

THE REVOLUTIONS BY ORDINARY PEOPLE

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In the most diverse corners of the planet, ordinary people are coming out onto the streets, occupying plazas, meeting up with other ordinary people who they did not know but who they immediately recognize. None of them waited to be convened, they were driven by the need to discover themselves. They do not calculate the consequences of their acts, they act based on what they feel, desire and dream. We find ourselves faced with real revolutions, profound changes and paradigmatic shifts, even if those in power believe that all will return to “normal” once the plazas and streets are cleared.

I find no better way of explaining current events than with a memorable text by Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968: The great rehearsal,” a chapter in their 1999 book *Antisystemic Movements*. This dense text, inspired in Braudel’s long-term and profound perspective, begins with an unusual statement: “There have only been two world revolutions. One took place in 1848. The second took place in 1968. Both were historical failures. Both transformed the world.”

According to these world-system analysts, these two revolutions’ failures *and* their ability to transform the world were due to the fact that they were both unplanned and spontaneous “in the profound sense of the word.” They go further: 1848 and 1968 were more important dates than 1789 and 1917, the



Libya.

A woman holds a Kingdom of Libya flag during Friday prayers in a street in Benghazi March 4, 2011.

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dates of the French and the Russian Revolutions. The latter were superseded by the former.

The inherited and still hegemonic conception of revolution must be revised, and in fact is being revised by current events. Revolution as exclusively focused on the capture of state power is being replaced by another concept of revolution, more complex and integral, which does not exclude a state-centered strategy but supersedes and goes beyond it. In any case, the conquest of state power is a bend in a far longer trajectory, one which seeks something that cannot be achieved from within state institutions: to create a new world.

Traditional politics – anchored in representation that replaces collective subjects with managerial professionals, professionals of deception – is of little use in the creation of a new world. On the contrary, a new world that is different from the current one

implies rehearsing and experimenting with horizontal social relations, in sovereign, self-controlled and autonomous spaces, in which no one imposes on or directs the collective.

The key phrase of the quote above is “spontaneous in a profound sense.” How do we interpret that phrase? At this point, we must acknowledge that there is not a *single* instrumental and state-centered rationality. Rather, each subject has his or her *own* rationality, and we can all be subjects when we say “Enough already!” It is a matter, then, of understanding alternative rationalities, a process that can only take place from within and in movements, starting from the immanent logic revealed by the collective acts of subjects from below. It is thus not a matter of interpreting, but of participating.

Beyond their diverse circumstances, the Tahrir Square and the Puerta del Sol movements in Cairo and in Madrid, form part of the genealogy of “All of them must go!” declared in the 2001 Argentinean revolt, the 2000 Cochabamba Water War, the 2003 and 2005 Bolivian Gas Wars and the 2006 Oaxaca commune, to mention only the urban cases. These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

This strategy of two phases, rejection and creation, goes beyond the traditional and hegemonic political culture of leftist and trade union movements, which only partially contemplate the first phase through self-controlled protests with precise and delimited objectives. That political culture has revealed its limits. It is not even able to fulfill the first objective of rejecting existing power structures; as it limits itself to institutional channels, it can only

prepare the ground for a change of the guard without a change of politics. That political culture has successfully and skillfully displaced the conservative right but has failed at the moment of transforming the world.

The revolutions underway are estuaries in which rivers and streams of rebellions, having covered much ground, now converge. Some of these drink from the waters of 1968, but they are far more profound and dense. Rebellions that come from afar, from the mountains above, that flow into other sometimes minuscule rivulets. These will all one day mix their waters in a torrent in which no one will ask each other where they're from, what colors and identity signs they carry.

These revolutions are the visible moment, important but not foundational, of a long and subterranean path. The image of the mole is apt: one day it leaps up and shows itself, but it has covered a long way underground to arrive. Without that trajectory, it does not see that light of day. That long route is made up of the hundreds of small initiatives that were born in spaces of resistance, small laboratories (such as those that existed since the ends of the 1990s in Lavapiés, Madrid), where life is lived as it is willed, and not as others want us to live.

Great events are preceded and prepared for, they are rehearsed, as James Scott says, by collective practices that take place far from the attention of the media and political professionals. They take place in spaces made safe and protected by peers. Now that those thousands of micro experiences have converged in these currents of life, it is time to celebrate and smile, despite the inevitable repressions to come. Above all, when dark days of the iron fist return, let us not forget that it is those arduous and

solitary experiences, isolated and frequently unsuccessful, that lay the groundwork for luminous times. The ones with the others transform the world.