

The Arab upsurge and the “viral” revolutions of our times

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Abstract

The article discusses the Arab revolution in the context of long history of activism and struggles in the region, and calls for a questioning of the already available paradigms in social science regarding “movements,” and “activism,” as well the spread of movements all around the world, and the way they pose a challenge to traditional political organizing.

Introduction

Two decades ago mass movements had rocked the former socialist world, bringing down some of the most oppressive regimes of the last century, heralding the end of a long winter that had kept thought too imprisoned in the polarities of the Cold War. Amidst the jubilation that followed, was declared the final victory of liberal democracies. American neoconservative thinker Francis Fukuyama triumphantly declared that these movements did not merely signal the end of the cold war or a phase of human history but of history itself. This was a contemporary rendering of Hegel’s well known formulation about history as the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit that must reach its final destination, its *telos* in the Spirit’s self-realization. In Fukuyama’s rendering, the end of the socialist regimes was the final realization of History’s Meaning; it had arrived at its final destination – at the endpoint of humanity’s ideological evolution with the triumph of liberal democracy worldwide. Fukuyama and many others saw those mass movements for democracy as signaling the universalization of western liberal democracy and its establishment as the “final form of human government”.

The movements of 2011 are a sharp refutation of this celebration although initially appearing to be merely further manifestations of the spirit of 1989. After all, the “Arab spring” comprised a series of mass movements in what were essentially anti-democratic and tyrannical regimes. Wasn’t the explosion of the desire for democracy on what Asef Bayat called the “Arab street”, simply the desire of a deprived mass of Muslim citizens aspiring to western values? Wasn’t it yet another confirmation of the Fukuyama thesis that it is the desire for liberal democracy that is moving the world? And what greater confirmation can we possibly require but the fact that it was in the “Islamic” world, battered out of shape by the US led “war on terror”, that the desire for democracy was the greatest? The US and its allies with their relentless push to export democracy to this part of the world, at last seemed to have found a vindication in these mass upsurges.

This was the reading offered by many analysts and commentators in the Western media. In India, strangely, there was a confused silence for a long time. Events in Tunisia and Egypt were not reported for quite some time in the “free press” of the “world’s largest democracy”. And when the Indian media did wake up to those earthshaking events, it could only see in them an affirmation of the western values of democracy and liberalism, conducted through nothing more than the “facebook activism” of the new generation.

Even in the western media though, not all reports were blind to the range of energies emanating from a number of different developments that had come together to produce the “Arab Spring”. Thus an important report in *The Guardian* (London), offered a more complex account of the movement in Egypt that overthrew the regime of Hosni Mubarak (Dreyfuss 2011). In its words, it was “a movement led by tech-savvy students and twentysomethings – labour activists, intellectuals, lawyers, accountants, engineers – that had its origins in a three-year-old textile strike in the Nile Delta and the killing of a 28-year-old university graduate, Khaled Said”. At its centre was “an alliance of Egyptian opposition groups, old and new.”

The April 6 Youth Movement had come into existence in 2008 in support of the ongoing workers’ struggle in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra, primarily on issues related to wages. The struggle in the past few years also moved towards a restructuring of unions that had hitherto functioned with government appointed leaders. The list of demands for the April 6 strike also included a demand for raising the national minimum wages that had remained stagnant for over two and a half decades. Increasing workers’ militancy over the past few years, we learnt from another report, was a direct response to the World Bank imposed “reforms” that had pushed lives of industrial labour to the brink (*Democracy Now!* 2011). It was this sharpening conflict, arising from the serious impact of structural adjustment policies, that provides the backdrop in which the middle class youth decided to rally in support of the April 6 2008 strike. It was they who converted the call for an industrial strike into a general strike.¹

In the Indian media there was absolutely no sense of this complex picture. Going by reports here, the Arab Spring would seem to have been the exclusive production of the “networking babalog”. “Babalog” is a term often used to refer, sometimes derisively, to privileged upwardly mobile youth. Some of these reports and comments constituted a peculiar mixture of derision and awe, of non-seriousness and celebration at the same time. (See for instance Dasgupta 2011).

¹ The strike of course, did not eventually take place as factories were occupied by the armed forces from three days before it was supposed to begin, as Stanford University professor Joel Beinin, also former director of Middle East Studies at the American University of Cairo, informed viewers in a *Democracy Now!* interview (*Democracy Now!* 2011). The mass demonstration that did take place faced a brutal crackdown, one that has perhaps become a memory that has fuelled the gathering anger over subsequent years.

If sharpening class conflict provided one window into the great upsurge that overthrew the despotic regime of Hosni Mubarak, it was certainly not the only one. *The New York Times* recognized the *pan-Arab* nature of the new movement facilitated by the Internet. What it did not recognize – and nor did most other commentators who saw some sort of victory of Western values in these protests and struggles – is that the pan-Arab sentiment was at one level, decidedly *against* the US and its war in the Arab world. And in the Egyptian case, at least, this was inescapably so, given that Mubarak was the protector of US-Israeli interests in the region.

This sentiment, as Asef Bayat has pointed out, is deeply interwoven with the sentiments of the second Palestinian intifada. “Arab street politics”, he says, “assumed a distinctively pan-Arab expanse in response to Israel’s incursions into the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, and the Anglo-US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.” In fact, Bayat suggests, it is the Palestinian intifada that “remains a role model and inspiration to today’s protesters”. Right from the first intifada (1987 to 1993), that involved almost the entire Palestinian population including women and children, nonviolent resistance to occupation was the primary mode of struggle: civil disobedience, strikes, demonstrations, withholding taxes and product boycotts (Bayat 2011a). It is also worth underlining that Kefaya [Enough], the other major coalition behind the Egypt uprising, owes its origins directly to the second intifada (See also Shorbagy 2007). Bayat suggests a wider connection between the struggles in what he calls “this incipient post-Islamist middle east.” Here, prevailing popular movements “assume a post-nationalist, post-ideological, civil and democratic character” where Iran’s ‘green movement’, the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian revolution become all of a piece (Bayat 2011b).

Whether or not one agrees with the analysis presented by Bayat, it seems undeniable that both in terms of the forms through which the movements express themselves and their “content” there is something fundamentally new and different that has come into view.

Thinking about the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions is no easy task. Standard tools of political analysis seem to be of little help. The discipline of political science has, of course, very little to say that is relevant about anything “political” in today’s world. Its preoccupation with parties, “party-systems”, “mobilization”, elections, and governance, or with even with “civil society”, rights and “social justice”, or “cosmopolitanism” has little to contribute in making sense of some of these “new revolutions of our times”.²

Even “democracy” makes very little sense once political scientists are through with it. What for instance, does “democracy” mean when masses of people decide to stake their lives to come out on the Asian streets of Yangon (Rangoon), Lahore, Bangkok (Kathmandu is a more complicated, if also more conventional scenario) and now in the cities of Tunisia, Egypt and other parts of the Arab

² The phrase ‘new revolution of our time/s’ is paraphrased from the title of Ernesto Laclau’s well-known book (see Laclau 1997).

world? Democracy here is not the name of some insipid liberal procedural arrangement where sterile debate always inevitably drowns all real concerns of inequality, poverty and domination. It is, rather, an empty signifier of sorts, invested with desires of all kinds, ranging from the desire to be free to the desire to consume. The eruption of “democracy” in mass movements in the early years of the twenty-first century, I shall suggest below, also points to a certain impatience with formal arrangements and institutional forms of politics even in the heart of what are seen as flourishing democracies. In that sense, the revolutions and rebellions in the Arab world, directed against oppressive and corrupt dictatorial regimes that preside over these countries, seem to be more than just that. Yes, the people want a say in the way things happen, in the way their future is determined, but perhaps there is something more here that needs decoding. It seems to me that these revolutions point to new forms of mobilization and new political practices and new subjectivities in ways that call for thinking afresh *the nature of “the political” itself*.

It is also important, it seems to me, to underline here that these developments are extremely complex and do not give us the luxury of either unproblematically celebrating them or simply condemning them. They no longer provide us with the luxury of choosing between Good and Evil as though they are always clearly pitted on opposite sides. This particular circumstance becomes most clearly visible in what I want to call the *postnational moment*.

The Postnational Moment

I use the term “postnational” in a very different sense from that which is usually attached to it – namely that of the supersession of the nation-state by global forces, institutions and processes. This is the sense in which most Western theorists like Habermas and scholars based there use the term. My use of the term involves the recognition that nations, nation-states and nationalisms can no longer provide the ethical horizon of critique, besieged as they are by a whole array of challenges from within – from cultures that were once sought to be erased for the nation to come to its own. The postnational moment is thus not simply about the supplanting of the national by the global but a much more complex process.³

Consider this: The Egyptian revolution was inspired by the Tunisian that just preceded it. And both together inspire the rebellions and revolutions across the rest of the Arab world that followed thereafter. All these revolutions, despite their ineluctably domestic roots, draw inspiration in some form or the other, from other movements in other places, in other contexts, just as they, in turn, inspire other movements in other parts of the globe.

³ This idea has been explored by a group of South Asian scholars based in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India, over a period of time and the papers that deal with different aspects of the idea have been published in a special number of *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay, India), Volume 44, No. 10, March 7 – March 13, 2009.

Thus, at one level, the April 6 Youth Movement – one of the key networks in Egypt – was in turn indirectly “inspired” by Otpor! [Resist!], the Serbian group that was instrumental in the anti-Milosevic mobilizations and which is credited with having played a key role in bringing down that regime in 2000.⁴ Otpor! also has had a more direct relationship with groups like PORA [It's Time!] that played a crucial role in the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004-2005 that reversed the run-off vote of 2004 by forcing a re-election. Otpor! and PORA are said to have been directly or indirectly inspired by the writings of Gene Sharp, whose book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, became a veritable bible for PORA!, according to one of its leaders Oleh Kyriyenko, and made its way into other groups struggling against dictatorships. Sharp's books and ideas emphasize non-violent mass action as the most effective way of challenging the power of dictatorships, and not surprisingly, draw on the ideas and work of Gandhi and Thoreau.⁵

It is interesting to think of the way different points in this tale connect; how different struggles draw sustenance from each earlier struggle – in some other place, some other time. And not always do these struggles obey the normative logic of old left-wing nationalisms; they may indeed seem a bit unpalatable to our thoroughly trained taste-buds. Thus, when it is revealed that Otpor! at some point, had received funds from US government agencies like USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, we can easily understand the motives of these institutions in providing such funds (“to promote US friendly democracy”, says the website of one of these organization). It is far more difficult for us to imagine the motivation of these movements in accepting huge amounts of US funding.

And before we get into some simplistic regurgitation of the familiar story of “CIA-inspired movements”, let us remind ourselves that Otpor! started out as a student outfit in the University of Belgrade in 1998, as a reaction to repressive laws promulgated by the government. It was probably around the time of the Kosovo war and the NATO bombing that it gained much greater popular support and US agencies also stepped in. The reasons why organizations like these might accept US support are not as simple as they might seem to be, for they range from amassing international support for the internal struggle to more simplistic and naive celebrations of a thing called “democracy” that apparently the US (and the West) has and which can deliver societies living under dictatorships to freedom. These struggles are postnational not only in that they establish connections with movements and struggles beyond their borders; they are also postnational because they are not averse to using the support of ‘external powers’ or states to aid their internal struggles – anathema

⁴ See Al Jazeera report, February 9, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrNzOdZgqN8> last accessed on 23 February 2012

⁵ The point of this reference to Gene Sharp is, of course, not to suggest that movements in the Arab world could not or would not have arisen without it but rather to emphasize the ways in which different impulses come together and how, in the midst of struggle, movements draw resources from wherever they can.

to all nationalisms. However troubling this may be to us, the fact is that often struggles against oppressive “third world” dictatorships do not have the luxury of choosing the “anti-imperialist” side, where many such despots stand.

This is where the Arab revolutions made a significant break from outfits like Otpor! The one clear non-negotiable in the pan-Arab struggles is the question of Palestine and role of the Israeli-US axis there. And with the so-called “war on terror” becoming the justification for the worst kind of war crimes and bombing of cities and civilian populations, the anti-US and anti-Israeli sentiment is at an all time high. Not surprisingly then, the movements combine their anger against their own despotic rulers with the gathering revolt against the global despotism of the US-Israeli forces. However, even in the Arab case, Libya is a case in point where the messy postnational logic played itself out to the fullest. There we had a “radical”, “anti-imperialist” despot Gaddafi, ranged against a mass movement that had to be eventually supported by Western powers militarily. This was a case that truly split the Left everywhere. In India, the Left, by and large, confined itself to making statements about imperialist aggression in Libya while maintaining silence on the mass opposition to Gaddafi and sons.

The Viral Spread

As we know, the eruptions in the Arab world did not remain confined to that region, their effects soon reverberating in the very heart of the Western world. The militant mass protests of students against fee hikes in Europe and Britain towards the end of 2010 had seemed to be an aberration but suddenly things changed rapidly. With mass sit-ins and demonstrations in Madrid, Barcelona and other Spanish cities, primarily against the multi-million Euro bailout plans for banks, militant street demonstrations in Greece and finally the Occupy Wall Street movement that started in New York and spread to other cities in the United States and to other parts of the world, another related but different story started emerging.

From the *indignados* in Spain and Greece to the Occupy Wall Street movement, the one thing that bound these movements was the demand for democracy – “real democracy” and “direct democracy”, as opposed to the sham that went by that name in these “advanced democracies”. Not surprisingly, the western media fell silent. Wasn’t this going against the script of politics as liberals had written it? Hadn’t we already arrived at the final destination of human society’s political development? After all, the Arab story was only about a “democracy deficit” in societies ruled by despots. What was happening now in the very heart of the “democratic world” was upsetting the happy belief that the West had conned itself into believing. All the more so because all the new upsurges identified themselves very clearly and unequivocally with the new wind that had started blowing from the Arab desert lands. “Tahrir Square” became an addition to the lexicon of these twenty-first century struggles. As one report in *Der Spiegel* (2011) put it:

The protesters have occupied the square for days now, with some comparing the gatherings to those that took place on Cairo’s Tahrir Square earlier this year, and demonstrations also continued for the fifth day in a row on Thursday in Barcelona, Valencia, Bilbao and Santiago de Compostela. Spaniards living abroad have also set up protest camps outside the country’s embassies in Berlin, Paris, London and Amsterdam. Most of the events have been organized online. After organizing demonstrations in around 50 cities last Sunday, the Real Democracy Now movement became a household name virtually overnight.

Two features stood out in all these movements – both of which we in India had already witnessed in the course of a massive anti-corruption movement that had swept India in the period between the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. The first was the strident rhetoric, not simply against the ruling party but *against politics as such*. It wasn’t one particular party but the entire domain of politics that was seen as suspect. Politics, that is, politics conducted through the political party, was increasingly seen as having hijacked “popular will” and transformed ordinary lives into pawns in the corporate game of profit-seeking. Thus for instance, a report in the French Left-wing paper, *l’Humanité* (2011) observed:

No trade union, let alone a political party. The workings of traditional dispute are outmoded, and even deliberately excluded. Internet, through the exchange in real time via social networks and chats, has allowed the emergence of a spontaneous free and radical protest movement by a generation that’s had enough...

...What is expressed is anger, a desire for radical change and a rejection of all traditional forms of politics. Which explains the refusal to be co-opted by any political party or trade union and calls to spoil ballot cards or vote blank. Confidence in the Spanish democratic system is broken; the indignants have the impression that their voices are never heard. The descent into the street came naturally, as an extension. The street is also where they want to be heard.

The second outstanding feature was the focus on *corruption*. “Robbery”, “thievery” and “corruption” were recurrent motifs in the movements across Europe and the United States.

And so it was with the anti-corruption movement in India – also known as the Anna Hazare movement after its figure-head leader – in India.⁶ Following on the heels of a series of exposures of corruption in high places where corporate loot and crony capitalism had been having a field day, the movement gave voice to people who do not otherwise participate in politics. Once again, the feeling that the hard earned money of the tax payer was being squandered was palpable. Once again, our leftist and radical thinkers of all hues, found

⁶ Anna Hazare is a 74 year old rustic Gandhian with an extremely idiosyncratic style. Before this movement his name has been associated with the ecological and economic regeneration of a village in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, which was long celebrated as a model by environmentalists. His paternalistic style has of course, come in for a lot of criticism from some quarters – not without justification.

themselves as always, in a quandary, completely missing the significance of what was going on.

Indeed, that was the strength of the movement: that it focused on one single issue on which everyone from left to right, from workers cheated of wages to sections of the corporate world, could all join in. The “Anna Hazare” movement was important precisely because it steered clear of what radicals wanted it to do, that is, take a stand on everything in the world. For that would have left, in the end, a motley crowd of radicals with their slogans and little else. Parenthetically, an additional point needs to be made here: Unlike many of the other movements that I have discussed here, the Anna Hazare movement also shared in some ways the old hierarchical pattern insofar as the charismatic figure of Anna Hazare was quite critical to the movement and unlike many of the other movements, after a certain point it received a very powerful backing from sections of the mainstream media.

There is a complicated dynamic to this process, the details of which we cannot possibly go into here. Suffice it to say that in the initial phases, from November 2010 to April 2011 (when Hazare sat on indefinite fast), the media had largely ignored it. Even on the first two days of the fast, scholars tracking the media response claim, it was not of much concern to the media. It was basically in this period that, with the number of Facebook supporters of the movement suddenly hitting 400,000 and with many media personalities sensing that something big might be in the offing, that its stance underwent a significant change. This shift was particularly visible in the electronic media whose advertising revenues depend crucially in what are called TRPs (Television Rating Point) and this is skewed in favour of the urban, consuming middle classes. Concerned media groups calculated that TRPs would shoot up drastically if they were to throw their weight behind the movement.

Also important was the movement’s steadfast refusal to enter the political domain; its demand that their voice – and of citizens in general – be heard in and of itself, refusing the legitimation offered by channels of party representation.

In the Indian instance, this movement became the occasion for a vigorous debate on democracy itself. While the champions of the movement spoke in the name of some form of “direct democracy”, establishment intellectuals saw in it a dangerous swerve towards mob-rule. The call to enact laws on the streets, as the movement in their perception seemed to be doing, was a call to anarchy. After all, law-making was the prerogative of the parliament.⁷ It is a different matter,

⁷ The reference to law-making here is because the movement explicitly demanded the enactment of a legislation that would provide for an Ombudsman-type of institution that would deal with complaints of corruption. This demand actually merely picked up a proposal made by the Government of India’s own Administrative Reforms Committee, way back in 1968. It had thus remained on paper for well over four decades. It is a different matter, of course, whether the law alone can deal with a matter like corruption in general. However, to be fair, here the emphasis was on political corruption and the ways in which it lent itself to large-scale corporate control over and swindling of people’s resources.

of course, that the parliament whose prerogative it was to draft the legislation, preferred to sleep over it for well over four decades. Clearly, two different conceptions of democracy were at issue here. One that insisted on its formal aspects – elections and representation, and the other articulated in the speeches of Anna Hazare and his colleagues that invoked the Constitution to say that the people and not the representatives are the real sovereign. At some level, it is this second notion of democracy that seems to be animating movements across the world. Representation, especially as mediated through the party, is seen as thoroughly suspect.

In India's history there has been a robust tradition of critique of this notion of party representation, especially in the writings of thinkers like MN Roy and Jaya Prakash Narayan and the argument has been often made that representatives elected on party tickets are answerable only to the party that gives them the ticket to contest elections, rather than to the people who elect them. In such a situation, to repose faith in the fact that members of parliament are “elected representatives of the people” is disingenuous to say the least.

Looking at the entire range of movements that erupted across the globe this year, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that, at the very least, they seek to redefine democracy itself, taking it away from the powers-that-be and the way they have defined it so far. At a very profound level, it seems that this round of global mass movements will initiate – indeed, it *must* initiate – a fresh thinking about *politics itself*. Older notions of politics may not seem workable now, especially as a new generation brought up in the post-Cold-War era takes centre stage. Twentieth century shibboleths mean little to them and they are in continuous conversation across the globe and across “ideologies”, through the Internet.

The Party-Form and the Implosion of the Political

There is something very strikingly similar between these movements and the revolutions that brought down the state socialist regimes of Eastern Europe. Those too were inspired by “democracy” – and once again, the term there stood in for a range of concerns from freedom to market and consumption.

But more importantly, both, it seems to me, signal the last days of the particular form – the party form – that structured all of modern politics in the last two centuries or so. There is at the very least an exhaustion and weariness with the form of politics mediated by parties. As Shorbagy put it: “Right from the very beginning, Kefaya has identified the established political parties as part of the problem not the solution” (Shorbagy 2007). Other analysts and scholars too have underlined this aspect of the more pervasive movements across the Arab world, namely their weariness of traditional party politics (Bayat 2011a) or its virtual absence (Dabashi 2011).

To the party-form belongs the hijacking of popular initiative and will (or may we say, desire?), such as is expressed either in mass revolts or in elections. To this form belongs the history of 20th century totalitarianisms. For it is this form that

has revealed itself, especially since the last decades of the previous century, as the instrument for *the destruction of politics within the formal domain of politics* – a phenomenon I have referred to elsewhere as the “implosion of the political” (Nigam 2008). This seems as true of societies where parties have become instruments of naked dictatorial power as it is of those where they function in a formal democracy but increasingly begin to look like one another. If in Egypt they had all reduced themselves to the position of Mubarak’s “loyal opposition”, in the more “advanced democracies” they have all come to mirror each other. There is little difference today between parties and their programmes in almost all so-called democracies across the western world.

Politics has thus ceased to take place in this formal domain, inhabited by parties and structured by the logic of representation. The enunciation of anything that even remotely seems to challenge the “normal” order of things has been carefully excised from this domain and it is precisely the party-form that has been the key instrument in this operation. As a consequence, mass politics and opposition on the streets too has been completely erased, except when marauding proto-fascist groups and parties choose to unleash their bloody politics on the streets. In the Indian context, in the place of “politics” we now have sterile parliamentary non-debates, farcical boycotts of parliament sessions over trivial matters and the installation of the television studio as the arena of phantom political conflicts.

Between the parliament and the television studio we have the complete disjunction of “party-politics” from popular mass struggles and everyday life. Had it not been for the on-going struggles over land and mass dispossession of the peasantry, we might perhaps have forgotten that there is anything like social conflict in Indian society any more.

It is this form that is now increasingly becoming suspect for mass movements all over the world. It is not that new modes of rule have been found – and so, inevitably, every revolution ends up overthrowing the power of dictatorial regimes, only to be replaced by new parties, all wanting to head in the same direction. That was particularly the case with the erstwhile socialist states, but it is also true of many other revolts of recent times including Otpor! which subsequently split into a party wing and a movement wing. The difference now is that today we are no longer innocent about parties and their professed claims of ideology.

Even in India, where people routinely vote in elections and often in large numbers, they now seldom do so because they believe in the ideological platform of the party they vote for; most often they vote tactically, because they must keep certain channels of access to power open for themselves, which they have carefully built over time. Recent struggles and movements here have widely exhibited this pervasive distrust of the party-form. It is the biggest fiction manufactured by the discipline of political science and political theory over the past centuries that it is popular will that constitutes political power and that parties and leaders merely “represent” the “people”. Marxism too reproduced this fiction; all it had to say by way of innovation was that the real party that

expressed the will of the people was the party that expressed the telos of History, viz. their own party. The new movements and struggles are no longer innocently prepared to buy this. Probably, that is why they do not attempt to take power.

While the struggles in the erstwhile state-socialist world belonged to the pre-Internet era, a crucial difference today is the mediation of the Internet and other new media forms. In this context, the suggestion about the viral nature of contemporary struggles made around the turn of the century by Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, seem apposite here. Movements and struggles at the beginning of the 21st century, they suggest, increasingly take the form of a virus that travels across frontiers and attaches itself to any “hospitable” body. Clearly, a hospitable body is one that is already vulnerable by virtue of its having lost the support of the large majority of its population. This viral struggle is facilitated and in fact, made possible by the Internet. New networks of horizontal communication have done something more: they have eliminated the need for a centralized organization with a centralized command structure by opening out avenues of horizontal communication. This much is clear and, by now, not particularly new. After all, it is ten years since *Empire* hit the scene. What remains to be addressed is the problem of new forms of power and new formations of the political.

The Conundrum

Clearly, we are living in an interregnum when the old forms of politics have become moribund and obsolete but new ones have not yet emerged. And so, as the tide of mass struggles recedes older animosities and sectarian conflicts, unthinkable outside the form of party-politics, make their appearance again. In this interregnum, once the moment of struggle is over, once the old regimes have been dismantled, we are left with the same old framework of elections. Once again parties step into the breach. Once again things seem to flow irreversibly back into familiar, recognizable patterns.

But it would be a mistake to imagine that this is yet another manifestation of the old pattern in which parties and vanguards have their final moment of glory, riding in on the back of popular unrest. Something, clearly, is waiting to be articulated in this relentless refusal of the political. And yet, it is not that politics as such has come to an end. Rather, the more “the political” gets evacuated of politics, the more politics appears everywhere else.

Rethinking the idea of the political and of politics as such, I suggest, entails a re-examination of the entire conceptual paraphernalia of political science and political theory premised as it is on what can only be called the dramaturgy of the will. It is as though “people” by definition are creatures of “the will to power”, and that it is they who constitute the foundation of all politics. Thus when they participate in elections and cast their vote, they are seen to be exercising their will in electing their representatives. The reality that all the contemporary movements point towards, on the other hand, is precisely the

opposite: the domain of politics and the arena of democracy are the field of vanguards – creatures of the will *par excellence*, who usurp the sole right to speak and decide *in the name of the people*. What happens if we deprive these vanguards of the right to speak in the name of any such fictional collectivity? What if we see the act of participation in elections as a complex game that ordinary folk are forced to enter into and play with the political class in order to open channels to power that would otherwise be outside their reach?

The point I am making here is not that ordinary people are unconcerned with politics; rather their engagement with politics is mediated by a number of other quotidian concerns. It is when things become unbearable in some sense that mass movements of the type that we have been witnessing lately, take place. That is when concerns are perhaps articulated in their sharpest form. But in no case do we have “the masses” themselves making a claim for power, only vanguards who speak in their name. It is a weariness with this experience through the twentieth century that has now made it imperative that all such creatures of the will be excluded: that they be considered as part of the problem and not the solution.

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