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FORUM: POWER AND PREFIGURATION

INTRODUCTION

by GHALEB ATTRACHE

The recent global wave of revolt has reinvigorated a crucial (and longstanding) question on the Left: what kind of a politics is to be pursued, here and now, if we are to build a more democratic and egalitarian society? The prevailing narrative suggests that contemporary social movements provide us with a novel answer: a kind of politics that eschews hierarchy, leadership, and perhaps even power altogether. "Prefigurative" and "leaderless," such movements, it is argued, are playing an entirely different game than previous movements, political parties, or labor unions, and thus avoid many of the pitfalls that such challengers ultimately faced.

But is this narrative really representative of the majority of political organizing today, and of the relationship between movements, the state, and power? Are internal dynamics within contemporary movements really all "horizontal," or do different forms of leadership and organization still exist? Is "prefigurative politics" the dominant mode of organizing against contemporary global capitalism, or are other forms of politics still flourishing? This forum is a space for counter-arguments to this prevailing story, including and beyond the recent uprisings.

The four pieces in this forum address prefigurative politics in varied ways: They are theoretical, analytical, and strategic. They cover a range of empirical cases. Their geographic scope extends from the Americas to Europe to the Middle East and North Africa.

In his piece on Occupy Wall Street, Jonathan Smucker employs a Gramscian conception of the political to address not only why it is unfair to characterize Occupy as an exemplar of prefigurative politics, but also how doing so impairs our ability to accurately diagnose, and thus overcome, the movement's shortcomings. Similarly, Cihan Tuğal's assessment of the situation in Egypt takes up the question of leaderlessness and the inability of movements there to capitalize on successive popular mobilizations, in both 2011 and 2013, and fundamentally challenge the existing rule of military, security, judiciary, and business elites. In her essay on Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, Rebecca Tarlau blurs the state-society distinction and explores the necessary question of whether, to what extent, and when it is viable for movements to engage or eschew state institutions. Thomas Hintze's interview with Jón Ólaffson provides an overview and appraisal of the Icelandic case, discussing its form, goals, and trajectory in relation to both the themes of the discourse on prefigurative politics and Iceland's specific political configuration.

Taken together, the contributions seek not only to complicate predominant narratives, but also to shed insights and draw lessons that can aid both scholars and those at the very forefront of collective action.

CAN PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS REPLACE POLITICAL STRATEGY?

by
JONATHAN MATTHEW SMUCKER

WHAT IS POLITICS?

In this essay, I examine so-called "prefigurative politics" as it played out in Occupy Wall Street (OWS)—through Gramscian and Habermasian theoretical lenses. My analysis is informed by my experiences as an active participant in the movement.

Before delving into the question of whether the concept of *prefigurative politics* is genuinely descriptive of OWS—let alone of the broader wave of global uprisings—let us first clarify what we even mean by *politics*. The words *politics* and *political* are often thrown around casually and without precision. What does it mean for something to be political or, for that matter, apolitical? For Antonio Gramsci, whether a certain tendency is political or not ultimately comes down to its engagement with extant power relations and structures. When Gramsci calls certain tendencies *apoliticism*,[1] his argument is not that these tendencies are not informed by or in reaction to political events or structural relationships, or that their adherents have no political opinions. He is asserting, rather, that the actions of some ostensibly political groups are not genuinely intended as political *interventions*, i.e., strategic attempts to shift relationships of power as well as the outcomes of those relationships. Here we see an important distinction: between actions (or opinions) that are informed by or in reaction to a political situation, on the one hand, and actions that are designed to be political *interventions* to reshape the world, on the other. The expression of one's values or opinions, while informed by political realities, will not automatically amount to political intervention—even if expressed loudly and dramatically.

To be *political*, then, is not merely to hold or to express political opinions about issues, either as individuals or in groups. Rather, to be political, requires engagement with the terrain of power, with an orientation towards the broader society and its structures. With such a political understanding, Gramsci saw the essential task of aspiring political challengers was "the formation of a national-popular collective will, of which the modern Prince is at one and the same time the organiser and the active, operative expression."[2] With the term "modern Prince" Gramsci was referring to a revolutionary party that must operate as both the unifying *symbol* and the *agent* of an articulated collective will, i.e., an emerging alternative hegemony that brings disparate groups into alignment.

How does Occupy Wall Street measure up to Gramsci's political vision? OWS did not have a revolutionary party, in the sense that Gramsci elaborated. Indeed, Occupy shared many features with the anarchist movement that Gramsci

criticized.[3] Yet, despite this anarchism—with all of its ambivalence and hostility towards the notion of building and wielding power, leadership, and organization—OWS did, in its first few months of existence, step partially into this dual role of "operative expression" and "organiser" of a newly articulated "national-popular collective will." Indeed, OWS's initial success in the realm of contesting popular meanings was remarkable. Practically overnight the nascent movement broke into the national news cycle and articulated a popular, albeit ambiguous, critique of economic inequality and a political system rigged to serve "the one percent."

Moreover, OWS managed momentarily to align remnants of a long-fragmented political Left in the United States, while simultaneously striking a resonant chord with far broader audiences. Its next logical political step, had it followed a Gramscian political "roadmap," would have been to build and consolidate its organizational capacity by (1) constructing a capable and disciplined organizational apparatus, and (2) activating the above-mentioned latent and fragmented organizations and social bases into an alternative hegemonic alignment capable of shifting political outcomes (i.e., winning).

Occupy, however, was deeply ambivalent about even attempting such operations. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that a tendency within OWS *did* make such attempts, and even enjoyed notable successes, however localized or limited these may have been. Broadly speaking, and certainly oversimplifying for the sake of clarity, there were two main overarching tendencies within the core of OWS. One tendency leaned toward *strategic politics* and the other toward *prefigurative politics*.[4] To follow a Gramscian roadmap, the former tendency would have had to build a mandate within the movement for strategic political intervention, to a greater extent than it did. As for the prefigurative politics tendency, Gramsci would likely not have considered much of its "politics" to be politics *at all*. This latter tendency viewed decision-making processes and the physical occupation of public space as manifestations of a better future *now* (i.e., prefiguration), rather than as tactics within a larger strategy of political contestation. The prefigurative politics tendency confused process, tactics, and self-expression with political content and was often ambivalent about strategic questions, like whether Wall Street was the named target or most anything else in its place.[5] It celebrated "'the act for the act's sake', struggle for the sake of struggle, etc."[6]; Gramsci may well have called it "apoliticism."

Among other related phenomena that Gramsci criticized, Occupy's prefigurative politics tendency resembled his descriptions of *voluntarism, marginalism*, and especially *utopianism*. "The attribute 'utopian' does not apply to political will in general," he argued, "but to specific wills which are incapable of relating means to end, and hence are not even wills, but idle whims, dreams, longings, etc."[7] Gramsci's elaboration of utopianism goes further than the popular notion of rosy-eyed visions of how the world could one day be. He dismisses utopianists not for the content of their vision of the future, but for their lack of a plan for how to move from Point A to Point B, from present reality to realized vision. In other words, dreaming about how the world might possibly someday be is not the same as political struggle—even when the dreams are punctuated with dramatic "prefigurative" public spectacles.

LIFEWORLD

I want to suggest that in the "prefigurative politics" on display at Zuccotti Park, Gramsci's negative concept of utopianism interacted with Jürgen Habermas' theory of the *lifeworld*—specifically the latter theorist's discussion of subcultural tendencies oriented towards the revitalization of the lifeworld. Again, *prefigurative politics* purports to be about modeling or prefiguring visions of utopian futures here and now. Indeed, such prefigurative spectacles did seem to create a palpable *feeling* of utopianism at Zuccotti Park. *Utopianism as a feeling* is hardly about the future; rather, it is felt here and now. During my time as an active participant and organizer at Zuccotti Park, I began to wonder if the heightened sense of an integrated identity was "the utopia" that many of my fellow participants were seeking. What if the thing we were missing, the thing we were lacking—the thing we longed for most—was a sense of an integrated existence in a cohesive community, i.e., an *intact lifeworld?* What if this longing was so potent that it could eclipse the drive to affect larger political outcomes?

Habermas argues that under a system of advanced capitalism and bureaucracy, both bureaucratic and capitalist logics have penetrated and colonized the *lifeworld*, encroaching upon, and even annihilating, the realm of traditional and organic social practice and organization. In such contexts, social movements have dramatically shifted in their political contents, forms, demographics, and the motivations of their participants. Social movement participants in advanced capitalist nations may be more likely to emphasize fine distinctions between their own groups and the broader society than they are to look for commonalities. That is, they are more likely to *marginally differentiate* themselves and their groups as a means of finding and deepening a sense of solidarity and belonging that they feel themselves lacking. Habermas writes:

> *For this reason, ascriptive characteristics such as gender, age, skin color, neighborhood or locality, and religious affiliation serve to build up and separate off communities, to establish subculturally protected communities supportive of the search for personal and collective identity. The revaluation of the particular, the natural, the provincial, of social spaces that are small enough to be familiar, of decentralized forms…all this is meant to foster the revitalization of possibilities for expression and communication that have been buried alive.*[8]

My point here is not to diminish the importance of a group's internal life and the sense of community, meaning, and belonging experienced by participants. I would even posit that such spaces are indispensible to social movements' ability to deepen political analysis and foster the level of solidarity and commitment that oppositional struggle requires. The problem here is a matter of imbalance: when a group's internal life becomes a more important motivator than *what the group accomplishes* as a vehicle for change. To the extent that a group becomes self-content—encapsulated in the project of constructing its particularized lifeworld—what motivation will participants have to strategically engage broader society and political structures? Why would group members want to claim and contest

popular meanings and symbols if the group's individuated lifeworld can be further cultivated by an explicit rejection of such contests? If participants are motivated by hope of psychic completion—by community and a strong sense of belonging—and such motivation is insufficiently grounded in instrumental political goals, their energies will likely go into deepening group identity over bolstering the group's external political achievements. The problem is that the group's particularized lifeworld can be strengthened without it ever having to actually *win* anything in the real world. Indeed, this may help to explain why some ostensibly political groups have been able to maintain a committed core of participants for decades without ever achieving a single measurable political goal.

What if the thing we were missing, the thing we were lacking—the thing we longed for most—was a sense of an integrated existence in a cohesive community... an intact lifeworld?

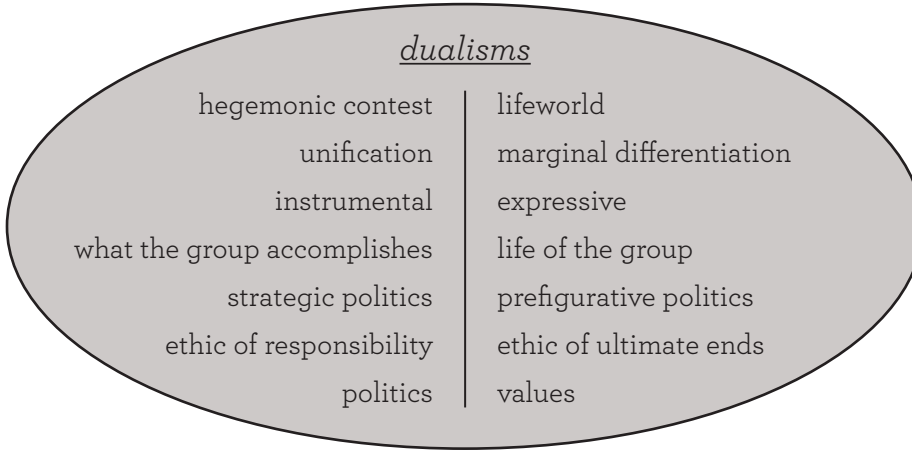
In short, the various forms of apoliticism described by Gramsci are encouraged by the extraordinary motivational shift described by Habermas. The latter theorist discusses two factors that combine to encourage this motivational shift: (1) the drive to construct a refuge from the pervasive logics of capitalism and bureaucracy, i.e., an intact *lifeworld*, and (2) the backdrop of an expanded middle class whose members can take for granted a certain level of material sustenance and comfort, so that individuals are freed up to expand their political concerns beyond basic material needs, thereby diminishing the imperative to articulate common class interests or build effective vehicles for their advancement. In Habermas' words, "The lifeworld, more or less relieved of tasks of material reproduction, can in turn become more differentiated in its symbolic structures and can set free the inner logic of development of cultural modernity."[9]

Political scientist Ronald Inglehart makes a similar argument, based partly on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Once our basic survival and material needs are provided for, we can then focus our attention on social networks and individual self-expression. Projecting this schema onto generational shifts, Inglehart posits an explanation for why dramatic outbursts of a remarkably new style of collective action hit every highly industrialized society in the world simultaneously in the late 1960s.[10] This argument dovetails with a prescient framework put forward by David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* over a decade before the social upheaval and social movements of the 1960s. Riesman argued that a new "other-directed" character structure, arising from a backdrop of material abundance, was becoming predominant in the United States. Young people who were socially molded into this character structure—in contrast to their *inner-directed* parents—were more concerned with *the life of the group* than with *what the group produces*.[11] It is not hard to see how such shifts could encourage "apoliticism," as it has been defined in this discussion: action "for the act's sake" that is effectively disinterested in political instrumentality, strategic calculus, and broader outcomes.

TWO TENDENCIES

As OWS launched, its *prefigurative politics* tendency was the most visible, as it celebrated the utopian microcosm it created in Zuccotti Park, and fixated on its own decision-making process. There was, however, another strong tendency, though often less visible, that bore a greater resemblance to a Gramscian approach to political struggle. This *strategic politics* tendency was simultaneously succeeding in injecting strategic political messages (most notably, "We are the 99%!") and aligning hitherto fragmented political actors—such as labor unions, community groups, and national organizations—behind the scenes. In the beginning of OWS, prefigurative politics and strategic politics co-existed uneasily; many core Occupy participants engaged in both kinds of tasks or oscillated between the two tendencies. Within three months, however, core members factionalized, and the tendencies became much clearer—i.e., closer to *ideal types*. Admittedly, Occupy was comprised of an impressive number of moving parts, so it is a gross simplification to try to categorize such variegated components into two overarching tendencies. Nonetheless, it is my assessment that these two tendencies each had enough coherence and adherents to be reasonably treated as *things* (even if their parameters blurred).

FIGURE 1: dualisms



I introduce the dualisms in ***Figure 1*** in order to shed light on underlying logics of these two tendencies in OWS. The dualisms overlay each other, but are not identical. Starting at the top, I juxtapose Gramsci's conception of a *hegemonic contest*—a strategic intervention into the realm of politics (with the aim of prevailing)—with Habermas' elaboration of the *lifeworld,* which, in advanced capitalist nations, can function as a kind of sacred refuge from political-instrumental logics. The second dualism relates to the first: *unification*, a necessary operation and orientation within a hegemonic contest, is juxtaposed with the tendency toward *marginal differentiation*—i.e., emphasis on distinguishing particulars, which Habermas

argues becomes more prevalent as the middle class expands in post-scarcity societies. Following this is *instrumental/expressive*, a dualism often discussed by social movement scholars.[12] The term *expressive* misses something important, however, insofar as it can imply *self*-expression and individualistic motivation. Seeing this motivation as profoundly group-oriented, I prefer the next dualism, *what the group accomplishes / life of the group.*[13] Moving down, I situate so-called *prefigurative politics* on the right side of the dualisms, to suggest that the concept is highly related to the dualism halves above it—*lifeworld, marginal differentiation, expressive* motivations, and the *life of the group*—and is highly ambivalent or even hostile towards the opposite halves. This dualism corresponds with the next one down: Max Weber's juxtaposition of an *ethic of responsibility* versus *an ethic of ultimate ends*[14]*; strategic politics* stems from the former, and *prefigurative politics* from the latter. The final dualism, *politics/values*, contains the two distinct levels of analysis that I argue are indispensible in apprehending collective political action; this dualism roughly encapsulates all of the above dualisms.

FIGURE 2: subjective layers of action

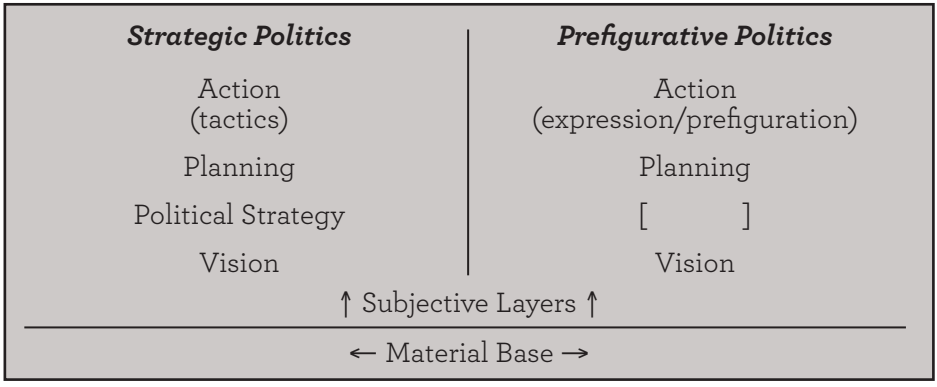


Figure 2 depicts subjective layers that precede collective action, under two models, as ideal types: *strategic politics* and *prefigurative politics*. Both models of political subjectivity are constructed upon, and shaped by the details of, a material base. The ***strategic politics*** model starts with a *vision* of the world that the collective actor desires: the ultimate goals it hopes to attain. On top of this ground is the layer of *political strategy,* where the actor assesses what parts of its vision might be achievable when—and how. This is where the actor assesses the terrain in which it must operate: its opponents, allies, potential allies, targets, resources, constraints, opportunities, etc. Informed by this layer, the actor engages in *planning* for its actions. Its *actions* (the top layer) then can be seen as *tactics* designed to move forward an underlying political strategy, which is designed to move the actor closer to realizing its vision (or to achieve measurable pieces thereof). The ***prefigurative politics*** model likewise starts with the layer of *vision*

(also atop a material base), but it skips over—and glosses over—the layer of *political strategy*. Instead it plans actions to directly manifest the essence of its vision. As such, its *actions* are not *tactics*—insofar as tactics are steps to move forward a strategy—but are rather direct *expressions* or *prefigurations* of the actor's vision. *Means* and *ends* are one and the same in this model.

In *Figure 2,* the two models can easily be confused. On the one hand, the *strategic politics* model incorporates *prefigurative elements* into its design; its tactics also reference and "prefigure" the actor's vision, as part of a strategic communication operation aimed at mobilization. But these operations are subordinate to political considerations. The famous lunch counter sit-ins in the US South during the civil rights movement are an excellent example of this kind of prefiguration of the actor's vision for the world—as a key communications component within a larger political strategy. On the other hand, the prefigurative politics model often uses buzzwords like "strategy" and "organizing" without ever defining them; misappropriating a political vocabulary, while mistakenly assuming that any plan of action automatically implies the existence of a strategy. In this case, the implicit "strategy" was to inspire more and more people to spontaneously join the prefigurative action, led by the hope that the revolution would come and the system would eventually collapse, by way of spontaneous mass defection.[15] As more and more people occupied more places, the Occupy movement would keep expanding. Such notions amounted to little more than wishful thinking.

That *prefigurative elements* can (and often should) be included within a *strategic politics model* is an important point. With Occupy, my aim is not to dismiss the value of the movement's prefigurative elements, such as the People's Kitchen', the People's Library, 'mic checks', and so on. Indeed, I found many of these elements deeply inspiring; I took part in them and I celebrate them. My argument is against a theory of change that is comprised of *only* these elements, without attention to whether they fit into a larger political strategy. I am neither against manifesting our visions and values in our internal organizing processes, nor against staging actions that put these visions and values on public display; my critique, rather, is of the notion that such practices can somehow substitute for strategic engagement at the level of political power. Insofar as prefigurative elements *supplement* a strategic politics, I am all for it; however, in its contemporary usage, I interpret the phrase "prefigurative politics" as a claim to *replace* strategic politics (as defined here) altogether.[16]

Thus, both sides of the dualisms shown in *Figure 1* can be contained within the *strategic politics* ideal type shown in *Figure 2*, but the same is not true of the *prefigurative politics* ideal type. The former *qua ideal type* has to achieve an optimal balance between *instrumentality* and *expressiveness*—when manifested as a working *model*, it *strives* for this balance—while the latter ideal type does not have to even recognize the legitimacy of the need for such balance. Following the logic of the dimension of *values expression* in which it has emerged, *prefigurative politics* is equipped to only see the dimension of politics negatively; the *whole dimension* is labeled and shrunk down to a single negative point of reference within a particularly narrated values dimension (i.e., *lifeworld*). From this vantage point, anything that is associated with power, authority, or politics proper, is considered to be a part of or imitative of a monolithic system, and must be

opposed on principle.

This is all to say that I am not convinced by the prevailing narrative about OWS having "no leaders" and amounting to a new kind of "prefigurative politics." My argument is not only that such an approach is politically unviable. I am also suggesting that it did not actually happen, except as mythology and public performance.[17] It is clearly *part* of the story, but it could not have existed without the existence of a more politically instrumental tendency. Moreover, what I have been building up to is a conceptual framework in which to situate so-called prefigurative politics: squarely within the *life of the group*, and in contrast to the *strategic politics* that groups engage in to achieve ends beyond their own existence. I do not accept prefigurative politics' account of itself. In many instances, I do not even accept that it is politics at all.

If prefigurative politics has its basis in attempts to construct a particular *lifeworld*—i.e., in expressing values and affirming the *life of the group*—*and* it eschews engagement and contestation in the larger common realm of power and politics, then we might ultimately view it as a project of *private* liberation. A private endeavor need not view itself as such in order for it to be functionally so; if the benefits of its efforts are limited to its own participants, it is functionally private. To be clear, my intention here is not to diminish the value or meaningfulness of these internal benefits to group participants, but, rather, to argue for balancing this with a broader political orientation. All of this points to the need—perhaps greater than ever before in history—to intentionally ground our projects of liberation in concrete political goals and accompanying political strategies. We have to acknowledge and be strategic about "what's in it for us," in terms of our sense of identity, community, and wholeness (i.e., the life of the group). We have to navigate and find a balance between the *expressive* and the *instrumental* aspects of collective action; between within-group *bonding* and beyond-group *bridging*; between the *life of the group* and *what the group accomplishes* aside from its own existence. Because, frankly, we (i.e., social movement participants in advanced capitalist nations) have material circumstances and a disposition that incline us towards self-involvement to the point of insularity.

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[1] Gramsci, Antonio. 1991. *Prison Notebooks*. Pp. 147. Ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press.
[2] ibid. Pp. 133
[3] ibid. Pp. 149
[4] Wini Breines introduces this juxtaposition of *strategic politics* and *prefigurative politics* in her scholarship on the New Left. (1982. *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal*. New York: Praeger.)
[5] Indeed, consider the bizarre attempt to occupy land owned by Trinity Church on December 17, 2011, in what may have been the most epic single moment of Occupy's unraveling.
[6] Gramsci, Antonio. 1991. *Prison Notebooks*. Pp. 147. Ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg. New York: Columbia University Press.
[7] ibid. Pp. 175
[8] Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume II*. Pp. 395. Boston: Beacon Press.
[9] ibid. Pp. 385
[10] Inglehart, Ronald. 1977. *The Silent Revolution*. Vol. 8. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[11] Riesman, David. 1950. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
[12] Polletta, Francesca, and James M. Jasper. 2001. "Collective Identity and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:283-305.
[13] Riesman, David. 1950. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
[14] Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Pp. 120-128. Eds. New York: Oxford University Press
[15] Richard J. F. Day sees such defection unfolding over a longer period of time; a process that he sympathetically describes as "the exodus from the neoliberal order." (2005. *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. Pp. 215. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.)
[16] Perhaps some advocates conceptualize *prefigurative politics* in a less totalizing way than I have defined it here; my critique may not apply to their conceptions. Yet, this is not my own novel interpretation of the phrase; many of prefigurative politics' most vocal and theoretically developed contemporary proponents would not disagree with my claim that it aims to *replace* strategic politics (especially if the latter is defined in terms of *hegemonic contestation*).
[17] Smucker, Jonathan M. 2013. "OCCUPY: A Name Fixed to a Flashpoint." *The Sociological Quarterly* 54(2):219–225.

END OF THE LEADERLESS REVOLUTION

by CIHAN TUĞAL

In June 2013, millions of Egyptians mobilized against a clumsy autocrat, the elected dictator Morsi. The rallying cry was "a second revolution," referring back to the toppling of Mubarak as the first one. However, the revolution—neither the first, nor the second—ever arrived. And it is dubious that a revolution can ever take place in the absence of a leadership. In fact, the leaderless revolution bore its bitter fruits as soon as July.[1]

The June mobilization ultimately led to a military-judiciary seizure of power, with the support of centrist politicians and clerics. Call this what you like: coup d'état, elegant coup, or people's power (these were the labels in circulation in the second half of 2013). None of these labels change the nature of the intervention[2] and its aftermath: popularly supported military rule, by more or less the same military-police-judicial-business elements who were in power during Mubarak's reign and who had struck a (shaky and incomplete) coalition deal with Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

The Tunisian and Egyptian revolts of recent years sparked the imagination of many activists around the globe as "leaderless revolutions." Yet, the strange amalgam of revolution, restoration, coup, democratization, and authoritarianism that persisted throughout the Egyptian process hints that different lessons need to be drawn from the Egyptian situation.

FROM A PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN TO THE REASSERTION OF ELITE RULE

Tamarod, an unprecedented people's campaign, collected millions of signatures and called for the downfall of president Morsi. Huge crowds gathered all around Egypt on June 30, 2013 in order to enforce the campaign's call. Millions of people took to the streets, making this presumably the biggest rebellion in Egyptian history.

Ironically, the main sentiment among the protesters was pro-military. There were even groups that openly called for a military intervention.[3] Among the protesters were not only pro-Mubarak civilians, but also thugs and Mubarak era security personnel who came to the square in their uniforms. Actually, during the month of June, it had become increasingly clear that the military intended to use the rebellion as an opportunity to intervene and moreover some politicians, who had previously made fierce statements against military rule, now welcomed the possibility in roundabout ways.

There were also other hegemonic forces bent on capitalizing on the protests and reinforcing their domination. For instance, Gulf intellectuals rejoiced in the troubles of the Brotherhood. They wanted a real Erdoğan as Egypt's leader, not a "Taiwanese" version: they embraced the Turkish conservative leader as

an alleged model of development and democracy, while mocking the Egyptian conservative autocrat as a bad imitation (of the original, and back then US-endorsed, commodity).[4] They chose to ignore that their criticisms of Morsi (power-grabbing, ultra-centralization, authoritarianism, etc.) applied equally to their favorite Muslim leader. Regional hegemons thus suggested that the only way out of the Egyptian crisis could be another established path—rather than a truly revolutionary one.

There were calls for a general strike during the protests of June 30, alongside the louder calls for military involvement. In fact, the national situation that set the scene for Tamarod had a class dimension, though this was not articulated firmly as a part of its platform.[5] Moreover, some groups in Tahrir such as April 6, Strong Egypt Party, and Revolutionary Socialists openly protested against the military, not just the Brotherhood.[6]

None of this, however, culminated in a roadmap that delineated the way out of the Brotherhood-military coalition (leaving the military and its new allies as the only actors capable of dictating the famous roadmap).

The uprising's immediate result was the resignation of six ministers.[7] Had a revolutionary political will crystallized in Egypt during the last two and a half years, it could have capitalized on this opening and declared an early victory; that is, it would have intervened before the Kornilovs of Egypt transformed it into their own victory.

When the military intervened, the few anti-coup speeches and slogans were drowned by the overall pro-military atmosphere in Tahrir. The unfounded optimism that anti-militarist forces would remain in the square until the military left[8] did not change the main dynamics. Nobody mobilized Tahrir to fight their erstwhile torturers. Millions came back only in order to prevent the square from the Brotherhood.

Ultimately, July 2013 witnessed not only the removal of an unpopular president, but the making of a full-fledged dictatorial regime: A hasty crackdown rounded up hundreds of MB and non-MB Islamists. Many television channels were closed down. And most important of all, the military appointed an old regime judiciary figure to replace the president. The massacres that followed were the necessary ingredients that accompanied any military takeover.

MISINTERPRETATIONS

Most of the initial responses to the military intervention missed the crucial point: Under the Brotherhood-military coalition, Egypt was quickly moving from popularly supported authoritarian rule to popularly supported totalitarian rule. Tahrir activists had the radicalism and the will to slow down this transformation, but did not have the tools to stop it without the military's pernicious "aid." Procedure-focused liberal critics of the military intervention completely ignored that under certain conditions, an elected president can help build a totalitarian regime that will render all future elections simple plebiscites. The street needed to act to defend the Egyptian revolution and perhaps even to recall the president. Liberal accounts, with their pronounced fear of the mob,[9] ruled out not only such risky moves, but all other forms of participatory democracy.

Just as dangerous were the (perhaps well-intentioned) accounts that listed the abuses of the Brotherhood-military regime, but stopped short of discussing the calamities a non-Brotherhood military regime could produce. Those who called the military coup a "second revolution" quickly pointed out all the autocratic moves of the Muslim Brotherhood regime.[10] But they did not explain in what sense the regime that would replace it had the potential of becoming a democracy. (A broader circle of pro-Tamarod intellectuals focused on the illegitimate moves of the toppled president, without going into whether and how these legitimized the moves of the military and judiciary after he was deposed.)[11]

The assertion, frequently seen in both English and Arabic,[12] that "all the factors that render January 25 a revolution also legitimize calling June 30 the second revolution" ignored one blatant fact (along many others): 2013 was not 2011. Over the course of two years, the social and political possibilities dramatically shifted. During these two years, the priority could have been organizing popular power, alternative institutions, and revolutionary leadership in order to prevent (or at least slow down) the increasing authoritarianism of elected powerholders, rather than toppling them to open the way for the old enemies of the revolution.

In July 2013, some commentators still insisted that neither the military nor the National Salvation Front (the coalition of anti-Brotherhood centrist politicians) represented the masses in Tahrir, whose real demand was democracy and early elections. This disclaimer on behalf of the apparently pro-military millions does not alter one of the rules of thumb of politics: Those who cannot represent themselves will be represented.

THE FRUITS OF THE IDEOLOGY-LESS "REVOLUTION"

This old statement regarding the French peasantry warns us against the idealization of non-organized masses, a romanticization now in high fashion. Multiple anti-représentation theses from rival ideological corners (anarchist, liberal, autonomist, postmodernist, etc.) all boil down to the following assumption: when there is no meta-discourse and no leadership, plurality will win. This might be true in the short-run. Indeed, in the case of Egypt, the anonymity of Tamarod's spokespersons initially helped:[13] the spokespersons (who are not leaders, it is held) could not be vilified, demonized as partisan populists. Moreover, thanks to uniting people only through its negative identity (being anti-Brotherhood), as well as to its innovative tactics, Tamarod mobilized people of all kinds. Still, the mobilized people fell prey to the only existing option: the old regime!

When the revolutionaries do not produce ideology, demands, and leaders, this does not mean that the revolt will have no ideology, demands, and leaders. In fact, Tamarod's spontaneous ideology turned out to be militarist nationalism, its demand a postmodern coup, its leader the feloul (remnants of the old regime). This is the danger that awaits any allegedly leaderless[14] revolt: appropriation by the main institutional alternatives of the institutions they are fighting against.

It is time to globalize the lessons from the global wave of 2009-2013. Let's start with the U.S. and Egypt. What we learn from this case is that when movements don't have (or claim not to have) ideologies, agendas, demands, and leaders, they can go in two directions: they can dissipate (as did the American Occupy), or

serve the agendas of others.

We are living in interesting times. Unlike the depressing three decades that stretched from 1980 to 2010, "the people want the system to fall," as the Arab slogan goes. And the system is very likely to fall, not just in Egypt but in many other places throughout the world. If we keep in mind how reactionary and reform-averse the current leaders and elites—all the way from the White House to the colonies—are: they simply do not want, or are incapable of imagining, New Deal-type frameworks, which could in fact absorb the revolt.

Yet, it is not sufficient for the system to fall. What will replace it? We have been avoiding an answer—for meta-narratives are allegedly dead; well, all meta-narratives but liberalism. We now have to wake up and realize that if we do not develop solid alternatives (and organizations and institutions that will implement them), the downfall of the system will not mean the making of a better world.

LEADERFUL REVOLUTIONS

What happened since July 2013? The Egyptian military perpetrated its pro-American and pro-Israel foreign policy, its time-tested authoritarianism, and (albeit more timidly) Mubarak and Morsi's neoliberalism. Many sectors of the left already expect nothing from the military; they need no conversion on this issue. But just like the Muslim Brotherhood quickly alienated millions of people in one year of rule, the "new" military regime (which has refurbished itself through appropriating a revolutionary uprising) is already showing its real face to those who have supported the coup with naïvely democratic expectations. The democratically backed authoritarian "new" regime the military has been constructing could very well pave the road for a third revolutionary uprising. The Left (including not only socialists, anarchists, communists and feminists, but also the left-liberals and left-wing Islamists) needs to use the intervening time to organize the inescapable dissatisfaction with military rule. It has to construct solid alternatives to military democracy and conservative-totalitarian democracy. Based on its experiences throughout the last three years, it should build the leadership, the institutions, and organs of popular power that can implement its alternative vision. In short, this time around, the Left needs to be ready.

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The end of the leaderless revolution does not mean the end of the Egyptian revolutionary process. But it spells the end of the fallacy that "people's power" can result from a scene without an agenda, an alternative platform, an ideology, and leaders. The leaderless revolution has turned out to be the wrong substitute for the status quo and revolutions that end up in a cult of the leader. Centralized leadership, we know, robs people of their power. Yet leaderless revolt quickly dissipates or loses its direction; disorganization runs rampant and is even reproduced by activists through a cult of leaderlessness. What we need is leaderful rather than leaderless revolutions.

Activists need to build flexible and democratic leadership structures. A new form of leadership for a sustainable post-neoliberal transformation will require an ability to learn from the grassroots, a willingness to interact with popular energy, institutionalized checks and balances, and constant immersion in alternative

institutions and co-education. The global revolutionary wave of 1905 had put its stamp on history through the consolidation of a new organizational form—the centralized revolutionary party—which is now "history" with its successes, failures, and sins (which provide treasures to learn from, rather than a model to adapt or reject). We may look back at the global wave of uprising that kicked off circa 2009 as helping to bring about a new (more democratic, yet still efficient) form of revolutionary organization. The nuclei of such a new form might already be under construction. Efforts to build—or uncover and further develop—the 21st Century model of leadership will nourish the revolution much more profoundly than romantic illusions about leaderlessness.

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[1] A version of this article first appeared at Counterpunch.org
[2] For an early and lucid diagnosis, see Amru al-Shalaqani, "An al-Khalfiyyat al-Shaabiyya li al-Inqilab al-Asqariyya," http://www.shorouknews.com, July 6, 2013.
[3] "Army is the only answer, say MOD protesters," www.madamasr.com, Sunday, June 30, 2013.
[4] "Morsi: Erdoghan Muqallid," al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 2, 2013.
[5] The first half of 2013 had witnessed countless strikes and now worker-led, now multi-class civil disobedience. The reasons why this activity could not be transformed into a political platform will be analyzed elsewhere, though this too was partially related to the lack of nationwide leadership.
[6] "Anti-military revolutionaries take part in protests," http://www.madamasr.com, July 2, 2013.
[7] "Mohamed Morsi clings to office in Egypt," http://www.theguardian.com, July 2, 2013.
[8] Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Three Days of History: Making It and Waiting For It," http://www.jadaliyya.com, July 3, 2013.
[9] Noah Feldman, "Democracy Loses in Egypt and Beyond," http://www.bloombergview.com, July 3, 2013.
[10] Hani Shukrallah, "Egypt's second revolution: Questions of legitimacy," http://english.ahram.org.eg, Jul 4, 2013.
[11] Khaled Fahmi, "al-Shariyya wa al-Thawra," http://www.shorouknews.com/, Jul 5, 2013.
[12] Ahmad al-Sawi, "Thawratan aw Inqilaban," http://www.shorouknews.com, Jul 5, 2013.
[13] Adel Iskandar, "Tamarod: Egypt's Revolution Hones its Skills," http://www.jadaliyya.com, June 30, 2013.
[14] It is questionable that the Egyptian revolts of 2011-2013 were really leaderless. E.g. see the discussion in Cihan Tugal, "Egypt's Emergent Passive Revolution," http://www.jadaliyya.com, June 20, 2012.

THIRTY YEARS OF LANDLESS WORKERS DEMANDING STATE POWER

by REBECCA TARLAU

In February of 2014, fifteen thousand peasant-activists from across Brazil came together for the Sixth National Congress of the Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST). The MST is one of the largest agrarian reform movements in Latin America. Over the past 30 years, through occupations of privately and publically owned landed estates, the MST has succeeded in forcing the government to redistribute land rights to approximately 150,000 previously landless families.[1] Currently, tens of thousands of families are still occupying land across the country, waiting for their claim to this land to be officially sanctioned.

Beyond visioning and strategizing, one of the main objectives of the MST's Sixth National Congress was to show the movement's force and strength to the Brazilian government. This objective became clearest on the third day of the congress, when 15,000 conference attendees marched several miles to the presidential palace. At the palace, a group of MST activists tried to push past a police barricade and enter the building, and were only stopped from doing so by tear gas and clubs. Another group of activists tried to set up a memorial of crosses for all of the landless peasants who have died in the struggle for agrarian reform. The police also prevented these actions, angering several activists who reacted by throwing the crosses at the police. This led to an escalation in police force, with more tear gas shot into the crowd and people breaking out running and screaming. A group of MST leaders tried to de-escalate the situation by leading everyone away from the police line and the presidential palace. Immediately following this confrontation, President Dilma Rousseff of the left-leaning Workers' Party (PT) agreed to meet with several MST leaders about their demands.

MOVING BEYOND THE "AUTONOMY VERSUS COOPTATION" DEBATE

What is the significance of these confrontations between MST activists and the PT government, given the MST's close relationship to this political party over the past thirty years? Are these protests and confrontations solely public performances? What are the implications of the MST's relationship to the government, given the government's current support for large agribusiness?

These questions about power and politics are of utmost importance. A common narrative about social movements is that once activists engage the state and attempt to take state power, they become co-opted and move into a period of demobilization and decline. This idea can be traced back to Michels'[2] iron rule of oligarchy, and his argument that political parties become more bureaucratic

and hierarchical over time, thus suppressing grassroots mobilization. Piven and Cloward[3] took up this idea five decades later, arguing that once movements become formalized, adopt hierarchies, and begin working within the state, contentious action is difficult to organize.

In a more recent expression of this position, Foweraker[4] argues that the MST's relationship to the state has effectively turned it into an NGO: "It [the MST] seeks to influence state agencies from the inside, while building an international network of NGO and agency support. In effect the MST has begun to conform to the image of a developmental NGO." This argument directly supports the position that once social movements become entangled and embedded within the state, they lose their nature as grassroots, mass-based, and contentious organizations.

The goal of this article is not to dismiss this position, as aspects of the argument resonate with the everyday reality of MST-state relations in Brazil.[5] The MST's relationship to the state is extremely complicated, and at times it can clearly serve to demobilize the movement. However, despite these risks, the MST is *not* afraid of taking power; rather, activists have been attempting to do so for more than thirty years. In direct contrast to the Zapatistas in Mexico, MST activists are making demands on the state as citizens of the Brazilian polity. Nonetheless, this goal—to take power and demand concessions wherever and whenever possible—has led to a huge predicament: while MST activists strive for structural transformations, such as the end to large-scale industrial agricultural production, the movement's current relationship to the PT directly contradicts this goal by stabilizing a hegemonic bloc that includes large agribusiness.

From a Gramscian perspective these contradictions are, of course, an inherent part of state-society dynamics: resistance movements are part and parcel of the hegemonic terrain, simultaneously protecting the state from a frontal attack while also representing the "trenches" in which contestation must be organized.[6] Therefore, social movements—regardless of their relationship to the government—are never fully autonomous from the state. In this article, rather than framing the state-society debate as "power is bad" versus "autonomy is good," I clarify how the MST developed its complicated relationship to the Brazilian state. I also discuss the nature of the MST as a movement with a large social base, and I argue that—despite the contradictions—the MST has consciously chosen to entangle itself with power as a response to the needs of these families. This has had real repercussions for the movement, including several internal divides. Does this confirm the perils of dealing with power? I argue that a more interesting question is not whether power is good or bad, but *how* movements engage the state, and the real tensions that challenger movements must navigate through this process.

HISTORICIZING MST-STATE RELATIONS

The MST was born in a moment of military dictatorship, in the early 1980s, when social movements of all types and ideologies were united in calling for a return to democracy. At this time, land occupations were almost entirely funded by solidarity groups and the Catholic Church. During these early years the line between the movement and the state was thick and unquestioned. The early 1980s was also the period when both the PT and the oppositional labor

movement, Central Union of Workers, (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, or CUT), were founded. In other words, the PT, CUT, and the MST were all born at this same historical moment, and there was a lot of overlap between participants in these different social struggles. Almost all of the founders of these three groups were connected to grassroots Catholic organizers, and especially in the MST's case, to rural Catholic groups such as the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, or CPT). Contemporary relationships between the PT and the MST cannot be understood without analyzing this historical context, and these movements' similar ideological formations.

In the 1990s, even before the PT won power at the federal level, the MST's relationship to the state became more complex as the movement's leadership began demanding resources for its social base. Again, a key point to remember is that the MST is not the Zapatistas. MST activists are not fighting for autonomy from the Brazilian state; rather, they are fighting for the government to fulfill its responsibility to the citizens of Brazil. For the MST, these responsibilities include providing education, health care, housing, infrastructure, agricultural assistance, and other public goods to all citizens. In addition, the MST insists on participating in the *provision* of these goods. In other words, MST activists do not just want public schools built in their communities, they also want to train the teachers who are going to work in those schools.

Given these goals, how should we conceptualize the nature of the MST?

A national MST leader tried to answer this question for a group of international solidarity groups attending the Sixth MST Congress. He said,

> *The first question to be clear on is the political nature of the MST. Some think of us as a big NGO or a labor union, and some think of us as a political party. Our political nature has a lot of these elements, but we are a social movement. And our political nature is to negotiate with the government and to demand what our social base needs; we have a responsibility to our social base . . .*[7]

In other words, although the MST does engage in some "NGO-type" activities, such as literacy campaigns and agricultural development projects, the MST is not an NGO. Similarly, although the MST fights for the rights of landless workers and sometimes campaigns for certain political candidates, the MST is also not a labor union or a political party. The MST activist continued,

> *When we interact with the state and government, we are still a social movement. Why do we not break with the state or government? . . . The NGOs can say that they do not receive money from the state, the NGO can do this, but our movement cannot do this because we have a social base that has rights, and those rights are the responsibility of the government.*[8]

The MST believes it is necessary to negotiate with the government, in order to win concrete material benefits for the families participating in the movement. This process necessarily involves having a relationship with state power.

These developments have created many interesting and complex situations for the movement. For example, in the area of public education, MST activists

MST organizers march to the presidential palace to demand agrarian reform. Feb. 2014

have been able to convince the Brazilian government to sanction a whole series of pedagogies that support the struggle for agrarian reform in the countryside.[9] On April 17, 1998, the two-year anniversary of a massacre of nineteen MST activists, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso created the National Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform (*Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agraria,* or PRONERA). This program has funded hundreds of literacy classes across the country, in addition to providing access to higher education to over fourteen thousand people living in areas of agrarian reform. In August of 2012, forty-seven students graduated from a PRONERA law degree program at the Federal University of Goiás; many of these graduates are now lawyers for the MST, directly contribution to the movement's internal capacity.

Sometimes, the relationship between the MST and the state becomes so complex that it is unclear whether the situation is more accurately described as the state co-opting the MST or the MST co-opting the state. For example, for over a decade in Rio Grande do Sul, the MST obtained permission from the state government to administer "Itinerant Schools" in their occupied camps. These were legally recognized public schools allowed to "move" with the "movement" of the MST camps. When the MST leadership in Rio Grande do Sul organized a march to the state capital in 2001, occupying a federal building, the Itinerant Schools in each of the MST's camps travelled with the families, setting up their classrooms within this building occupation. In this case, the boundaries between state and movement became completely blurred, as the state actually became part of the mobilization of the social movement itself.

At every level of government in Brazil, MST activists develop relationships with state officials and demand concessions for their settlements and camps. I witnessed this when I helped to lead a delegation of U.S. community organizers

to an MST settlement in the state of Goías. During this visit, the vice mayor of the town asked to come to the home where we were staying, and in preparation our MST host listed all of the issues she wanted us to demand for her settlement. When the vice mayor arrived, we each introduced ourselves, duly noting the lack of schooling, agricultural assistance, and medical facilities in the community. At every level, MST activists see these types of interactions with political officials as opportunities to obtain concessions for the movement. However, as our host emphasized, these concessions only ever materialize when the movement also takes to the street. This is similar to the "dual strategy"[10] that Latin American feminist groups have engaged in for the past three decades, simultaneously working with policy actors and engaging in contentious political actions.

Although the MST's connections to the Brazilian state have always been full of contradictions, these relationships became even more complex when the PT took power at the federal level in 2003. Although the MST has an official position of autonomy from political parties, many activists have deep connections to the PT and some have even chosen to run for office through the party.[11] Furthermore, while the MST is not affiliated with one party, before every election MST leadership bodies do "analyses of the political conjuncture," taking positions on which candidates to support. At the national level, the MST came out in support of PT candidate Luis Inácio da Silva (Lula) in 2002 and 2006. While the movement did not take an official stance in the 2010 presidential election, one of the most prominent leaders of the MST, João Pedro Stédile, actively encouraged MST activists to vote for PT candidate Dilma Rousseff.

Although there was a general assumption when President Lula first took office in 2003 that he would implement a program of agrarian reform based on expropriation, the Lula administration did not take any immediate actions concerning this issue. Furthermore, instead of breaking with the policies of the previous government, President Lula continued many of the market-based agrarian reform initiatives over his two terms in office.[12] During Lula's administration there was also a huge expansion of industrial soybean, corn, and sugarcane production, driven by both government programs (including the promotion of sugarcane ethanol) and an increased investment by international capital in Brazilian agriculture.

These developments have not been entirely negative for poor populations in Brazil. While agricultural exports are used as the principal source of income for the federal government to pay off external debt, the PT government has also invested this money into poverty relief programs such as *Bolsa Familia, Bolsa Escola*, and *Luz Para Todos*. In addition, the PT has invested an unprecedented amount of money into agrarian reform settlements, through rural development programs. In other words, the GDP growth driven by the agribusiness export industry has been used to build the houses that MST families live in, the agricultural cooperatives that fund the movement, and the public schools that MST activists use to teach children about the struggle for agrarian reform.

Herein lies the contradiction: when the MST was entirely funded by outside solidarity groups, the amount of resources available to the movement was quite limited. Thus, in the 1990s, MST activists began forming closer relationships to

the Brazilian government, demanding public services and goods as members of the Brazilian polity. The movement also demanded to participate in the provision and governance of these services. Access to these resources and spaces for participatory governance increased when President Lula took office in 2003. Yet, these developments came with less expropriation of land and more investment for industrial agricultural production. Therefore, the concessions that the MST has successfully won for its social base during the PT rule have been primarily funded by an economic system that threatens the future existence of the movement.

CONCLUSIONS: POWER, POLITICS, AND CONTESTATION

What should we make of these contradictions? Should we understand the MST's failure to achieve large-scale agrarian reform as a consequence of its relationship to the state? Or should we understand these state concessions as significant victories, *despite* the fact that agrarian reform might never have occurred? Even Piven and Cloward[13] admit that, "What was won must be judged by what was possible."

These questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer. However, as a movement with a social base of families who have concrete needs, the leaders of the MST argue that they do not have the privilege of disengaging from public power. Not everyone within the movement has agreed with this position. In October of 2011, over a dozen activists chose to leave the MST, publishing a public letter that critiqued the movement's relationship to the government and the lack of autonomy this has produced. Interestingly, the responses from MST activists who have stayed in the movement have not been outright denials of the legitimacy of these critiques. Rather, they acknowledge that the MST's relationship to the state is complicated and may, at times, suck energy away from more contentious actions.

These activists argue that the MST has to acknowledge these contradictions while continuing to take advantage of the *gaps* in state power that push forward their struggle. These gaps include funding for university degree programs for MST activists, government markets for agricultural products, and loans for constructing collectively owned small-scale agribusinesses. As political scientist Deborah Yashar[14] writes, "We cannot assume that states are competent, purposive, coherent, and capable . . . To the contrary, we must analyze states and state projects in light of the reach of the state." In other words, the "state" is not an all-powerful entity; there are always gaps in state power that the movement can use to push forward its struggle. However, the MST always combines this political maneuvering with contentious forms of protest, illustrating to the Brazilian government that the movement's demands are backed by "soldiers"[15] on the ground.

The case of the MST illustrates a need to reframe the debate about power and political mobilization. Rather than asking whether or not engaging the state is the correct strategy, a more interesting task is historicizing these state-society relations, and assessing the real tensions that come with directly confronting power, and partially taking it. In the hundreds of MST settlements and camps

across the country families are "prefiguring" the world they hope to see, organizing collective housing, agricultural cooperatives, and student-administered public school systems. However, the MST is neither leaderless nor dismissive of state power. With limited resources available, the state is an important actor the MST can hold accountable for providing these public goods. Through contestation, street protest, and yes, political negotiation, the MST has been able to win concrete concessions for hundreds of thousands of landless families across the country. While "leaderless" movements that lack a social base might be able to reject state power, mass-based organizations such as the MST do not have this privilege.

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[1] Miguel Carter and Horacio Martins de Carvalho, "A Luta Na Terra: Fonte de Crescimento, Inovaçao E Desafio Constante Ao MST," in *Combatendo a Desigualdade Social: O MST E a Reforma Agrária No Brasil*, ed. Miguel Carter (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2009), 329.
[2] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1915).
[3] Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, "Normalizing Collective Protest," in *The Breaking of the American Social Compact* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 345–74.
[4] Joe Foweraker, "Grassroots Movements and Political Activism in Latin America: A Critical Comparison of Chile and Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33 (2001): 856.
[5] This article is based on seventeen months of ethnographic research with the MST between June of 2009 and December of 2012, in four Brazilian states, as well as participation in the Sixth MST National Congress in February of 2014.
[6] Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916 – 1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 233.
[7] Notes from a MST leader's presentation at a "Friends of the MST" meeting, held in Guaranema, São Paulo, February 16-18, 2014.
[8] Ibid.
[9] For more information on the MST's attempt to implement these alternative pedagogies in public schools, see: (Tarlau, 2013).
[10] Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
[11] If an MST activist chooses to run for a political office, even with the encouragement of the MST leadership, she or he is asked to leave the decision-making processes of the movement.
[12] Joao Márcio Mendes Pereira and Sérgio Sauer, "História E Legado Da Reforma Agrária de Mercado No Brasil," in *Capturando a Terra: Banco Mundial, Políticas Fundiárias Neoliberais E Reforma Agrária de Mercado*, ed. Sérgio Sauer and Joao Márcio Mendes Pereira (São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2006), 198.
[13] Piven and Cloward, "Normalizing Collective Protest," xiii.
[14] Deborah Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.
[15] A commonly used Portuguese phrase to refer to a social base of people willing to take to the streets.

A NEW RESPONSE TO CRISIS? JONÓLAFSSON ON THE CASE OF ICELAND

Interview by THOMAS HINTZE

Few know more about democracy and governance in Iceland than Jón Ólafsson. Well before 2008's financial crisis plunged the tiny nation into upheaval (what many would later call the "cutlery revolution"), Ólafsson, who is professor of philosophy at Bifröst University and a member of the Comparative Cultural Studies Department at the University of Iceland, had been studying Iceland's social justice movements and their relationship to democracy and state power. So when the Icelandic government was forced to resign as a result of popular mobilizations in the winter of 2009, Ólafsson was there, closely monitoring the transition of power, the election of the Icelandic Constitutional Assembly, and the process that led to a new constitution in 2011. His paper on the subject, "Experiment in Iceland: Crowdsourcing a Constitution?" offers the most complete critique of the Constitutional Assembly's methodology and process, recounting the movement's ultimate failure to ratify a new constitution in the Icelandic Parliament.

Ólafsson and I corresponded electronically from June 18 to June 29, 2014 to construct this interview. Our conversation revolved around questions of prefiguration and the revolution in Iceland while addressing other key matters such as the utility of mass mobilizations, the influence of performative politics, narrative constructions of the movement, and the enfranchising of radical identities in Iceland's political system.

THOMAS HINTZE: To start with, let's get to the bottom of this: do you believe that it is fair to characterize the Icelandic Revolution of 2009 as "prefigurative" and/or "leaderless?"

JÓN ÓLAFSSON: If we go back to 2008-2009 we can see that the movements created in the wake of the financial crisis had organizers rather than leaders. They were leaderless in the sense that one cannot characterize them by any particular leader—some charismatic figure with demands or slogans. But the movements created the environment that made it possible for some new leaders to emerge. The crisis meant that the general public was receptive to much more radical ideas and demands than had been the case before. So the social movements served as a channel into politics for people who were able to go for it, as "ordinary" politicians stood by. This is why the situation was truly revolutionary. Power had evaporated from the hands of officeholders and into the streets—or that's at least how it felt. As to whether the movements were prefigurative in the usual sense of the word—I don't think so. Within the movements there were radical ideas but radical in the traditional sense: general demands for better administrative practice, transparency, more deliberative democracy, along with specific demands, such as that the government resign (which it eventually did), that the director of the Central Bank be fired (as he eventually was).

A close and sharp look at many of the events will reveal skilled organizers behind the scenes.

TH: Some critics have neatly folded the protests in Iceland into narratives about the cycle of uprisings that began in 2011, and therefore much of the analysis about Iceland has failed to recognize key differences.

JÓ: Right. Iceland doesn't fit in that narrative. But, you see, the thing is that the protest in Iceland was very spontaneous: it was easy for the organizers to set up a simple structure and make it work. This consisted of public meetings every Saturday in the Parliament square where new people would give talks, three each time, or holding town meetings that were sometimes directly broadcast on national TV. Publicity was easy, participation enormous. Participants and organizers gave interpretations of their own actions afterwards. And they were happy to accept the available narratives being offered to them.

A close and sharp look at many of the events will reveal skilled organizers behind the scenes. That's the case with the series of town meetings, some of which were broadcast live on national TV. It's also the case with the meetings in front of the parliament where Hörður Torfason, the musician, provided the brains and effort necessary to give them a structure and meaning. Some of those who later became MPs or were elected to the Constitutional Assembly made their first appearance at one of the meetings Hörður organized every Saturday for most of the winter. But the sharp look may cause some disappointment.

TH: What do you mean by disappointment? Disappointing for whom?

JÓ: I think that Icelandic activists have been influenced in interesting ways by interpretations offered by external observers. They have in some cases used narratives offered by observers to reinterpret their own goals and motivations. But that puts an ironic twist on Icelandic democratic activism as such: The concept of crowdsourcing was for example never mentioned in the preparatory stages of the Constitutional Council (CC). When external observers insisted that the constitutional draft was being crowdsourced, CC members partially adopted it to describe their efforts. Thus the Icelandic movement has grown into the global narrative and to some extent refigured itself to embrace it. But outside observers tend to overlook this and conclude that the Icelandic movement either played a leading role in a global sense or was spontaneously acting in parallel ways to movements elsewhere.

TH: Judith Butler has written about the "performative politics" of recent movements, specifically the performance of dispossession. Was there a kind of performative politics at play in Iceland?

JÓ: Dispossession played an important role in the original protests and was also the element that continued to fuel discontent. This was true of dispossession in the sense that the crisis created a strong sense of betrayal by those who may have thought before the crisis that they were citizens in a democratic country, but saw

themselves after the crisis as having in fact been powerless subjects. It was also the case in a more acute and palpable sense for those who actually faced personal bankruptcy because of the mortgage loans based on foreign currency that were common in Iceland at that time and obviously became an intolerable burden for middle class people when the Icelandic króna lost most of its worth.

One of the results of this second kind of dispossession was the creation of an association of homeowners, "Defenders of Home Interests," which continued to press the government to create solutions for people who had technically become bankrupt in the crisis. The association successfully argued that the government as well as the banks assumes at least a part of the responsibility of paying the debts of homeowners.

TH: The movement in Iceland certainly did not fully eschew power, but in fact engaged with existing structures in an effort to shift power within the system.

JÓ: Right. Actually I think that after the government stepped down in January 2009 and a new left wing coalition took power, most of those who had been engaged in protest action and new movements were willing to work with the government. After all it was generally believed that a revolution had brought this new government to power, and that it would act very differently from past governments. Sadly, I think that assessment was only partially true. The perception now is that the new government failed to change policy-making and decision processes in fundamental ways. But on the whole protesters channeled their effort into established political frameworks. Discontent with the performance of the new government increased interest in new political parties rather than to more intense grassroots activity.

TH: What were some other strategies the movement used during the revolution? Were they what we might call "traditional" or did they mark a departure from the way movements have previously organized?

JÓ: This is a central question in my view. I am inclined to say that the movements did not depart in significant ways from traditional strategies. That said, one must also point out significant characteristics of the Icelandic movement which are a departure from the traditional. One is communication between very different groups. The first wave of protests brought together people who had earlier perceived themselves as opponents. Later diverse groups converged on projects such as the Constituent Assembly and various kinds of democratic innovation (e-platforms such as "Better Reykjavík" e.g.).

My feeling is that the grassroots activism which as such lasted maybe for a couple of years created a new kind of political awareness which brought new groups into politics, groups that had earlier been effectively marginalized because they could not connect to political parties or elites. The people brought into the Reykjavík City Council by Jón Gnarr, a comedian who led the Best Party and was mayor of Reykjavík 2010-2014, are a good example. Did they bring radical ideas or radicalism to this body through their sweeping victory? No, they did not. But they brought an entirely new kind of people in.

People wonder in what way these new parties differ from traditional center-left parties. I think they should not be looking at policies or ideologies to answer that question, but rather acknowledge that a stagnated political system such as the Icelandic one, has now been thoroughly infiltrated by people who have perspectives that radically differ from old style politics. This includes a disdain for the argumentative and hostile kinds of communication that people often take for granted in everyday politics.

TH: Once we separate the Icelandic Revolution from the uprisings of 2011, what lessons should students of social movements learn?

JÓ: There are really some interesting lessons about activist-establishment relations (if we can put it that way), which I think can be drawn from the Icelandic experience. Given that motivation in Iceland was mainly to reform and change political culture I think the movement can be seen by and large as a success. Now it is commonly acknowledged that the movement has made mass mobilization much more likely when political decisions are met with general discontent. Politicians therefore must be aware of a larger arsenal of extra institutional tools with which their policies can be challenged, for better or worse, whenever they are dealing with difficult and contested issues.

On the other hand the movement also showed the limitations of mass participation. The Constitutional Assembly was able to produce a complete constitution but its activist edge alienated it from establishment politicians, which to the end robbed it of the support that was needed to actually have the constitutional bill passed. The successes and failures also illustrate clearly the enormous impatience inherent in mass mobilization. The goals that were announced in 2008-2009 were simple: throw out the government, get rid of the Director of the Central Bank and the director of the financial supervisory authority. Once these demands had been met things quieted down.

TH: Iceland has been in the news most recently for protests against the government's decision to abandon talks to join the EU. The public outcry seemed less to do with the decision and more to do with the exclusionary process that led to the decision.

JÓ: It has been a very interesting experience to see protest reemerge. Sure, it was about the process, not the content. But I would like to put it into a more general context. The protest action of 2008-2009 made the public see how fast, forceful (yet peaceful) protest action can paralyze the government.

Moreover: the 2008-2009 protest clearly had created a channel, one could even call it a mechanism, through which swiftly organized petitions together with meetings and enormous social media activity, simply could build up strong public resistance.

TH: Before the revolution, how was power distributed among Icelanders? How did that change after the overthrow of the government?

JÓ: The simple answer is to point out that before the crisis a group of wealthy people and their leading managers had become the real power in Iceland. This new power was not hidden. The argument was openly made that through the international financial activities of our banks and businesses the country was growing rich and powerful far beyond what anyone could expect on an island in the North-Atlantic with 330,00 inhabitants. It was therefore surprisingly easy to convince the public that serving internationalized Icelandic businesses and financial institutions should be a governmental priority—the top priority in fact. After the crisis this power structure has simply disappeared. It will not be possible in the near future for business to gain such enormous influence and to hold the government hostage. The power has shifted to politics again.

Thomas Hintze is a writer, reader, photographer, and Know Your Rights trainer interested in social movements at the intersection of art, literature, and culture. He is a contributing editor at Tidal Magazine and a doctoral student at UC Davis in the English Department.