by the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood and other variants of orthodoxy, by the regrouping forces of the governing party or by myriad other political entrepreneurs. But even when this happens, if it does happen, all parties will have realized that Egyptians (like Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians, etc.) have lost much of their awe of power and the powerful and that it won't be so easy to

reinstate an autocracy with a different dressing. One commentator wrote, 'Activists across the Arab world speak of breaking through the barrier of fear so that even the harshest repression no longer deters' (Black 2011). This is an accurate depiction of the Arab Spring, particularly the Syrian uprising, where people have shown admirable courage in the face of the government's unrelenting brutality. Of course, one should not underestimate the role of fear as a disincentive for action. The point, however, is that many protesters take to the streets despite their fear and not because they are fearless. What matters is that the powerful lose their sacral aura. The spectacle of confused tyrants put on trial, gone into hiding or fleeing abroad with the public monies looted during their time in government is a wonderful educational experience. It is like the guillotining of Louis XVI: it taught the French that the body could go on living without its head and that rulers were not demigods. This is the existential pedagogy of emancipatory politics and it is foolish to dismiss it as subjective gibberish. Its lessons are likely to linger long after the effervescence in the streets subsides.

2. The student revolt in Chile

The second example takes us to Chile, a country with the highest cost of education among OECD countries after the United States and a President who has openly stated that education is a consumer good. High school and university students mounted a challenge to the funding policies for schools and privatized higher education. Chileans were generally supportive of their cause,

if only because graduates start their working life with a huge debt and their parents will have to foot the bill if they don't find jobs. Polls indicate that their approval rating was far higher than that of the right wing president, his political coalition and even the left of center opposition. At the high point of the protests in July and August 2011, 77% of the people surveyed had a positive view of the student leaders and nearly 82% expressed support for the movement's demands. In contrast, the approval rating of the president was 26% and his Minister of Education mustered only 19%. The left of center coalition *Concertación por la Democracia* did not fare better: only 17% approved its performance (see *La Tercera* 2011a and 2011b; Centro de Estudios Públicos 2011). Students seemed immune to protest fatigue (nearly 210 in an eight-month period, according to Koschutzke 2012: 19), mounted extensive mobilizations in demand of free public education (400,000 plus people in demonstrations across the country) and occupied schools (over 600) and universities (17 of them) knowing that this could force them to graduate a year later. They were also well versed in guerrilla theatre: kiss-a-thons for free education, a flash mob of zombies (the living dead of a dysfunctional educational system) dancing to the music of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* across from the Presidential palace, and an 1800 hour urban marathon – one hour for each million US dollars required to fund the education of 300,000 students per year.

At the time of writing this article the student insurgency had not succeeded in modifying the educational policies of the government. Neither had they

managed to secure its commitment to change an educational model in which the affluence of the borough – and therefore the strength of its tax base – determines the quality of publicly funded schools. Their activism, however, has disturbed the given in various ways. It opened a discussion about the limits of privatized higher education and made people aware of the life-long consequences of policies that enshrine inequality in the allocation of funds for schools. Most importantly, students have rubbished the idea that education is a consumer good.

Their mobilizations also put into question the country's political table manners, which in the post-Pinochet era construes radical political demands as memories of a long gone past, celebrates consensus and privileges the technical discourse of people with limited goals, professional agendas, and little passion. This is partly due to the way in which institutional discourse processed (or failed to process) the aftermath of the traumatic overthrow of President Salvador Allende in the other 9/11, the one of 1973. The political class tends to refrain from describing Pinochet's rule as barbarian, at least in public. 'Coup' and 'difficult times' suffice, just like 'The Troubles' was the euphemism of choice to describe the war in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. In 2011 the Ministry of Education went as far as to modify primary school textbooks by dropping 'dictatorship' as the qualifier of Pinochet's 17-year rule. It believed that 'military regime' was more tactful (Acuña 2012).

But the repressed manages to return. The adversarial politics spearheaded by students has nudged the country out of

the prolonged state of exception in which it had been living for nearly four decades. One can see this in the acrimonious controversies between students and government officials played out live in the media and in their refusal to back down from confrontations with the political elite. Their relentless criticism of the educational policies of the right wing government did not spare the opposition *Concertación por la Democracia* either. The *Concertación* implemented well-meaning reforms during its four consecutive administrations yet generally stuck to the neoliberal educational model inherited from the Pinochet era. Students refused to whitewash their policies by saying that the *Concertación* had had two decades to come up with an alternative. Criticizing both the government and the *Concertación* was refreshing. It made consensus less of an obsession in the public mind and, at least during the many months of protests of 2011, moved the vector of politics from Congressional committees to the streets. Their neither-nor position allowed them to bypass the usual wrangling between government and opposition. Change will probably come about through the encounter of these different political performances.

The student revolt also undermined the success story that Chileans have been telling themselves for the past three decades: that the country is different – more rational, less unstable and better off – than others because there the market works and macroeconomic indicators are sound. Business-speak cuts across the Chilean political spectrum and is prevalent among all classes, ages and occupations. Its ubiquity is only comparable to that of the

managerial language permeating the audit culture of UK universities, where something that is not subject to assessment is in principle suspicious, firings are called restructurings and Heads of Department line managers. Student protests in Chile highlighted the class divisions embedded in the educational system and its lifelong consequences on social mobility. Their stubborn refusal to back down in their criticism of privilege, exclusion and the perception of education as a consumer good contributed to strip the neoliberal economic model from the immunitarian privilege it had enjoyed. They are one big reason that the mainstream itself has warmed up to the idea that questioning the market as the primary mechanism for allocating resources and rewards is not off the table.

To cut to the chase, the spectral remainder of the student revolt is that it managed to disturb the given by undermining consensus, addressing the spectres of the past and questioning the triumphalism of neoliberal discourse. It has renewed overly ritualized political exchanges and opened up political discourse to ways to deal with the trauma of the coup that overthrew Allende and gave us Pinochet. In the final line of Philip Roth's novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, the psychoanalyst utters the only line of dialogue after nearly 300 pages of Portnoy's soliloquy. He says: 'Now vee may perhaps to begin, yes?' Analogies must be taken with caution, but perhaps Chileans can now lighten up the weight of their ghosts and 'may perhaps to begin, yes?' to pick up their history from where they left it in 1973.

Whether we look at events associated with the Arab Spring or the mobilizations of students in South America and those spearheaded by '#Occupy' movements, they all have great dreams about what will come but no real blueprint of what the future will look like. They are episodic and at some point will be overtaken by old and new politicians embarked in the everyday practice of running the machinery of government. But insurgencies will have a spectral afterlife that is anything but ethereal because it impregnates practices and institutions as much as ways of seeing and doing.

The materiality of this afterlife manifests itself in the cognitive shifts insurgencies generate, the learning experience of life in the streets and of participating in general assemblies to chart their next steps, in the memories of these experiences, in the leaders that could emerge in the process of occupation, in the subsequent campaigns and partnerships they foster and in the policy changes they bring about. Inventiveness is another face of this materiality. Tech-savvy activists came up with the *human microphone*, an anachronistically low-tech solution devised to circumvent the New York Police Department prohibition of amplifiers and hand-held bullhorns. At first sight one could have confused it with a scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, when Brian tells a crowd gathered under his window 'You are all individuals' and they repeat in chorus 'Yes, we are all individuals!' But it wasn't similar at all. The familiar 'Mic check!' could be heard as a speaker took to the podium without a microphone in her hand or lapel. It prepared the general assembly for an unusual way of amplifying sound: people would repeat in chorus what a speaker

said so that those further away could hear too.

As always, concurrent and unborn insurgencies benefit from this inventiveness. Tactics and practices devised by activists become part of a collective political know-how, a political jurisprudence that functions as a toolbox available for anyone to use. It is not always easy to establish the paternity of these tactics and procedures because once they enter into circulation they become recombinant as people retouch and adapt them to their needs. OWS assemblies adapted a hand-based sign language to express agreement, disagreement, a point of order or the blockage of proposals. In Syria, where the government ordered its forces to shoot at protesters, activists came up with *tayar*, an equivalent of flash mobs:

they gathered for 10 minutes and then dispersed before the army or police arrived.

The material afterlife of insurgencies also appears in the cultural artifacts they leave behind – songs, graffiti, manifestos, pamphlets, photos, films, blogs, websites and an assortment of testimonies in the social media. Then there is the foreseeable torrent of conferences, workshops, publications (including this one), interviews, media analyses, assessments by activists and everyday conversations trying to make sense of the experience of these insurgencies long after they pass.

So even in failure, if we measure failure by the absence of a plan for a future society, the insurgencies of 2011 will have had a measure of success.

References

- Acuña, E. (2012), 'En Chile sí hubo dictadura', *El Ciudadano*, 8 January, <http://www.elciudadano.cl/2012/01/08/46777/en-chile-si-hubo-dictadura/>. [Accessed January 2012]
- Beasley Murray, J. (2010), *Post-Hegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Black, I. (2011), 'A year of uprisings and revolutions: uncertainty reigns in the Arab world', *The Guardian*, 13 December, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/dec/13/arab-world-uprisings-2011-future>. [Accessed December 2012]
- Blanchot, M. (1988), *The Unavowable Community*, New York: Station Hill.
- Centro de Estudios Públicos, CEP (2011), 'Estudio Nacional de Opinión Pública, Junio-Julio 2011', http://www.cepchile.cl/dms/lang_1/doc_4844.html. [Accessed November 2011]
- Graber, D. (2011), 'On Playing By The Rules —The Strange Success Of #OccupyWallStreet', *Naked Capitalist*, 19 October, <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/10/david-graeber-on-playing-by-the-rules-%E2%80%93-the-strange-success-of-occupy-wall-street.html>. [Accessed October 2011]

- Jameson, F. (1973), 'The Vanishing Mediator: Narrative Structure in Max Weber', *New German Critique* 1, 52-82.
- Koschutzke, A. (2012), 'Chile frente a sí mismo. Los límites del fundamentalismo de mercado y las protestas estudiantiles', *Nueva Sociedad* 237, January-February, 17-31.
- Krugman, P. (2011), 'Confronting the Malefactors', *New York Times*, 6 October, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/07/opinion/krugman-confronting-the-malefactors.html?src=tp&smid=fb-share>. [Accessed October 2011]
- La Tercera* (2011a), '81.9% de los chilenos simpatizan con demandas de estudiantes' <http://latercera.com/noticia/educacion/2011/07/657-377552-9-819-de-chilenos-simpatiza-con-demandas-de-estudiantes-segun-encuesta.shtml>. [Accessed October 2011]
- La Tercera* (2011b), 'Movilización mantiene alto apoyo', <http://papeldigital.info/ltrep/2011/08/13/01/paginas/013.pdf>. [Accessed November 2011]
- Löwy, M. (2005), *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, London: Verso.
- McLuhan, M. (1994 [1964]), *Understanding Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- O'Donnell, G., and P Schmitter (1986), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rancière, J. (2010 [2001]), 'Ten Theses on Politics', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steve Corcoran, London and New York, 27-44.
- Rancière, J. (2011), 'The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics', in P. Bowman and R. Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière*, London and New York: Continuum, 1-17.
- Wallerstein, I. (2011), 'The Fantastic Success of Occupy Wall Street', <http://www.iwallerstein.com/fantastic-success-occupy-wall-street/>. [Accessed October 2011]
- Žižek, S. (2002), 'A Plea for Leninist Intolerance', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2): 542-66.
- Žižek, S. (2011), 'Shoplifters of the World Unite', *London Review of Books*, 19 August, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>. [Accessed August 2011]

This article was first published in *JOMECE Journal*

JOMECE Journal is an online, open-access and peer reviewed journal dedicated to publishing the highest quality innovative academic work in Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. It is run by an editorial collective based in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, committed both to open-access publication and to maintaining the highest standards of rigour and academic integrity. *JOMECE Journal* is peer reviewed with an international, multi-disciplinary Editorial Board and Advisory Panel. It welcomes work that is located in any one of these disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary work that approaches Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies as overlapping and interlocking fields. It is particularly interested in work that addresses the political and ethical dimensions, stakes, problematics and possibilities of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

To submit a paper or to discuss publication, please contact:

Dr Paul Bowman: BowmanP@cf.ac.uk

www.cf.ac.uk/jomecejournal

Twitter: @JOMECEjournal

ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. Based on a work at www.cf.ac.uk/jomecejournal.

