

## **The season of revolution: the Arab Spring and European mobilizations**

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### **The Arab Spring: Eurocentrism, modernity and Orientalism**

Whatever name we assign to the events in the Arab world, we end up trapping ourselves in one limiting or problematic framework or another. The concept of seasons is embedded in a long history of Orientalizing the region, as if what happened in the history of Arab people before 2011 did not qualify for an acknowledgment of the energies, struggles, and fighting for a better life they have been waging against western colonialism, intrusions, and unjust local governments for over 100 years. From Algeria, Egypt, Yemen and Iraq to Palestine, Arab people have been putting up a hard fight for over a century against a western, colonial and neo-colonial, capitalist and racist modernity. But this hardly registers in a western-centric mindset and discourse, nor among many in the Arab world.

Despite the obsession of the West with the Arab world, and despite its claims of superior knowledge, Arab people continue to be "misunderstood," and / or maligned, and established academic theories continue to fail to explain, and or predict developments in the region. With every failure, a more arrogant wave of theories are generated by the same failing western-centric expertise, replacing or continuing the old paradigms of "knowledge" as if nothing had happened. Failures are evaded, and expertise, analyses, and prescriptions are repeated with the same arrogance.

This pattern is due to at least three interrelated issues: modernity, Orientalism, and Eurocentrism, which have been at work in combination since the ascendance of western modernity to global hegemony, with its assumption that humans are rational and thus can achieve accurate knowledge and be accurately studied.

This was accompanied by a denial of the contribution of knowledge of different cultures from around the world, and with a western-centric approach to knowledge that not only universalized theories and explanations of questions related to human societies, but was also embedded in a project of global domination that aimed at maintaining western supremacy and the dependence of the rest of the world. This approach to knowledge was and continues to be shaped, as it is related to the Arab world, with a racist and Orientalist attitudes that color the views of even those who claim and even might be very much against western hegemony, and are supportive or are in solidarity with Arab people and other people in the South.

Too many experts who claim sympathy with Arab people's struggles, and claim to be in opposition to Western hegemony and exploitation of the globe have

rushed quickly to assert expertise on the Arab revolution, and to make early judgments on it mere weeks or months after it started, as if it is something that has ended, rather than seeing it as something that is in the making.

The French Revolution, the most celebrated example of people's power to change history in Euro-centric historiography, took years to achieve some of its goals, only to be hijacked later by the dictatorship of Napoleon who led the same French state to colonize large parts of the world. The slogans of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" were soon forgotten and domination and genocides against people in the Third World became the norm of the French "Republic," its legacy, and continues to be part and parcel of French involvement in different parts of the world in pursuit of resources and hegemony. Nothing less is expected from the U.S. or Britain as old colonial rule was replaced with imperialist and neo-colonial structures of domination and exploitation.

In the many reports, talks, conferences, and or papers about the Arab revolution, old Orientalist and neo-Orientalist narratives continue to present the Arab world as either dangerous, chaotic and violent or stagnant, passive, and always of need for help from the outside (from the West).

When revolutions erupted, instant claims of western influence shaped much of the discourse (as though Arab people were incapable of having their own revolutions). The ideas of the "non-violence theorist" Gene Sharp (whose main work and analysis of violence, oppression, and dictatorship has only focused on East European, and Third World countries, and for some reason never discussed Israeli or American wars and oppressions), were argued to be the guiding ideology of Egyptian youth. Israeli and Western media constantly showed reservations and fear of the unknown, of possible chaos, or the danger of "radicals" taking over governments in the Arab world.

Of course such arguments and representations managed and continue to manage to ignore the history of activism and revolution in the Arab world against economic, political, social and imperial repression, and the local dictatorship that were and some continue to be supported by the West. They also ignore Arab youth in Europe, their history of resistance and revolts against racism and their struggle along with other marginalized groups for economic, social and political justice in Europe.

Thus the struggles of people in the South seem to continue to be ignored, manipulated to fit western interests, or when impossible they are maligned as the result of "fanaticism." When they manage to overcome local, regional, and global restraints and succeeds, these struggles are celebrated and coopted as the result of Western influence.

The history of western interventions in the South, not only militarily, politically, and economically, but also intellectually have not only created disfigured "Oriental" minds, but also Western ones. Those who were made to believe that their history of knowledge production was not valid or irrelevant have often ended up only mimicking and reproducing western paradigms and distanced

themselves from their local knowledge as they also came to see it as “backward,” or irrelevant. Those in the west who came to believe that western knowledge is the only “real”, accurate and useful knowledge, were led not only to feelings of supremacy, but also to avoid taking seriously alternative knowledge which might have helped better explain human societies and its changes. The end result was the marginalization of diverse and more democratic knowledge, coupled with an insistence on paradigms and frameworks that continue to demonstrate their inadequacy.

This pattern continues today to shape discourse about issues including the developments in the Arab world, where constant writing, conferences, talks, and workshops are shaped by this same western-centric approach, which failed to predict or explain what happened in the Arab world, yet continues to insist on shaping the understanding and the outcome of events there to fit western interests of the west, and continue to lecture about how things should be as if people there will act and behave as instruments rather than agents. It is not only intervention in military, political, and economic forms in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, but also an “intellectual” campaign which is continuing unabated.

All this, in addition to the selective interventions of the West in many countries, the selective support for some “revolutions” by contrast with western support for brutal regimes such as Saudi Arabia, the Israeli military settler colonial project, and war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq (part of a longer history of crimes against Southern populations, of exploitation of Southern resources and of maintaining underdevelopment and dependency there), makes the situation in the Arab world poorly understood.

But to have a better future for everyone, and to be able to start understanding the world around us in an effort to transform it, the old paradigms of western supremacist, capitalist, racist, colonialist practices and approaches to knowledge must end, if popular movements and the academy are to produce knowledge that can help create a better world, that is more just and democratic, not for the few, but for the largest majority if not for all.

In the meantime, as in the past, the human energy of people on the ground will prove the limits of such western interventions again and again, in a continuous struggle for decolonization and real liberation from this nightmare. This resistance has been also taking place in the form of writing and counter intellectual resistance. This journal issue is one of such attempts at counter intervention that aims at challenging how events in the Arab world have been explained and represented.

## **In this issue**

The articles in this special issue are diverse and cover several issues.

Austin Mackell's interview with Egyptian labour activist Kamal Elfayoumi is particularly significant for *Interface* because of the arrests of Mackell, his translator Ailya Alwi and postgrad student Derek Ludovici when they arrived in Mahalla al-Kubra for the interview (see Mackell 2012). As with other recent attacks on foreign media, the Egyptian state are seeking to discredit local activists by associating them with fictitious external agendas and thus cutting them off from international media. In this particular case, the claim is that the three researchers promised children money to throw rocks at a police station: a claim which would be ridiculous if the charge did not carry a sentence of 5 – 7 years. We ask *Interface* readers to sign the petition on <http://www.change.org/petitions/australian-prime-minister-act-on-austin-mackell-s-matter-now-freeaustin>.

Samir Amin's article provides a context for the Arab revolution and the rise of what he defines as the tri-partite cluster of forces (comprador elites, political Islam, and imperialism) that aim at maintaining the dependence of the region, its subordinate position, and the absence of development that allows U.S. led global imperialism and Israeli hegemony in the region.

Vijay Prashad's article contextualizes the revolution in a long history of resistance in the South and attempts for people there to shape their own history through different projects such as the Non-Allied Movement, and the counter imperialist projects to suppress any independent path for the peoples of the South. Jeremy Salt discusses the different dynamics in the region since the start of the revolution, the rise of different regional powers, and the continuous western interventions in the region.

The article on Tunisia by Corinna Mullin and Azadeh Shashahani discusses how western intervention historically and at the moment is going to affect the development of the revolution in Tunisia (and elsewhere). Andrea Teti and Gennaro Gervasio provide an inside look at the political context and the challenges and possibilities for social movements in Egypt one year after the taking of Tahrir Square.

Bassam Haddad tries to find room for opposing western interventions and imperialism while being critical of despotism, and supporting popular aspirations in Syria and elsewhere for freedom, justice, and liberty. Steven Salaita discusses media coverage in the U.S. and its rootedness in modern Orientalism and assumptions about Arabs and Muslims, and insists on calling contemporary events a revolution.

Ahmed Kanna discusses the unreported revolution and protests of South Asian workers in the Gulf, while Aditya Nigam argues for rethinking the traditional frameworks of what defines political organizing and allowing more space for seeing new forms of protest and politics also outside of western paradigms of social movements and protests.

Finally, Cassie Findlay discusses the struggle to archive the graffiti and other forms of public art from the Egyptian revolution.

## **A “European Spring”?**

As the phrase suggests, the “Arab Spring” has been an inspiration to activists in Europe, where a recent wave of mobilizations has swept across the continent. Perhaps the most significant influence was the occupation of Tahrir Square, which prompted European activists to take the practice of occupation (most often reserved for squatted social centres) into the public squares and into direct contact with other citizens, drawing in large numbers of people who had not mobilized before (Calvo, forthcoming; Romanos, forthcoming, Vogiatzoglou and Sergi, forthcoming). At the same time as face-to-face contact was increasing, the increasing use and importance of ICTs also played a key role in developing forums of discussion and transmission of news and calls for mobilization (Fuster Morell, forthcoming).

The European protest wave has taken both participants and observers by surprise with the intensity, scope and longevity of the mobilisations. These continue the double critique levelled by the global justice movement against neoliberal capitalist globalization and ineffective, illegitimate representative democracy - but now set against the backdrop of global financial crisis, austerity cuts, soaring unemployment and the deterioration of social welfare safety nets for the most vulnerable.

Although the protests in Spain and Greece have drawn the most media attention, European mobilizations in response to the financial global crisis in fact started much earlier, in Iceland’s 2008 Sausage Revolution, prompted by the economic collapse resulting from the banking crisis (Júlíusson and Helgason, forthcoming). Icelanders occupied Reykjavik’s Austurvöllur square every Saturday from 11 October 2008 to 14 March 2009, banging on pots and pans (in echo of Argentina’s 2001 uprising) and occasionally throwing eggs at members of parliament.

They demanded the resignation of the government, parliamentary elections, electoral reform (from one of differently-weighted constituencies to one person, one vote), the prosecution of bankers and politicians responsible for the mishandling of the nation’s finances, a new constitution, and a referendum to decide whether or not Iceland should assume the debt generated by the collapse of its three main banks. The mobilizations were successful: the President resigned, a new constitution was drafted using participatory methods and Icelanders voted “No” on two referenda (6 March 2010, and 10 April, 2011).

Also in 2008, between 6 and 23 December, Greece erupted in protests after the shooting of a 15 year old boy by Athens police. The outrage over the shooting sparked mobilizations which channelled discontent with deteriorating economic conditions and dissatisfaction with the political class and were characterized by

violent confrontations in the streets. It wasn't until 5 May 2010, after a general strike in the context of the Greek debt crisis, however, that the "Greek Revolution" got underway.

Strongly backed by the unions, who called six general strikes in 2011 alone, the movement met in Syntagma Square in front of parliament to demand the abandonment of neoliberal politics and cuts in social spending; that the EU, IMF and WB stop pressuring Greece to adopt austerity measures; and an increase in citizen power with an attendant decrease in the power of financial and economic elites. In May, 2011 the Greek *Indignados* movement was formed, inspired by the Spanish *Indignados*, and with the slogan "Direct Democracy Now!" on May 31 2011, *Indignado* protesters surrounded and blockaded politicians in parliament.

The Spanish 15-M or *Indignados* movement occupied the central plazas of Madrid, Barcelona and other cities and was the product of a diverse configuration of assemblies and groups with a marked autonomous character. "Real Democracy Now!", the civic platform that called the 15-M protest, was the prime impulse behind the original protests and was itself made up of numerous groups and campaigns, including the "Nolesvotes" (Don't vote for them) campaign which called for abstention against all political parties that had supported the Sinde Law regulating web pages and intellectual property rights; the "Platform of those Affected by Mortgages" (PAH), the student group "Youth without Future" who had been key mobilizers against the Bologna university reforms, long standing environmental action group "Ecologistas en Acción", diverse social centres, Attac Spain, and other groups active in the global justice movement and in other recent protests.

In Madrid, where the movement began, the form of assemblies - which were autonomous and decentralized and spread throughout the cities - represented an extension and amplification of the forms developed by autonomous actors in the global justice movement (horizontal assemblies based on consensus decision making designed to make visible and protest against political issues, and coordinated between local assemblies via a general assembly) but the striking feature, fostered no doubt by the direct effect of the financial crisis on many citizens, was that many of the participants were new to protest.

Unlike the Icelandic movement whose goals were clear and specific, the Spanish *Indignados* generated a comprehensive and radical list of demands that encompassed many long-term social movement demands (from anti-nuclear claims and reductions in military spending to the recovery of historical memory and the separation of church and state, to the reform of labor laws, and a radical reform in tax law to benefit the most vulnerable), reflecting the multiplicity of social movement groups involved in the protests.

The two first points of the manifesto produced by the general assembly in the Puerta del Sol on 20 May 2011 were a change in the Electoral Law to open lists and a one person one vote system (as against the current one where minimum thresholds make it harder for radical parties to gain seats), and that the

fundamental rights stipulated in the Spanish Constitution be upheld: the right to a decent home, to universal and free healthcare, to free circulation of people, and to a public and non-religious education.

### **Internationalisation?**

The European mobilizations were strongly inspired by not only by the Arab Spring but also by each other, and references to mobilizations across national borders were frequent. Protests in Portugal began prior to the more visible protests in Spain when the movement of the "desperate generation" (*Geração o rasca*) - inspired by the events in Egypt - took to the streets on 12 March 2011 in the biggest public demonstration since the 1974 revolution. The protests lasted only one day, but activists later mobilized again in solidarity with the Spanish 15-M *Indignados* and went on to more sustained protests in October. While Egypt was a clear inspiration in the Spanish case, activists there also looked north, carrying signs saying "We too can be Iceland", referring to Iceland's refusal to pay the debt and its new constitution.

The Spanish mobilizations in turn inspired mobilizations in Italy (*indignati*, calling for *democrazia reale ora* on 20 May 2011) and France, and influenced the framing and demands of the Greek and Portuguese movements who adopted the 15-M/Indignado/Real Democracy Now slogans and names. Common to all of the protests is a rejection of austerity measures imposed by International Financial Institutions, a defense of the welfare state, a critique of neo-liberal global capitalism and a deep critique of representative democracy and the political class.

These mobilizations came together with the developing Occupy movement and struggles in other countries 15 October 2011, at the initiative of the Spanish *Indignados*. Protests in more than 80 countries and 900 cities called for global change, recalling the global anti-war protest of 15 February 2003.

Other European countries saw far more limited mobilisation (at least so far). Ireland, for example, is one of the countries hardest hit by the crisis in both financial and social terms, with soaring unemployment, cuts and emigration, and the crisis saw the collapse of support for the traditionally governing Fianna Fáil and its overt clientelism. Yet this failed to translate into substantial social movements, and conventional trade union marches accompanied the entry of their Labour Party ally into a new government committed to neoliberal austerity and demonstrations of loyalty to Berlin. The government's attempt to impose a poll tax and a threatened water tax are generating significant civil disobedience, and Occupy camps were highly visible in six different towns, but as yet an Irish uprising comparable to events in Iceland, Greece or Spain has been absent. Understanding these counter-examples is crucial both for activists in these more passive countries seeking to change the situation as well as for researchers – as are, of course, the *differences* between mobilisations in countries like Iceland, Greece and Spain.

## Spanish developments

As we go to press, two noteworthy updates on the Spanish case: the first and the most troubling is the move from the Popular Party government to draft legislation that will criminalize peaceful public protest on and offline<sup>1</sup>. The importance of this attack on fundamental civil liberties and its implications for social movements cannot be overstated. The legislation would make any protest organized by internet or social media that results in "violence" a criminal offense. The implications of this are clear: any act of "violence" at a street protest could result in criminal penalties for the organizers. The legislation would also elevate passive resistance to a criminal offense, including blocking the entrance to public buildings and sit-ins. It would classify as criminal "threatening behaviour toward the forces of order /security, throwing dangerous objects, and rushing or charging", carrying a penalty of two years imprisonment.

This is a clear strategy to deter peaceful protest under the guise of dealing with the "radical element". Making the organizers of a public demonstration which anyone can join criminally liable for the actions of any one of the participants is draconian to say the least, but it becomes even more troubling when one considers the frequently-used tactic of undercover police infiltrators acting as agents provocateurs. If successful this strategy would be very effective in denying citizens the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. The Minister of the Interior, Fernández Díaz, justified the need for the change in legislation to deal with "radical violent anti-systemic protesters that use these types of protest events to act like real urban guerrillas" (RTVE 2012). He argued that far from making Spain an anomaly, the legislation would bring Spain into line with the legislation currently on the books in France and the UK.

This latest initiative comes against the backdrop of a general strike in Spain (29 March 2012) which saw hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets, accompanied by heavy handed policing, but also against the backdrop of recent student protests in Valencia, sparked when students protesting against cuts in education at the LLuis Vives High School decided to block traffic and were beaten and arrested by the police (Martínez 2012 and Público 2012)<sup>2</sup>. The circulation of images of police beating minors circulated via internet, triggering protests of high school and university students, professors and others across Valencia and other cities. The protesters dubbed the protests the "Valencian Spring" in a clear reference to the Arab Spring and the criticisms of the cuts in

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<sup>1</sup> See EDRI 2012 and RTV 2012

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive listing of news coverage see: <http://www.acampadavalencia.net/prensa-primaveravalenciana/>



education funding were linked also to critiques of political corruption<sup>3</sup> and the lack of real democratic participation and institutions.

The second development is less dramatic, but still illuminating: the news that a small minority of the Real Democracy Now movement, which was behind the 15-M *Indignados* mobilizations, has decided to incorporate the name "Real Democracy Now" (DRY) as a legal association, against the wishes of the majority of the people involved in the assemblies. Reported in the mainstream press with the headline "The Real Democracy Now movement splits in two" (Elola 2012), the version from the movement web portal tells a different story. In an article titled "Real Democracy Now is no longer Real Democracy Now", members of DRY state that the move to create the association was minoritarian, unilateral and illegitimate<sup>4</sup> since the State assembly in Málaga in the summer of 2011 clearly agreed that Real Democracy Now would never adopt a legal form because that went against the principles of the movement:

"We want to make clear that we continue to believe in a coordinated network of individuals without leaders... and continue to be a horizontal network without representatives...DRY is an idea, values, principles and political and social objectives based on radical democracy: a participatory, horizontal and direct democracy, for real democracy now!"

If key goals of the 15-M movement have been a rejection of representative politics, a strong commitment to alternative forms of deliberative decision making (to the point of taking on the challenge of trying to achieve consensus in popular assemblies of 5000 people), and a desire to engage in prefigurative transformative politics that not only critique the ravages of rampant global capitalism but attempt to meet them head on via the establishment of mutual aid societies and cooperatives, these attempts have been met, as always, by the voices of those who demand leaders, efficiency, and some form of hierarchical decision making structure.

This is in keeping with the cleavages that divide not only the Spanish 15-M movement, but also Occupy movements in the US and other contemporary movements in the West/Global North. It was also a common tension in the Global Justice Movement (Flesher Fominaya 2007) where some institutional Left actors dismissed autonomous protesters as "swarms of mosquitoes" and were anxious to get down to what they saw as the business of real politics. These differences of approach go back generations in various permutations throughout the history of European social movements (from the First International's

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<sup>3</sup>There is a long running political corruption scandal revolving around the former President of Valencia, Partido Popular member Francisco Camps and other members of his party. See Hernández 2010.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.democraciarealya.es/blog/2012/04/22/la-asociacion-democracia-real-ya-no-es-democracia-real-ya/>

conflicts between anarchists and Marxists via the 1960s rupture between institutional and extra-parliamentary Lefts and debates between radical democrats and representative politicians in Green parties). The “where do we go from here?” question is as inevitable as it is predictable. The challenge of working across these fundamentally different approaches to political action is a central task for contemporary movements in Europe, and the tension between radical participatory democracy and efficiency and institutionalization will be with us for the foreseeable future.

The Spanish Minister of the Interior is probably right about one thing: Spain is not an anomaly. The levels of mobilization and the levels of repression may be more visible, but it would be optimistic to think that increases in attacks on the right to protest and, in particular, attempts to control the use of the Internet and to censor the free circulation of information are not on the horizon across Europe. Some comfort perhaps can be taken from Castells' (2011) assessment of Mubarak's attempt to pull the plug on the Internet during his five day blackout (27 January-1 February 2011) during the January Revolution. The attempt was met with the solidarity, creativity, ingenuity and technological savvy of hundreds of people and hackers around the world and in Egypt who worked together to re-route information, find alternative routes of communication and keep people connected.

If the importance of social media and Internet can be overstated and oversimplified, with insufficient attention given to real geographical disparities in use and connectivity, it is clear that ICTs are opening up new possibilities for new forms of mobilization and new forms of surveillance and repression. The effects of the global financial crisis are far from subsiding, and the 15-M movement is gearing up as we write for a new round of global protests from 12 – 15 May. As noted above with regard to the “Arab Spring” the rush to quick judgements in the face of a lack of empirical evidence needs to be tempered with analysis and insightful reflection, and the recognition that this wave of protests is not over.

## **In this issue**

In this issue, our special section on European Spring opens with Eduardo Romanos Fraile's interview with the activist blogger @fanetin on his perspective on the “15-M” movement. Marianne Maeckelbergh's article “Horizontal democracy now” looks at how the decision-making processes of 15-M in Barcelona both draw on and develop those of the alterglobalization movement.

Fabià Díaz-Cortés i Gemma Ubasart-González, in “15M: Indignació, Trajectòries mobilitadores i especificitats territorials. El cas català”, explore the significance of the pre-existing local context to events in Barcelona, while Puneet Dhaliwal's “Public squares and resistance: the politics of space in the Indignados movement” discusses the strategic value of the occupation of physical space.

In "Mobilizing against the crisis, mobilizing for 'another democracy'" Donatella della Porta discusses the continuity between both waves of protests globally, in the goal of democratic change – and the disparity in the modes of transnational organising. Finally, Joan Subirats' "Algunas ideas sobre política y políticas en el cambio de época" explores the emergence of new network forms, the role of IT and how both fit into wider processes of social change.

## **A global wave?**

The "Occupy" movement, so present in Anglophone media, has marked, above all, a return of US social movements to the wide-ranging alliance-building and mobilisation that was supposed to have been defeated by the rise of post-9/11 nationalism and security panics. Both inspired by events in Spain and the Arab world and inspiring events in countries in Europe and elsewhere, its international connections are equally evident.

In the nature of things, the deeper relationships underlying these three very different crises of hegemony – that represented by the Arab Spring, that manifested in European protests against austerity and that of the Occupy movement – are the subject of a debate that is only beginning, among activists as among movement researchers.

Waves of social movements, in one or more areas of the world-system, are a normal feature of life in capitalism. They include the "Atlantic Revolutions" of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (America, France, 1798 in Ireland and the Haitian revolution which ended slavery); the revolutions of 1848 across Europe; the wave of 1916-23 which left new states of very different kinds in Ireland and Russia but saw revolutionary situations in many if not most European countries; the anti-fascist resistance from (say) the Spanish Civil War to 1945; Asian and African anti-colonial movements which led to independence from empire for most of the world's population; the global wave of 1968, from Mexico to Japan; the revolutions of 1989-90 which brought down state socialism in most places (but were defeated in China); and the Latin American "pink tide" which has seen a string of revolutionary situations and movement-linked states in South America and shaken US hegemony there.

The causes of such waves are widely debated. One reading links them to the long Kondratieff waves of capitalist development and tries to see a structural link to the ebbs and flows of political economy. Another highlights weakened states (for example, at the end of wars). Katsiaficas (1987) has talked about an "eros effect" of contagion from one revolution to the next. Others have celebrated "networking" processes. They may also be seen as linked to the rise and fall of regimes of accumulation – that they represent both a crisis in such regimes and a moment in which popular forces have an opportunity to push events in a different direction: enforcing democracy against monarchy or dictatorship, independence against empire, welfare against capitalism, and so on.

Certainly such waves have been among the major social forces in the history of recent centuries. Decolonisation – whether the US in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup>, Ireland in the 1920s or Asia after WWII – is one major outcome. Democracy – in the French Revolution, the European resistance to fascism or the events of 1989-90 – is another. Social justice has been a common theme, from the Haitian revolution via the European uprisings at the end of WWI to the Latin American pink tide. A democratisation of everyday life – in particular after 1968 – is another.

The current wave is happening in a very particular global context. The wave of 1989-90 saw the Soviet Union lose its satellites and then disintegrate, and Putin has not been able to restore its reach. The pink tide demonstrated the US' inability, for the first time in a century or more, to impose its will (in military, foreign policy or economic terms) on its Latin American "backyard", while events in Egypt in particular have underlined its limited purchase on the strategically crucial Arab world.

More generally there is a rumbling challenge to neoliberalism: started by the "IMF riots" of the 1980s and early 1990s, articulated by the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, summit protests and the 2001 *Argentinazo*, institutionalised by radical governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, and now manifested across three key global regions.

This challenge is particularly significant as the tentative criticisms of neoliberalism made at the start of the current crisis by figures like Gordon Brown have had no real implication beyond the narrowly technical ("quantitative easing" etc.) It is clear that there is no significant dissent within elites – political and financial, or their hired mouths in academia and journalism – about the proposal that the only way forward is yet more of the recipes that created the crisis. Of course the fact that elites are so resistant to alternatives is one of the major factors forcing ordinary people into radical resistance.

To summarise the situation at present would be foolish. If conferences and special issues on the Arab Spring (and, less frequently, European anti-austerity movements) are now commonplace, the Occupy! movement has developed so recently that it is only now beginning to be represented significantly in academic work. Activists too are struggling to keep up with the sheer flow of information; to build effective links with groups that are developing at such a rate; and to imagine ways of organising that might resolve some of the problems and barriers they are facing. The next few years promise to be not only interesting ones for scholars of social movements – they also promise to be decisive ones for the struggles of ordinary people to shape their own futures.

### **Also in this issue**

As always, this issue of *Interface* contains a range of other articles alongside those related to the theme and special section. Marina Adler's article looks at

the Oaxacan APPO and how a strong movement alliance and collective identity was generated out of the 2006 uprising. Nancy Baez and Andreas Hernandez' practice note (including a video by participants) looks at the grassroots-led participatory budgeting initiative in four New York districts and how it challenges the model of that city as the financial centre of global capitalism.

The article by Magdalena Prusinowska, Piotr Kowzan and Małgorzata Zielińska looks at the rise and fall of the OKUPÉ student movement in Gdansk and why imported models of movement decision-making have not worked so well in the university context. Finally, Jim Gladwin and Rose Hollins' action note looks at Auckland's Water Pressure Group and sets this in the context of privatisation of municipal assets in New Zealand.

Lastly, we welcome Mandisi Majavu as our new reviews editor. This issue we have reviews of 8 books: Chenoweth and Stephan's *Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of nonviolent action*; Manji and Ekine's *Africa awakening: the emerging revolutions*; Starr, Fernandez and Scholl's *Shutting down the streets: political violence and social control in the global era*; Givan, Roberts and Soule's *The diffusion of social movements: actors, mechanisms and political effects*; Hessdörter, Pabst and Ullrich's *Prevent and tame: protest under (self-) control*; Observatorio Metropolitano's *Crisis y revolución en Europa: People of Europe rise up!* Lemonik and Mikaila's *Student activism and curricular change in higher education* and MacKinnon's *Consent of the networked: the worldwide struggle for internet freedom*.

## Finally

We were delighted to have Mayo Fuster Morell as a guest editor for the special section on the European Spring. Sincere thanks are also due to Elizabeth Humphrys for her help with many things, including cover images and contacts in Egypt. Cristina wishes to thank Antonio Montañés Jiménez for help with background information on the European Spring section of this editorial.

Along with our new reviews editor Mandisi Majavu we also welcome Aziz Choudry as US / Canada editor (with Lesley Wood). Lastly, as always, we would like to thank the contributors to this issue and the anonymous peer reviewers.

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