

## Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

### Let's Talk About 2011 -the year of protests and uprisings

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My life has been defined by the issue how the organization of social movements relates to the 'media question'. And so, this remarkable year, defined by the term Facebook revolution, can be read as a real test. We all know that the year 2011 didn't end well. There is a real question here in terms of the long-term effect of protest and we are still living in this after-period. It is difficult, even six years later, to historicize what happened in 2011, the year marked by the Arab Spring, the Movement of the Squares, the UK riots, Occupy and many more protests across the globe.

2011 is out of step, it is an uncontemporary year. There are a lot of utopian elements at play here. 2011 is not a year of simple outcry but rather a year of belated protests and experimentation with new social forms and decision making. Three years after the global financial crisis is a long period if you come to think of it, and this delay even surprised me at the time. Why did it take so long for social movements or uprisings to emerge and hit the surface? This in a time defined by real-time social media communication... that is a tremendous delay.

Let me go through this the year 2011 is marked by a real beginning and an end that's quite interesting. It all started late January with the uprisings first in Tunisia and then a little later in Egypt, where we see the birth of this myth of the Facebook revolution. At the time, the movement itself proclaimed that Facebook and Twitter were going to take over from the Kalashnikov. It was a myth because from an activist point of view it was clear that computer networks such as Facebook and Twitter were only playing a minor role in the social making of these very large uprisings, specifically the one in Egypt. Mobilizations did not happen through these channels. From the very beginning these social media were used to communicate with the West (media, exile communities, politicians). It was from the very beginning a specifically Western if not American media image, dominated and steered by Silicon Valley and the Obama Administration, and in particular Hillary Clinton's foreign policy called Internet Freedom that colored our view of these uprisings as 'Facebook revolutions'.

Then, a little later, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, we move to Madrid and encounter another key aspect of the 2011 uprisings: reclaiming public space, taking over streets and squares (as already shown in the case of Cairo's Tahrir Square). This element is embodied in the movement throughout Spain called the M15 movement, which was primarily an anti-austerity movement as was the case of other manifestations of this kind in other countries.

Then there are the riots in June 2011 in Athens, but also think of the even more mysterious August riots throughout England, which Slavoj Žižek called “consumerist carnival of destruction.” Remember the large size of this sudden revolt, the way it came up as a riot and then disappeared within days, causing a considerable amount of damage, resulting in a large amount of people who were arrested. The 2011 UK uprising questioned the very idea of the social movement that emerges, comes together, builds up and then manifests itself, aimed to continue and grow. Many of the 2011 protests were uprisings without a cause: they came up quickly and disappeared again without a trace. The most baffled about this play of appearances and disappearances were the actors themselves. This short-termism also led to its mirror phenomena, especially in Spain and Greece, where we saw that these new social movements were instrumental in the preproduction of new political parties, in this case Syriza and Podemos. A little later we saw also elsewhere new political parties emerging as a result of the social movements’ inability to create a sustainable political momentum. This issue is the starting of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s 2017 book called *Assembly*. The tensions between political party and the short-lived impulses of social movements is something that is going to stay with us. Just think of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK or Bernie Sanders in the US.

We then move to Occupy Wall Street, first of all in New York, occurring in September 2011. Now there’s another element and there we clearly see this utopian aspect there. This has disturbed a lot of people but it’s very strong element which especially young people are really drawn to. Occupy Wall Street claimed to embody the 99% while at the same time refused to make any concrete demands. It explicitly had no leaders and was driven by a consensus culture during the assemblies. The movement refused classical forms of representation, both in its decision-making procedures and towards the ‘old media’. This was all quite disturbing for many of the commentators. OWS was defined not by an ideology but by its speechlessness.

I would like to quote Judy Butler who wrote about her participation in her book called *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*: “Even when they are not speaking or do not present a set of negotiable demands, the call for justice is being enacted: the bodies being assembled say we are not disposable whether or not they are using words at the moment what they say as it were is we are still here persisting, demanding greater justice a release from precarity, a possibility of a viable life.” In the book she contemplates the new social rituals instead of criticizing the movement for not having

leaders and failed to put forward any demands.

Judith Butler is in dialogue with Hannah Arendt and many other political thinkers as she theorizes the idea of the alliance as a form of collective appearance. Butler defines the We Are the 99% slogan as a speech act. This publication can be contrasted with Slavoj Žižek 2011 book called *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* in which he describes the philosophical dimension of all these uprisings. Talking about the danger we cannot fail to mention the darker sides of 2011. With that I mean the two failed revolutions in Syria and Libya. Both started off as part of the Arab Spring. There were a lot of hopes and promises, both in Syria and in Libya. And both ended up in a lot of violence and ultimately civil war. We know many hundreds of thousands of people died in the aftermath of these two revolts that we may as well call the 2011 termidor. This became clear already towards the end of 2011. While the Tahrir uprising resulted in the election of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, it also produced the violent take-over of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who took power in June 2013 after overthrowing the elected government of Morsi and installing a military dictatorship. And even in Madrid, how did the M15 movement go? Well, in late 2017 we are all struggling to make sense of the declaration of independence of Catalonia... Which side are you on? Is this really what people have been fighting for?

The same can be said of Occupy Wall Street. Of course there is a chronology that continues, from Black Lives Matter to the Women's March and #metoo... But it could also be relevant to ask how OWS relates to the rise of Alt-Right and the election of Donald Trump. And this is this is the problem starts. The same can be said of many of the unfortunate events that are happening throughout the Middle East. Protests cannot be seen as isolated phenomena. Or can they? Let's face it, where is the spirit of the Arab Spring in late 2017? I want to end here with a quote of Slavoj Žižek. He wrote this in early 2012 in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, looking back at this turbulent year of protest: "What makes the situation so ominous is the all pervasive sense of blockage, there is no clear way out and the ruling elite is clearly losing its ability to rule." This what has recently been theorized (including Žižek) under the umbrella term of "*The Great Regression*" and what he calls "the blockage". This is what I see as our main task: we need to further theorize and reflect how this strange and utopian year of protest, filled with hope and new experiences, relates to our ongoing stagnation and blockage.

(Edited transcript of speech at ta Chinese Academy of the Arts Hangzhou event, held at the art academy of Strasbourg, December 2017).