

The arc of civil liberation: Obama–Tahrir–Occupy

Philosophy and Social Criticism

39(4-5) 341–347

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0191453713477349

psc.sagepub.com



Jeffrey C. Alexander

Yale University, USA

Abstract

Despite anxieties about the growing power of neo-liberalism, the crisis of the EU and the upsurge of right-wing political movements, it is important to recognize that utopian movements on the left have also in recent years been symbolically revitalized and organizationally sustained. This article analyses three recent social upheavals as utopian civil society movements, placing the 2008 US presidential campaign of Barack Obama, the Egyptian uprising in Tahrir Square and the Occupy Movement in the USA inside the narrative arc that began with the non-violent democratic uprisings against authoritarian governments four decades earlier. In this new utopian surge, however, there is an unprecedented connection of eastern and western impulses, demonstrating that the tide of democratic thought and action is hardly confined to Judeo-Christian civilizations.

Keywords

Civil sphere, global civil society, Barack Obama, Occupy, Tahrir Square, utopia

In this article I wish to explore the recent intertwining of meanings between ‘East’ and ‘West’ by linking tightly together three recent social upheavals that disrupted world routines and inspired the global collective imaginary – the first Obama presidential campaign, the Egyptian revolution, and Occupy Wall Street. These movements, I suggest, should be seen not simply politically, as struggles for state power, but as symbolic upheavals in the spiritual hearts of their own nations and in other societies around the globe. Emotionally laden eruptions of utopian possibility, these performances wildly inspired their immediate participants, and projected ‘tableaux’ beyond the scene, to tens of millions in the national and global citizen audiences who fused with the performances from outside.

Corresponding author:

Jeffrey C. Alexander, Room 203, 493 College Street, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511-8933, USA.

Email: jeffrey.alexander@yale.edu

A version of this article was presented at the Reset-Dialogues Istanbul Seminars 2012 (‘The Promises of Democracy in Troubled Times’) that took place at Istanbul Bilgi University from 19–24 May 2012.

These symbolic eruptions form a narrative arc, the sequential iteration of a utopian performance that, over recent decades, has become a deeply engrained culture structure in global civil society. This ‘global civil society social movement’ (Khosrokhavar, 2012) can be seen as a kind of recombinant social DNA. The utopian ideal of civil solidarity sits uneasily in a world of social inequality and individual restriction. Dissatisfaction with existing social arrangements is chronic. Civil society becomes restlessness. Episodes of liminality and demands for civil repair are the periodic result.

The utopian idea of a solitary community composed of autonomous yet mutually responsible citizens has been at the heart of western modernity since the city-states of the Renaissance. In the 17th- and 18th-century revolutions in Britain, America and France, the civil imaginary was crystallized in democratic revolutions that made constitutionally regulated and self-governing communities of citizens the new rulers of their respective states. With the rise of industrial capitalism in the mid-19th century, the program for political democracy came to be gradually displaced by the ‘social question’, a focus on class inequality that pushed for socialism rather than democracy. Efforts to control the ravages of industrial capitalism and imperialism demanded the creation of enormous state bureaucracies. In the crush of these newly insistent interests, the civil society imperative was often pushed aside. Revolutionary strategy shifted from public mobilization to clandestine militancy, and violent political organizations became *de rigueur* on the left and right.

The most remarkable political development over the last four decades has been the withering of state-centrism and Jacobin ideals. Democracy has re-emerged as a radical idea and civil society as a revolutionary movement. In 1981, to the astonishment of liberal, radical and conservative pundits alike, the ‘Solidarity’ movement emerged in Poland. It was repressed the year after, but the decade that followed enshrined its idea of democratic civil society as a radical, revolution-inspiring goal. The blossoming of newly democratic Spain defied predictions that Franco’s passing would trigger a bloody civil war. The ‘flower power’ of the Philippine ‘People’s Revolution’ compelled Ferdinand Marcos to flee and the military to accede power to the million protesters in Manila’s public square. Throughout the Southern Cone of Latin America, civilian governments pushed military juntas aside.

That first arc of global civil society movements culminated in the magical year of ‘1989’, when one communist dictatorship after another fell before non-violent velvet revolutions. In June 1989, the communist state in China nearly met its match in Tiananmen Square. In 1990, pressure from global civil society compelled a peaceful transition to multicultural democracy in South Africa.

The 1980s created a new script for revolutionary social upheaval, one that left the utopia of socialism and the repertoire of violent militancy behind. Shifting from the proletariat to cross-class coalitions, from vanguard to mass participation, and from violence to non-violence, the series of utopian uprisings made civil society seem radical. This story of liberation was constructed in familiar narrative patterns, as a movement of purity from danger, of light breaking through darkness, of enslaved peoples breaking their chains. But the characters who enacted this narrative had now changed. They took global politics in a new direction, back from 1917 and 1933 to 1789 and 1776. A new world revolution was being born (Sobral, 2011).

In recent times, this narrative arc has been projected once again. It began with the national and worldwide effervescence of the ‘Obama for President’ campaign in 2008, swept through North Africa and the Middle East in the spring and summer of 2011, and occupied Wall Street in the autumn of that year. The restless arc of civil utopia has not yet crested. Russia is on its trajectory as well.

‘Obama’

One can explain the two-year campaign that Obama waged for the American presidency as a struggle for political power, filled with strategy and money and ending with a resounding, if still relatively narrow, majority of votes. One can also understand these pre-presidential Obama years as a utopian social movement. Obama’s rise inspired tens of millions of Americans to hope and believe – in the unifying, egalitarian and individually liberating possibilities of the civil sphere (Alexander, 2010). The delirium of Obama’s rallies marked liminal interruptions of public space, civil rituals that resounded with democratic effervescence. Obama’s person became an iconic symbol radiating an aura of fundamental social change. His triumphal progress signaled inclusion over exclusion, hope over fear, civil solidarity over fragmentation, the victory of democratic justice over cynical resignation to the abuses of power. ‘O-ba-MA, O-ba-MA, O-ba-MA’ was the call of a people’s movement, of the civil sacred challenging the anti-civil profane, of purity winning out against danger, of the street beating the establishment, of citizen-organizing defeating money and institutions.

The difficulties encountered by Obama-in-Office should hardly be surprising. The utopian hopes his campaign stirred and embodied could never be satisfied by the mundane machinery of government. Indeed, Obama himself seemed the victim of his own utopian aspirations. The President seemed to believe that his political enemies would help him restore civil solidarity. Humiliated by political catastrophe, Republicans were prepared to do no such thing. Obama’s dream of civil repair was defeated by brilliant Republican partisanship, which made a farce of his utopian aspirations. But in his winning 2012 presidential campaign, Obama’s utopian social movement rose from the ashes to victory once again.

Tahrir

It was only weeks after Republicans handed Obama his head on a platter – in the November 2010 Congressional elections – that the restless arc of civil social movement stretched to North Africa and the Middle East. Like the rise of Obama, the Arab Spring was totally unexpected. It was experienced as a volcanic eruption of almost foolhardy aspiration, and few believed it could be sustained. Yet, Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution triggered a whole series of uprisings, the lava eventually flowing to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and Syria. There had, in fact, been an intellectual revolution in the Arab world, an internal political-cultural development that, pushing back against Occidentalism, socialism and violent Islamism, tentatively embraced the tenets of liberal if not secular democracy.

Yet it was in Tahrir, in Egypt, that this unexpected outpouring of radical democratic sentiment symbolically peaked. In this nation in the heart of the Arab world, the drama of

democracy played out over 18 days. There were many hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, but the millions of protestors remained non-violent. Tahrir Square became a microcosm of civil utopia (Alexander, 2011). The 25 January movement did not just protest and demand it, but performatively enacted it. The narratives of Tahrir projected by mainstream, alternative and social media featured cross-class and cross-religious solidarities. Egypt was being born again, rising like a phoenix from the suffering and humiliation of the Mubarak regime.

Whether this is a stillbirth has not yet been decided. The Egyptian army stepped aside during the 18 days of revolt, promising to institutionalize the civil revolution. In the aftermath, they became its greatest roadblock. The subsequent rise to political power of the Muslim Brotherhood has sometimes occluded the message of January 25 in a discouraging way. Whatever the results, like 'Obama' and the Polish Solidarity movements before it, Tahrir projected meanings in public far beyond the boundaries of the Egyptian nation-state. The revolution's English Facebook page projected its narrative of civil revolution around the globe, receiving tens of thousands of wildly supportive posts. The Egyptian revolution captured the global imaginary; it became a neon-lit symbol of human courage, a flashing advertisement for the possibility of democratic social mobilization against the powers-that-be.

'The People Want the End of the Regime', 'The People Want the End of Military Trials', 'The People Want the Rule of Law' – these chants from Tahrir Square reverberated not only across the Middle Eastern and North Africa, but Europe and North America as well. After watching one western government after another embrace the restrictive demands of fiscal austerity, massive demonstrations broke out in Madrid, in London, in Tel Aviv, and in Madison, Wisconsin. They were pushbacks of civil against market society, protests against the craven submission of democratic governments to failed corporate and financial elites. Among these massed demonstrators, explicit references to 'Tahrir' frequently appeared. If Egypt had provided a live performance of civil power in the East, in the West it was now being replayed. The corporate-communist masters in China filtered out every Internet reference to the words 'Egyptian revolution'. Russia's rulers could not do the same, and they may live to rue the day.

The western iterations of Tahrir had distinctive icons and slogans. As for icons, Guy Fawkes made frequent appearances; the grinning white-faced anti-hero of the 1605 British 'Gunpowder Plot' who had metamorphized in the 2006 comic book *V for Vendetta*, which the Wachowski Brothers turned into a commercially successful film (Sobral, 2011). As for slogans, none approached 'We are the 99%'. As the arc of civil upheaval spread westward and eastward from Cairo, the most potent poetic transliteration came from New York. As a retrospective in *The New York Times* (January 11 2011) put it: 'The idea, according to some organizers, was to camp out for weeks or even months to replicate the kind, if not the scale, of protests that had erupted earlier in 2011 in places as varied as Egypt, Spain and Israel.'

Occupy Wall Street

'Occupy Wall Street' was stunning and unexpected, a random electric spark that started a hot brush fire. The American left had been prostrate, the Tea Party in command and the Obama revolution seemingly in full retreat. Initially derided, the scruffy gathering of a

few hundred protestors in Zuccotti Park soon became a catalysing social event. Powerful ideological statements are metaphors, creating new relations among previously disparate social elements. Propelled by felicitous performances, ideological metaphors can make meaning public in new and surprisingly consequential ways.

'Occupy Wall Street' was virtual, not literal, as brilliantly felicitous as any performance in a particular time and place can be. It symbolically thrust the critical, demanding and egalitarian spirit of American democracy into the stultifying and musky chambers of elites. If its message and effect were symbolic, the performance itself was physically demanding. There were rain, tents, dirt, police attacks, and it lasted more than 60 days. Efforts to repress Occupy triggered immediate and effusive outpourings of public sympathy, the dirt and tents and the non-violence and the human microphone gradually garnering grudging admiration.

By sticking it out, and publicly sticking it to the financial and corporate elite, Occupy embodied the ongoing struggle between civil and market society. Occupy had no real demands, but that was the point. Experts inside and outside the beltway had been churning out policy proposals for years. It was the performance of Occupy that was itself the achievement. Riveting citizen-audience attention well beyond the relatively narrow bandwidth of frustrated progressives, Occupy commanded the means of symbolic production – network and cable news, front pages of newspapers and leading blog sites. It supplied its own facilities as well, live cam streams to cable TV, cell phone pictures leaping to websites around nation and world. Its gutsy, aggressive, yet determinedly civil performance of social justice earned Occupy a distinctive mystique, an aura of sacrality that provided protection against repressive moves from the state. The protests had the wind of public opinion at their back. If Mubarak's army was afraid to intervene in Tahrir, how much more reluctant were the police forces of a relatively democratic state?

Zuccotti Park did not change policy, elect new representatives, or lower the unemployment rate.¹ What it did was create a vastly more energetic and critical form of civil power. One way to understand this upgrade is how it energized the left. Iterations of Occupy sprang up in more than 150 cities: Occupy Oakland, Occupy Los Angeles, Occupy Chicago, even Occupy New Haven and Yale. A coalition of 70 liberal organizations, the 'American Dream Movement', formed to provide material and support.

But the impact of these liminal performances went beyond the audience on the left. It entered into the center of American collective consciousness. As a front-page article in *The New York Times* (December 1 2011) put it: 'The 99% Has Become an Ingrained part of the Cultural Lexicon.' One per cent and 99 per cent became magical numbers, culture structures that redistributed civil sacred and profane, morally re-weighting economic and political 'realities'. Long viewed as bungling but not venal, and certainly worth saving, the financial and corporate elite now became the vilified and polluted 'One Per Cent'. The masses of struggling Americans, formerly characterized as hapless objects – victims, shlepers and pretty much schmucks – were transformed into the purified 'Ninety-Nine Per Cent', a collective agent demanding justice, a maligned hero finally fighting back.

In a very short time, this movement has dramatically changed how we think about occupation. In early September, 'occupy' signaled ongoing military incursions. Now it

signifies progressive political protest. It is no longer primarily about force of military power; instead it signifies standing up to injustice, inequality and abuse of power. It is no longer about simply occupying a space; it is about transforming that space (*New York Times*, December 21 2011).

One month after the occupation of Zuccotti Park, half of a national sample told pollsters that Occupy reflected the views of most Americans; and two-thirds of all those queried, including one-third of the Republicans, said the distribution of wealth needed to be made more equal (*New York Times*, October 18 2011). Three months later, a national survey reported that two-thirds of Americans now believed there were 'strong conflicts' between the rich and poor, eclipsing divisions of race and immigration. Since 2009 there had been a 50 per cent increase in this perception of class conflict, the largest increases reported among whites, middle-income and independent voters, the latter presenting the most dramatic shift, from 23 to 68 per cent (*New York Times*, January 12, 2012). Investigating hospital privileges for the most affluent patients, the *New York Times* suggested that 'in the age of Occupy Wall Street, catering to the rich can be trickier' (*New York Times*, January 22 2012).

As these post-Occupy effects began to be felt, right-wing Republican campaigning for their party's presidential nomination began eviscerating Mitt Romney as a 'vulture capitalist' for his work with Bain Capital. And the arc of utopian civil movement once again reached outside the United States. In October, *The New York Times* wrote that 'demonstrations in emulation of Occupy Wall Street were held in Europe, Asia and the Americas, drawing crowds in the hundreds and the thousands'. At the end of December, a radical leader of the Russian democracy movement evoked Occupy from his hospital bed. In a fiery speech projected on large screens outside on the Moscow streets, he called the assembled protesters 'the 99 per cent' and said Russia was led by a corrupt 1 per cent of bureaucrats and oligarchs.

The arc of civil liberation continues to stretch over this new age.

Note

1. See, for example, the complaint by columnist Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times* (1 October 2011).

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2010) *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. (2011) *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bernstein, Nina (2012) 'Chefs, Butlers, Marble Baths: Hospitals Vie for the Affluent', *The New York Times* (22 January): A1.
- Khosrokhavar, Farhad (2012) *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Kohut, Andrew (2011) 'The "Haves" and the "Have-Nots"', *The New York Times* (18 October): Opinion page.
- Kristoff, Nicholas D. (2011) 'The Bankers and the Revolutionaries', *The New York Times* (1 October): SR 11.

-
- Samy Alim, H. (2011) 'What If We Occupied Language?', *The New York Times* (21 December): The Opinionator (online).
- Sobral, Ana (2011) 'Performing a "World Revolution"? Transnational Networks, Symbols and Scripts from Cairo to Madrid to . . .', unpublished manuscript, University of Konstanz.
- Stelter, Brian (2011) 'Camps Are Cleared, but "99 Percent" Still Occupies the Lexicon', *The New York Times* (1 December): A1.
- Tavernise, Sabrian (2012) 'Survey Finds Rising Strain between Rich and the Poor', *The New York Times* (12 January): A15.