

Organizations and Movements

In the twentieth century, during the epoch of corporate capitalism and state socialism, overemphasis of the “Organization Human” superseded the nineteenth century’s “Great Man” orientation. Today, we observe the continuing extension of this same principle in both academic studies of social movements and activists’ professionalization. When NGOs are understood as the alpha and

omega of civil society, specialized organizations become ends in themselves, rather than one dimension of popular movements’ self-organization, one aspect of “civil society”—and perhaps not even its most important one. In worst-case scenarios, fetishizing NGOs leads to underestimation of class divisions, co-optation of grassroots aspirations, and emergence of collaborationist strata that blunt the radical impetus of insurgencies.⁶ For system change, uprisings are vital; for system maintenance, professional organizations serve well when they become established and gain legitimacy. More often than not, NGOs are vehicles to transform antisystemic insurgencies into engines of reform that strengthen the very structures against which movements arose.

To understand how societies can be transformed, Muthiah Alagappa maintains the need to focus on the totality of civil society, rather than its insurgent protests, since the latter may “obscure the more mundane and less visible functions of civil society in normal times, functions that may be just as crucial as its actions in moments of crisis.”⁷ By these crucial functions, he refers to a variety of roles professional organizations play, including creation of free public space in liberalization periods, supporting the development of political parties in the transition phase, and making the consolidated system more inclusive. Clearly these are

important tasks, yet he does not seem concerned with how uprisings motivate ordinary people to step forward at great personal risk. Nor does he discuss how popular insurgencies inextricably change those involved in them. In the midst of uprisings, new lifelong friendships form, political consciousness is raised, and identities change—all in the time frame of a few days or weeks. In every case, previously subaltern people—minorities, women, and low-caste people—experience new possibilities in their lives and develop leadership skills and networks.

All-too-often, self-defined professional “revolutionary” groups (and individuals) remain loyal to the status quo and abandon—or work against—more radical formations in the streets. We can observe this dynamic in many places, from Korean progressive politicians and their parties, Bangladeshi and Czech democrats, French and Italian Communists, or Filipina and Thai people’s organizations. On the other hand, spontaneous actions by tens of thousands of people often throw forth visions that go beyond those that established political parties deem “realistic”; they sow seeds from which new leaders emerge, who challenge the reticence of established figures to help implement people’s aspirations. Uprisings are crucibles within which society’s ascendant forces are galvanized, they continue to pressure politicians and parties to

grant more liberties to ordinary citizens, and their actions generate new forms of organization that reshape existing organizations and institutions.

Capitalism's ability to morph into new forms and strengthen itself through major crises, as it has continually done in the last several centuries, presents a clear need for discovering ways to maintain popular mobilizations as a vehicle for impeding the reintroduction of elite privileges. Even when movement organizations come to power, as many have done, the system is able to withstand—and even benefit from—the new infusion of leaders. Take the case of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress in bringing neoliberalism to South Africa, or the role of the American Revolution in eventually helping Great Britain to continue to be a hegemonic world power long after its military and economic prowess had declined.

Contemporary historians' inattention to the specific dynamics of uprisings has a variety of causes. Protests and demonstrations are often transitory and unable to preserve their momentum for long periods of time. Yet popular uprisings have grown increasingly able to regenerate themselves—as we can see in new iterations of the 1986 and 2001 People Power protests in Manila, in the importance of Gwangju to the June 1987 Uprising in

societies. Whether the closing of social space is attributed to excessive regime reactions or to uprisings' successful overthrow of existing governments, analysts prefer soft challenges to hard ones. Yet in excluding uprisings from their purview of inquiry, investigators carry ideological assumptions and hold to "iron laws" that perpetuate blind spots rather than illuminating previously unexamined areas. Ideological distortions are especially problematic for Korea because of the vibrant string of uprisings that has animated its recent history.

Classical philosophers believed social conflict was natural and healthy. Immanuel Kant's *Idea for a Universal History* eloquently recognized that "the means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of humans is their antagonism in society." More recently, Frances Fox Piven observed the profound impact of conflict and disorder: "The rare intervals of nonincremental democratic reforms are responses to the rise of disruptive protest movements, and the distinctive kind of power that these movements wield . . . Democratic successes flow not from the influence of voters and parties taken by themselves, but from the mobilization of a more fundamental kind of power that is rooted in the very nature of society."⁸

Modern sociologists and political scientists, whatever their

Korea, and in the recurrence of massive protests in Thailand (1973, 1992, and 2010), Nepal (1990 and 2006), Burma (1988 and 2007), and Tibet (1959, 1989, and 2008). Hundreds of thousands of people internalize lessons learned from previous episodes of insurgencies as they continue to act without the “help” of leaders from above. While professional organizations claiming to “represent” the opposition often strengthen unjust systems through participation in them, insurgencies seldom fail to create new visions for freedom. Time after time, uprisings can be found to strengthen opposition movements; in their immediate aftermath, workers’ strikes proliferate, independent media flourish, the number of voluntary associations mushrooms, feminists activate networks, and subaltern groups mobilize to win more rights.

Another ostensible reason behind failures to recognize uprisings’ significance is the difficulties that may be imposed upon anyone seeming to challenge established powers by embracing insurgents’ views. In societies where scholars and activists enjoy freedom of inquiry, a salient reason for their lack of interest in social upheavals can be traced to a presumption that popular insurgencies lead to totalitarian dictatorships when they succeed and increased repression when they fail—but not to more open

different purviews, commonly subscribe to the notion of the “rational” individual actor lying at the core of society. In contrast, the crowd is commonly seen as embodying a form of “contagion,” of authoritarian domination and unintelligent action. At worst, academics understand groups through the model of lynch mobs that lead individuals to suspend their individual rationality and act according to debased instinctual passions that only harm others. In contrast to this view, millions of ordinary people who arose in Korea in the string of twentieth-century uprisings are living proof of another dynamic: *ordinary people, acting together in the best interests of the group, embody a reasonability and intelligence far greater than any of today’s corporate or political elites*. One does not need to be radical to comprehend the increasing intelligence of the world’s peoples and elite corruption and inability to rule properly. Recent observers of technology have penned simple insights that speak volumes: the Internet and the World Wide Web have facilitated “the wisdom of crowds” and “smart mobs.”² The role of collective intelligence facilitated by social media during the 2011 Arab Spring is too important to overlook.

The intelligence and reasonability of popular uprisings may surprise many people, while a better application of Le Bon’s “contagion” theory can be found in the herd instinct of

international financial investors, whose panic has resulted in massive sell-offs that overnight ruin economies—as during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 or again in the global economic meltdown that began in 2008. Unreasonable investment decisions of greedy “rational” actors who determine what to do with humanity’s wealth based on individual self-interest trample on the lives of those without riches; but when the dispossessed rise up, then—and only then—do mainstream commentators speak of disease.

Despite the history of the reasonability of social movements and the rationality of peoples’ grassroots decision-making, in the twelve decades since Le Bon formulated his ultraconservative notion of “contagion,” mainstream wisdom maintains the parameters of his thinking. The capacity of ordinary people to make intelligent decisions in the interests of humanity is continually underestimated. Even in comparison to democratically elected political leadership (as in the United States) and self-perpetuating economic elites (at the center of corporate power), ordinary people are far wiser.¹⁰ At gatherings like the World Social Forum, people assume the need to abolish nuclear bombs and all weapons of mass destruction, to end wars, and to cure poverty through redistribution of wealth. When was the last time we could hear such gems of common sense come from the mouth of a major political or corporate leader?

George Katsiaficas, *Asia's Unknown Uprisings Volume 1: South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century*

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See James Petras, "NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 4 (1999): 429.

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Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5.

8

Frances Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 18.

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See the recent books by nonacademic and nonmovement observers James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004) and Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Basic Books: 2002).

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See, for example, the film *The Battle of Chile*.