

Occupy, the Time of Riots, and the Real Movement of History

by Jason E. Smith



Every age has its riots. In ours, each day, all over the world, they go off by the hundreds: food rebellions, landless peasant uprisings, worker strikes that get out of hand, anti-police brutality riots in urban slums. At what point does this steady beat of riots crystallize into an age, into a time of riots? How should we understand the riots we see or do not see, the riots we fear and the riots we take part in, when they begin to assume a kind of configuration, to accumulate in a certain chaotic order, and begin to echo each other, as if converging obliquely in one single, if still largely unfocused, assault on the existing order? *Le temps des émeutes*: this was the expression used in France after 1848 to refer to the early years of the workers' movement, the two decades preceding the sudden eruption of revolt across Europe that year. This period was marked on one hand by a certain disconnection between the proliferation of socialist and utopian sects, with their alternately arcane or lucid schemes for treating the emergent so-called "social question," and on the other by the immediate needs of workers themselves in their often violent responses to transformations of the production process occurring at the time. The formal subsumption of worker activity under capitalist social relations combined with radical changes to industrial production—only then just beginning—often occasioned the sabotage of the work process and the outright destruction of newly introduced machinery.

However punctual their occurrence and staccato their rhythm, these worker assaults, often a defense of older forms of the labour process, began to almost unconsciously produce a certain orientation that would not be clarified strategically for some time. To be sure, the virtual convergence of worker struggles often finds its structural unity in specific objective conditions, namely those of a crisis internal to a particular phase of the capital relation, or in the restructurings of these relations, often occasioned by technological transformation. But we must not underestimate the more contagious process whereby revolts communicate through the proliferation of affects, affinities, and hatreds that circulate among previously unconnected places and times, sometimes with a speed so rapid they seem to happen everywhere all at once, as if forming a ring of fire.

Over the past five or six years, probably beginning with the banlieue riots in France in November 2005 up to the London riots of August 2011, from the anti-CPE struggles in France in 2006 to the recent "movement of the squares," from the anti-austerity general strikes in Greece over the past two years to the astonishing revolts in North Africa last year, we are awakening from the neo-liberal dream of global progress and prosperity: after forty years of reaction, after four decades of defeat, we have re-entered the uncertain stream of history. We bear witness to a new cycle of struggles; ours is a time of riots.

The most remarkable aspect of the Arab rebellions of last year is neither the fact of their occurrence nor the success they enjoyed in deposing the senile autocrats and their entourages whose power (so often supported by Western billions) crumbled. What is most remarkable is the reception of these revolutions in the West. Here I do not mean the cynical instrumentalization of the riots on the part of the political classes who, with predictable vulgarity, projected their own unearned narcissism onto the revolts, imagining that the people who risked their lives taking and defending Tahrir square somehow wanted to have a Western-style social arrangement, with its fig-leaf democratic circuses barely concealing the ruthless extraction of wealth from the earth and its populations that is its very *raison d'être*. These same commentators who claimed to admire the Egyptian people's intransigence, and even their

capacity for revolt (for we should not forget that the revolt in Egypt involved the burning down of police stations, the liberal use of Molotov cocktails, and violent clashes with the state security apparatus and its hired thugs) were only yesterday cheerleaders for the regimes that fell, and who today condemn the most minor confrontations with the police over "here" (as recently occurred with Occupy Oakland). In referring to the reception of the Arab Spring Revolutions in the West, I want to emphasize instead the fact that these victories, even if only partial and often fragile, were received not as struggles undertaken by peoples far away nor by people so different from "us." To the contrary, they produced a movement of identification, probably false, but irreducible all the same: that these people were like us, and we could do what they have done. From one perspective, there was minimal resonance between the situation unfolding in North Africa and what would become the movement of the squares or the Occupy movement: a revolt on the part of an immiserated petit bourgeoisie that faced a future completely destroyed by debt, a life without the State functionary position they might have expected to receive only ten years prior. But what is important in this identification is the distance it marks from the Third-Worldist positions characteristic of the movements formed on the basis of a *solidarity* with anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in the 1960s. While politically consequential for a number of reasons, these solidarities were founded on the assumption that it was only the peasant populations of the non-industrialized West who were still capable of leading a global assault on the imperialist (and therefore "final") stage of capitalist development; the assumption was that the West and its workers' movement—indeed class struggle itself—had been completely absorbed into the dynamic of capitalist development. The Arab revolts of early 2011, and their reception in the West, make it clear that this previous cycle of struggles has come to an end. The conditions for this can no doubt be found in the objective transformation of the capitalist world system itself, which has slowly undermined the core-periphery articulation characteristic of earlier historical moments. But, for us, it is the subjective effects that deserve further consideration, and in particular the assumption that struggles in the post-industrial West, whether the indignado movement in Spain or Greece, or Occupy in the U.S., could be modeled on the successful rebellions of North Africa.

It is not irrelevant that these revolts took place in countries and cities on the southern coast of the Mediterranean, only hundreds of miles from Athens. This fact makes the movement less a European phenomenon than a conflagration of the Mediterranean basin, a geopolitical configuration that would include Spain and Italy as well. The Mediterranean rim would form, in a post-core/periphery age, a geo-political formation brought together through the resonance of revolts, out of which other echoes would resonate. But a closer inspection underlines the more fundamental differences between what has occurred in the global "movement of the squares"—the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, the movement of the "indignados" in Spain, as well as the Occupy movement in the U.S., with its two poles of Wall Street and Oakland—and the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring cannot simply be folded into the fallout of the financial crisis of 2008. It is quite clear that even though North African countries like Tunisia and Egypt would necessarily feel its effects, it would not have the same kind of impact there as in industrial and post-industrial Europe and North America—and certainly not with the same immediacy. Instead, and this is essential, we can assign the triggering incident to that of a police murder, a murder by the State, in the form of the suicide of the street vendor in

Tunisia. This is what links the Arab Spring and the intensity of its initial emergence more closely to the 2005 banlieue riots in France, the British riots of 2011, and importantly, the riots of December 2008 in Greece. All three European events involved a murder committed by the police that triggered a ferocious reprisal. But in North Africa the riots managed to endure beyond the usual few days (though the French riots lasted as long as two weeks) and expand beyond the mere destruction of property, looting, and conflagration of State symbols (the burning of schools and police stations). They were able to consolidate in central urban places, and formalize their virulence into a single, simple watchword: "The people want the regime to fall."

The fundamental question posed by the Occupy movement in the U.S. is why the tactic of occupation had such a resonance, even before the Arab Spring. We should not forget that it was the University of California anti-austerity struggles of 2009–10 that put the tactic on the map, even as the UC student movement itself inherited the tactic from earlier initiatives in Europe, such as the anti-CPE struggles in France in 2006 and even the university occupation in Zagreb in 2009. It is also worth pointing out that many of the insurrectionary elements that helped organize the Oakland camp were veterans of the UC struggles of a few years before. What is perhaps most remarkable is the way in which the tactic of occupation itself was able to take root in a vastly different context, a transplantation that survived the passage from a small radical milieu on UC campuses to the complex class composition of the Oakland camps, with its convergence of increasingly immiserated petit-bourgeois elements—ex-students crushed by mountains of debt—and a large, predominantly black homeless population. Indeed, this convergence would necessarily reveal fractures and even antagonisms for which there would be no organizational or ideological fix available. The tactic of occupation—and we should be clear that, in the end, protestors did not occupy any buildings, met as they were by hundreds of police in riot suits—is an intense experience both because it is materially difficult to defend these claimed spaces and because of the subjective disposition it induces. You are always on the defensive—which was not the case with the dramatic port blockades pulled off in Oakland, or even in the failed actions to take buildings—constantly haunted by the sudden attack in the middle of the night by riot police who are massed just around the corner, armed with tear gas, rubber bullets, flashbang grenades, and zipties.

It is important when considering the appeal of occupation as a tactic to recall the form of struggle assumed by the anti-globalization movement, particularly during its peak phase between Seattle and Genoa. The summit-hopping tactics of the anti-capitalist movement, for all its numbers and intensity—bringing together a range of factions on the left, from liberals to organized labour, from the new social movements to black blocs, both Seattle and Genoa occasioned the most intense street battles witnessed since the 1960s—revealed a fundamental weakness: the inability of the movement to construct its own temporality. Not only did the movement fixate on the more institutional facades of the new, "imperial" form of power that emerged with the neoliberal restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, fetishizing political and juridical figurations of that power rather than attacking it at its heart—in the largely invisible penetration of micro-powers into the webs of everyday life on the one hand, and in the refinement of the global class relation on the other, now no longer tied to worker identity and the workers' movement—but the timing of its actions, however spectacular they may have been, was always determined by

the cadence of the State or its imperial successors. Empire should be understood as a certain rhythm of convocation, the capacity to determine when and where decisions regarding the destiny of a people (war, bank bailouts) are made, and at the level of the State, the capacity to call for elections, for a vote. What the Occupy movements were capable of, whether in the dramatic but qualified successes of the Arab Spring, or in the more equivocal experience of the movement of the squares in the West, was the construction of an immanent duration. This construction of its own temporality, of its own internal dynamics, was not, however, the formation of an interiority (or if it was, the fetishization of its own inner workings and operations almost always spelled doom). The trajectory of Occupy Oakland, whatever its future may be (and there is no assurance that it will have one), remains exemplary here. The occupation of Oscar Grant Plaza, and the growth of various organs capable of treating the contradictions and conflicts, established a temporality marked by this rhythm of conflict and the development of capacities for handling contradiction. What made it possible for this camp to prevent its own collapse is that the construction of its own temporality—its surges and retreats—was dependent on both the unpredictable, but inevitable, contingency of a police attack, as well as the outward projection of its own capacities into the city through the aforementioned successful port shutdowns and even in the failure to occupy buildings or create a defensible base for offensive actions to come.

What is remarkable about the experiences of the Arab Spring was their capacity to move on the basis of the contingent trigger of a police murder (even if this takes the form of a police attack followed by a suicide), from the punctual intensity of the anti-police riot to the immanent duration of occupation: an occupation of Tahrir Square that functioned as the site of convergence among various layers of the Egyptian population as well as a launching point for the counter-assault on the Mubarek regime. By way of a conclusion, it may be more relevant to address the situation in Greece, a country marked deeply and painfully by the global economic crisis and currently faced with devastating austerity measures imposed by a government of technocrats installed by their German financial masters. The protest there is remarkable for having brought together, in however fragmented and disconnected a manner, the anti-police riots of December 2008, the occupation of Syntagma square in 2011, and the massive general strikes that occurred on the occasion of parliamentary votes on austerity measures. What we see in these three elements is not only the actions undertaken by different social forces—the anarchists, immigrants and lumpen rioters, the futureless petit bourgeois of the square, and the remnants of the workers' movement in the general strikes—but rather three temporalities that seem to exist side-by-side, without yet finding their explosive articulation, without yet forcing Greece from revolt to revolution. As these three temporalities fuse together in a ruptural unity, the time of the State will buckle, and the time of riots will force open a new phase in the transition to life after capitalism. What will resurface is nothing less than what Marx, in an enigmatic but decisive phrase, called the "real movement of history."¹ X

Note

1. I want to thank Jasper Bernes in particular for helping shape some of these thoughts.

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