

Why it's still kicking off everywhere

Paul Mason

Are we witnessing a global revolt against
neoliberalism?

Two years on from the Arab Spring, I'm clearer about what it was that it inaugurated: it is a revolution. In some ways it parallels the revolutions of before - 1848, 1830, 1789 - and there are also echoes of the Prague spring, the US civil rights movement, the Russian 'mad summer of 1874' ... but in other ways it is unique. Above all, the relationship between the physical and the mental, the political and the cultural, seems to be inverted. There is a change in consciousness, the intuition that something big is possible, that a great change in the world's priorities is within people's grasp.

What is underpinning the unrest that has swept the globe? In reality it's reducible to three factors. Firstly, the neoliberal economic model has collapsed, and this has then been compounded by persistent attempts to go on making neoliberalism work: to ram the square peg into the round hole, thereby turning a slump into what looks like being a ten year global depression. Secondly there has been a revolution in technology that has made horizontal networks the default mode of activism and protest; this has destroyed the traditional means of disseminating ideology that persisted through two hundred years of industrial capitalism, and has made social media the irreversible norm. Thirdly, there has been a change in human consciousness: the emergence of what Manuel Castells calls 'the networked individual' - an expansion of the space and power of individual human beings and a change in the way they think; a change in the rate of change of ideas; an expansion of available knowledge; and a massive, almost unrecordable, revolution in culture.

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What we are seeing is not the Arab Spring, the Russian Spring, the Maple Spring, Occupy, the *indignados*. We're seeing the Human Spring. We are seeing something that reminds us, long after the historians reduced it to a list of battles and constitutions, why they called 1848 the springtime of the nations; and why Hegel, in the aftermath of the first French revolution, wrote: 'Our epoch is a birth-time. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation (*Phenomenology of Mind*, 1807)

The collapse of neoliberalism

As an economic model neoliberalism died on 15 September 2008. Alan Greenspan's words in the subsequent House Committee hearing were prophetic: 'I found a flaw', he said: 'A flaw in the model that I perceived [to be] ... a critical functioning structure that defines how the world works ... That's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I've been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well' (October 2008). Neoliberalism told us that the market was self-regulating; that the self-interest of the deal participant was a better policeman than the regulator. It created a dominant finance sector and told that sector to enrich itself - and that sector has now crashed the world economy.

We are left with what Nomura economist Richard Koo calls a 'balance sheet recession' - in which fiscal stimulus, zero interest rates and a \$6 trillion global money printing operation can only keep the patient alive. The Western elite can't address this prolonged stagnation because it can't bear to do any of the things that would end the depression: write off the debts, inflate them away, or step back from globalisation to protect their own populations from its depressive effect on living standards. So they're left staring at the old model: and not only is the dynamo of it knackered, it is rapidly losing social legitimacy. All attempts to make the old model work without solving the global imbalances on which it rests lead to the policy of austerity: not just fiscal austerity, as in Britain and southern Europe, but a long-term strategy of reducing the wages, welfare benefits and labour rights of the workforce in the West.

And there is one massively important group that has been dealt not just a tactical setback but a strategic one. In *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere* I called these

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'graduates without a future' - the first generation in the West since the 1930s who will be poorer than their parents.¹ They will leave college with £30, 40, 50k debts. The jobs on offer are - as the famous Santa Cruz 'Communiqué from an Absent Future' told us in 2009 - the same jobs you do while on campus: interning, barista, waiting tables, sex work. The first post-college job is often working for free or for the minimum wage. There is no way onto the housing ladder, the ladder is now horizontal; and in retirement, pension schemes will be gone.

You can add in further specific grievances, country by country: medieval attempts to roll back reproductive rights; endless small wars conducted against civilians; racism everywhere; torture as the default option not just in anti-terrorism but in the policing of minorities. In Europe there is relentless austerity - of the kind that forces you to eat or pay the rent. A whole generation is being forced to live as drifters - to relive the plots of 1930s movies: to get on a bus to look for work, to migrate, to sofa-surf, to enter relationships that are stark compromises between love and economics.

For this generation it is not a question of simple economic grievance but of the theft of the promised future. And I've become sick of hearing that the movement has 'petered out'. No. It has been massively repressed. Tear gas fired indiscriminately into crowds in Athens, rubber bullets in Madrid, tasers and pepper spray on campuses across America. Non-lethal policing is highly effective against non-violent protests. It tends to clear them away. But do not think it has cleared away the grievances in people's minds that led them to demonstrate in the first place. What it does is push those who don't want to get their heads broken into a more sullen, silent, passive resistance: a resistance of ideas; or a resistance of small, granular social projects; or, as in Greece, anomie - where people just embrace the beauty of being hopeless, roll a joint, stare into each other's eyes.

The crisis of neoliberalism, compounded by the total failure to emerge of any alternative within official politics, simply leaves unanswered the next generation's question: how does capitalism secure my future?

The revolution in technology

I recently rewatched the rushes my team shot on 15 September 2008 in New York City, the day Lehman Brothers collapsed. Two things struck me: the guys in the suits

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don't realise how badly capitalism is about to come unstuck - and nor do I. Second, all the technology is, by now, obsolete. People on the sidewalk are filming the bankers on their Nokias, Motorolas, SonyEricssons - remember them? On that day Facebook had 100m users. It now has a billion. Twitter then had about 4m accounts worldwide. It now has 100 million. In the four years since the Lehman collapse the iPhone has conquered the world - and now Android. As for the plain old internet: 1.5bn people had it in September 2008, 2.4bn people have it now - that's 34 per cent of the world's population. But even that is an under-estimation: in Ethiopia, for example, there are twice as many Facebook accounts as there are internet connections.

The digital communications revolution is only one part of a wider technological revolution that has been under way since the middle of the 1990s, and has affected commerce (goodbye high streets), manufacturing (goodbye workers, hello robots), the speed of scientific discovery itself, and of course finance. But it turns out that the killer application of all these new technologies is to empower human beings: to think what they want, to act more autonomously, and to get knowledge they need. Clay Shirky summed up the effect of these technologies better and earlier than anybody: 'The current change, in one sentence, is this: most of the barriers to group action have collapsed and with those barriers we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done'.²

The effects of the communications revolution can be seen everywhere. In Egypt, the youth who took the decisive actions between December 2010 and February 2011 originally assembled as a loose affinity network using Facebook, around the *We Are All Khaled Sayeed* page. When the time came to act they were able to form up as small, quite distributed and horizontal groups: ten people on somebody's floor linked to another ten not by a command hierarchy but by trust, and numerous nodal connections. When they acted, they immediately began to use Facebook and Twitter to feed back information much faster than the security forces could; they bypassed the state media, which was paralysed, and when the internet was shut down they bypassed that too, using proxy servers and word of mouth: what they'd created on the internet they took out onto the streets.

Time and again over the past four years, beginning in Iran, the spontaneous defensive gesture that you see - replacing the clenched fist - is the phone raised to shoot video or take pictures. 'I'm recording you', it says. Of course the power

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of the gesture relies on international law, on an external media to publicise what's happening, but for me this is the new clenched fist of the twenty-first century. We saw it again recently in the March 2012 elections in Russia: when Putin's party was found to be perpetrating large-scale voter fraud, the proof, the outrage and then the call to action spread through social networks, which - because they overlap blogging sites, Twitter, Facebook and peer to peer information transfer - could not be shut down. Indeed I argue that they cannot even be adequately monitored or even recorded. This type of communication is horizontal, and it is networked. Spin and lies and inadvertent mistakes are easily challenged - and not just challenged but neutralised.

The type of action that grows out of such networked protest movements is completely different from that taken by Weberian hierarchal organisations: it is sporadic, voluntary, time limited. At the point you don't like it you break off; at the point it gets taken over, infiltrated, derailed, you stop and start again. Whereas with the labour movement you would never squander an organisation you'd spent years building, today movements like Climate Camp can just decide 'sod it, this is going nowhere'. And just as the movements are mercurial, so are the activists: they can pick and choose, they can have a day off; they can contribute a bit to each effort; they can meld their social life into their political efforts.

Castells captures perfectly what happened in 2011-12: 'By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the Internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. That is, they embarked on something that is the opposite of twentieth-century political practice: not parties, not campaigns, not united fronts, but sporadic swarms'. He continues: 'From the safety of cyberspace people from all ages and conditions moved towards occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge'.³

I don't say that these movements are only horizontal networks. And in fact the actual moment of physical occupation of space was brief in most cases. In the US Zuccotti Square got cleared so thoroughly that even I, as a BBC reporter with a pass, was not allowed to stand there and report once it was empty. But a core of people have continued to flock to Tahrir Square over the last two years - that plebeian intersection between the Coptic TV actor, the secular leftist Arab, the football fans

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and the educated young women. And Sol in Madrid was an incredible experience for those involved: 'You could almost taste the freedom', one of my colleagues in Spain said. While the time in Syntagma, in the summer of 2011, under the orange trees, with assemblies of 3000 going on amiably late into the night, modelled explicitly on the traditions of the *agora*, remains, for me, the high point of the Greek movement - before the descent into really cruel violence and the rise of fascism.

The big question of course is what all this leads to. Over time a critique of horizontalism has evolved. Long before Occupy, Malcolm Gladwell set the tone - networks are useful only for low-risk, low impact activism: 'The drawbacks of networks scarcely matter if the network isn't interested in systemic change - if it just wants to frighten or humiliate or make a splash - or if it doesn't need to think strategically. But if you're taking on a powerful and organized establishment you have to be a hierarchy'.⁴ During the occupation of Zuccotti Park, Slavoj Žižek articulated a more nuanced criticism: the self-infatuation of the movements, the way they come to be about themselves: 'There is a danger. Don't fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?'. Thomas Frank also criticised the lack of structure, the self-obsession, the lack of preparedness to embrace goals and demands, and the lack of connection with real life. He called for: 'a movement whose core values arise not from an abstract hostility to the state or from the need for protesters to find their voice, but rather from the everyday lives of working people'.

I think all these critics have something in common: they have lived through a time when structured, hierarchical movements with a clear counter-narrative and demands rose and fell. They understand the relationship between those kinds of movements and the old Fordist economy and the industrial working class. Equally, they all understand that the Fordist economy and the male, manual working class of the 1970s and 1980s has been destroyed and is not coming back. Mark Fisher, the inventor of the term 'capitalist realism', says: 'Although anarchist tactics are the most ineffective in attempting to defeat capital, capital has destroyed all the tactics that *were* effective, leaving this rump to propagate itself within the movement'. And what I think all the critics miss is the absolute congruence between modern work and this horizontalism, or networked organisation, with its weak ties, gestures, lack of achievements. Indeed I insist that horizontalism mirrors in great detail the

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way people exist at work, and the way they actually work. It is the new structure of the corporation that forces us to live these multiple lives: we are Paul in the suit at work; Paul in the combat trousers at night; Paul the Nord two-handed swordsman in Skyrim; Paul the Northern Soul obsessive on Tumblr. Corporate life forces us to have weak ties to our workmates, to constantly compete with them, to value social networking skills higher than actual skills: that's how you get a job of course - when many skills are quite easily learnable you have to be the person who can communicate and learn skills. Richard Sennett logged all these new attributes of modern work - weak ties, mercuriality, individualism - in his book *The New Culture of Capitalism*.⁵ The revolts of 2010-11 have shown, quite simply, what this workforce looks like when it becomes collectively disillusioned, when it realises that the whole offer of self-betterment has been withdrawn.

I differ from these critics on a number of points. First, these movements are not trying to take power. They're trying - consciously or unconsciously - to form a counter-power within capitalism. It's a counter-power that rejects the conformist, stereotyped mass culture that the elite and the mainstream media are signed up to, but it is not yet prepared to offer an alternative. And there is a strategic reason for this: this generation has learned the lessons of the twentieth century. It has learned, as the commundard Louise Michel once put it, that power monopolised is evil. It has grown up with Foucault, with Deleuze and Guattari, with the idea that the power relations inherent in hierarchical resistance movements are likely to lead, at best, to George Galloway, and at worst to Stalinism and Maoism. It has read Primo Levi, and it has read Vasily Grossmann.

On top of that - if they only knew it - these movements attempting to carve out alternative, more civilised, more self-controlled social spaces within capitalism are doing *exactly* what the pre-Leninist workers movement did. It annoys them when I say this, but they remind me of Edward Bernstein, the most centre-left of the German social democrats, who said 'the way is everything, the final goal nothing'. It really is not that far from that to the famous #OWS poster 'What is our one demand? Occupy Wall Street, 17 Sept 2011, Bring a Tent'.

Furthermore, there is no such thing any more as 'normal life' divorced from this experience of crisis and fragmentation. Those who think that by immersing themselves in the working men's club, or becoming an organiser for a trade union, the *indignados* would somehow be connecting to a reality that rectifies the

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weaknesses of horizontalism are missing the point. And indeed former occupiers are now beginning to fan out into normal life - as seen for example in Occupy Sandy in New York, formed after the storms to help distribute relief; or perhaps more significantly, in Spain, where members of the M-15 movement have become - like the Russian Narodniks in 1874 - the organisers of hundreds of campaigns and squats in working-class communities. What they find there are poor, disenfranchised people - often highly articulate but shattered - in the same precarious position as them. Castells sums up a quite awful truth for those who wish the horizontalist movements would just wake up and return to the twentieth-century forms of structured politics: 'Networked social movements ... could not exist without the internet. But their significance is much deeper. They are suited for their role as agents of change in the network society, in sharp contrast with the obsolete political institutions inherited from a historically superseded social structure'.

The change in human consciousness

All this is connected to the third big factor that is driving change - a change in human behaviour, psychology and thought patterns. This is the least tangible factor, but I've come to the conclusion that it is probably the most important of the changes that underpin the unrest: it can survive quite a lot of reversals.

When the horizontalist movements arose, and the new culture around them - of raves, hip-hop, art activism, body art, sampling, photomontage, graphic novels - people immediately compared them to the 1960s. I argue that a more profound parallel is with the era before the First World War. That too was a period of rapid technological change, probably even more so than ours; and then, as now, the effect of many of the new technologies was to enhance personal freedom. In almost every novel of the time there's a liberated woman; and there's often an easily spottable gay man. And there's also a pervasive freedom, individualism.

It was Virginia Woolf who wrote 'on or about December 1910 human character changed'. What she meant was that new kinds of human being had been created by the combined impact of modernism in art and literature, suffragism and its allied women's social and sexual rights movements, mass consumption, and new technology. Stefan Zweig captured some of this in his memoir *The World of Yesterday*: 'There was more freedom and more beauty in the world ... in those ten years there

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was more freedom, informality and lack of inhibition than there had been in the entire preceding century'.⁶

How do the internet and social media and mobile comms change thinking and behaviour? I think they complete, and make irreversible, the small-scale social revolutions that started in the late 1960s: women's rights, gay rights, divorce, contraception, the human rights revolution in general. In the west, psychologists and sociologists documented the behaviour changes quite early on: Sherry Turkle, studying early computer gamers and bulletin board enthusiasts, noted the emergence of the so-called 'decentred self', that 'exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time' - and argued that people were using the internet as a 'social laboratory of the self'. Margaret Wertheim argued - and this was before Facebook, Twitter and even broadband - that we were using the internet to create a 'collective mental arena', where the act of sharing knowledge for free was causing the self to become 'leaky', 'joining each of us into a vast ocean, or web, of relationships with other leaky selves'.

In the 1990s, these early sociologists of Internet consciousness documented the behaviour patterns that are common now: swarming, multiple personalities, masquerading, stalking, community formation, intense personal relationships, seeing the online world as real, or hyper-real, and the constant attempts to create utopian communities. But they were writing the pre-history - because social media has brought these behaviours out of the world of the hidden, the online, the furtive parallel universe, and into the coffee bar, the living room, the university lecture theatre, the barricade, the tent camp.

There is of course a downside - or a claimed downside - to all this multi-tasking and hyper-social behaviour. For example there's a growing body of cognitive experiments that show that people fully immersed in the new technology perform worse on abstract thinking, on retaining facts, on inductive logic, on mindfulness etc.⁷ And I'm prepared to accept that this is true. But here's one possible response to it: it's quite similar to what happened to physical skill when production moved from workshops to factories in the early nineteenth century. People who used to be able to make a Chippendale table now struggled to make a table leg. But if you measured the collective effort it was more efficient and collectively more intelligent. It is no surprise that the fragmented, de-centred, hyper-social self performs badly on tests designed in the Doris Day era.

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All this is evidence that the cognitive, behavioural and psycho-social impacts of the communications revolution are real, rapid and unending. And above all they have created a zeitgeist - a series of signifiers that I think we're now in a position to understand: the V for Vendetta mask; the verbose sign written on cardboard; the chant 'Ash'ab nurid izqat al-nizam'; the acceptability of graffiti as both art and protest; the covering of people's bodies with tattoos and piercings; the ubiquity of graphic novels, of dance music; the white liquid Maalox which you put on your face against tear gas - and which the artist Molly Crabapple has now put onto the face of an oil painting. The most important thing about all these slogans, images and gestures is not what they say in isolation but what they express cumulatively.

And for me that is: scorn for the charade played out in the workplace, for discipline, hierarchy, targets achieved, the cheap business suit, the insincere smile, the dead language of corporate communications. And solidarity with one another - large parts of humanity signalling across borders and cultures their belief that a kinder, more human system is possible; and that it will be born out of the chaotic, ironic, playful qualities of human life - not by pitting one cruel hierarchy against another.

Where does it all go next?

We have to start by admitting that what is new in the situation does not abolish what is old. There are still unions, armies, Leninist groups with their perfectly preserved practice from the mid-1970s, hierarchical mainstream political parties and enough people coming out of university prepared to don a suit, look geeky, avoid drugs and, eventually, become special advisers, party staffers or MPs. And there are still workers, peasants and the bourgeoisie. So the classic revolutions - Egypt, Libya - and probably those still to come - Iran, Russia, China - will follow a modified form of the usual path: the eruption over democracy and human rights, then the move towards social justice and distribution, followed by splits in the movement and - finally - the question subsequently posed of whether the old power can come back in a new form: by force. This is the classic pattern established by 1848-51.

But here's the difference with 1848: by the mid-1850s capitalism was delivering - albeit under the guise of autocratic regimes in Europe - an upswing in living standards. Today, it is hard to see a long-term sustained global recovery; and in the west, unless there's a break with globalisation, social conditions are on a race if not

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to the bottom then to the point at which they meet the rising conditions of Asia and Latin America half way. It is therefore hard to see the upsurge of 2011-2 being followed by a long social peace such as we saw in the 1850s and 1860s.

In many ways 2012 was full of lessons to the pure horizontalist movement that politics abhors a vacuum, even one created for the best of intentions. As things turn nasty - for example with the attempt to roll back reproductive rights in America - it becomes clear that, although you can try to 'live despite capitalism', there are certain things you can't live despite: you can't live 'despite' fascist pogroms, you have to stop them; if you're a working-class young woman in America you can't live 'despite' the mass closure of contraception and abortion services. So people are propelled back into the structures, the system - to use it as a shield - even if they have no belief in that system. So the theatre group besieged by fascists in Athens, over the production of a gay themed play, demanded that the police protect them, and eventually they did - with tear gas. And Mitt Romney lost to Obama among women by a staggering 12 percentage points, largely because if you're a woman faced with a matter of fundamental rights, even if you're a horizontalist and dislike Obama's politics, or just cynical about the system in general, you're going to use your vote to protect yourself.

In the first four years after the crash of 1929, there was everywhere a swing to the right: austerity programmes, the rise of fascism, the self-marginalisation of the left. It was only in the face of the increasing threat from the far right later in the 1930s that the liberals and the left 'got real'. The rise of fascism propelled them from what Malcolm Gladwell might call low-risk activism to high-risk activism. As Castells points out, it is not hope that propels us to take high risks, but fear.

But the world that was created after 1945 - a world of human rights, democracy and relative working-class affluence in the West - is now in jeopardy. And as long as all these things remain in jeopardy, it will go on kicking off.

This is an edited and abridged version of the 2013 Amiel Trust lecture.

Notes

1. Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, Verso 2012.

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2. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, Penguin 2008, chapter 1.
3. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope, Social Movements in the Internet Age* Polity 2012, p2.
4. www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell#ixzz2HWSnTC00.
5. Richard Sennett, *The New Culture of Capitalism*, Yale University Press 2006.
6. Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, first published in Britain by Viking in 1943, p218.
7. See Nicholas Carr, 'Does the Internet Make You Dumber', *Wall Street Journal*, 5.6.10.