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## Reflections on contemporary social protests and governance

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By Guy Burton

When the history of the present is eventually written, 2011 may well be most closely associated with the '[Arab spring](#).' Attention will undoubtedly centre on the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, as well as the currently ongoing protests against leaderships from the Gulf to Yemen and violent reaction from the Libyan and Syrian regimes.

However, the pressure for change in the Arab world has not occurred in isolation. The last month has seen the transformation of what was initially a youth movement in [Tel Aviv against the high cost of living](#) to encompass all elements of society in Israel. Alongside the tents sprouting up along the wealthy Rothschild Boulevard in central Tel Aviv, the last three weekends have seen the size of the protests escalate, resulting in an estimated 300,000 people marching across Israel under the banner of social justice.

Meanwhile, outside the Middle East similar forms of protest have also been emerging over the past year. In Europe, Spanish demonstrators staged sit-ins against the leftwing [government's economic policies in May](#). Last November saw arguably the [largest demonstrations by students in London](#) against the coalition government's decision to increase university fees. And in Latin America [students in Chile](#) have also been protesting against the rightwing government about the state of education and its increasing privatisation, echoing similar demonstrations which swept the country five years ago.

The various protests taking place across the world echo the Arab spring through their self-conscious adoption of the features associated with the (so far) successful revolutions sweeping the Middle East. The 'Chilean winter' offers a parallel to the 'Arab spring' while Israeli demonstrators have carried placards including the phrases 'Go' (as Egyptian posters demanded of the now deposed president, Hosni Mubarak) and 'Here is Egypt.'

### Bringing the economy back in

Much of the media focus on these protests has largely been on the political dimension, especially the impact against the governments against which they are directed. In Israel media attention has been on the fumbling response by the Benjamin Netanyahu government to the protestors, just as in Chile particular interest has concentrated on the predominately private sector background – and therefore vested interests – of ministers in Sebastian Piñera's government.

But focusing on the political side is to lose sight of the economic grievances that prompted them in the first place. Indeed, the current struggle and demand for greater political rights in the Arab world began as an economic protest: the Tunisian revolution was kick-started by the self-immolation of a young college graduate who was unable to find a permanent and fulltime job. In addition, many of the first Egyptian protestors to congregate in Tahrir Square were among the young, educated and unemployed.

Many of the economic dissatisfaction associated with the protests is based in the neo-liberal changes and structural adjustments implemented by governments across the globe over the past 30 years. The 1970s was a decade of declining productivity, sluggish (and sometimes negative) growth, coupled with a perceived inefficiency in the state's industrial and manufacturing sectors. This was a common view in both the industrialised and the developing world. Governments were consequently put under pressure to find an alternative. This resulted in a reduction in public spending and the role of the state, introducing privatisation of state assets, deregulation and a minimal state (including social security) in exchange for greater participation by the private sector in the 1980s and 1990s. The process was also accompanied by globalisation, whereby capital, production, trade and consumption became increasingly internationalised, reaching beyond national borders.

The primary beneficiaries of these changes were elites, including financiers, businesspeople and their political supporters. It was assumed that the dividends of greater competition unleashed by neo-liberal change would be felt in both the public and private sector, leading to a 'trickle down' effect in the form of new jobs and choice generated by economic growth and deregulation. However, while some social sectors did experience some improvement in their living condition and prospects, not all of society did. Disaffection began to set in, eventually coalescing in the anti-globalisation movement. This movement grew in prominence following a series of highly public and publicised protests during the 1990s. Perhaps the most notable of these was the so-called '[Battle of Seattle](#)' during the WTO ministerial conference in that city in 1999 and opposition to the G8 in Genoa in 2001, resulting in the death of a young Italian protestor. At the same time the anti-globalisation movement began to organise itself, through the World Social Forum and the various regional events in the early years of the century under the banner of 'Another World is Possible.' However, the economic focus appeared to take a tumble in the wake of the September

11 attacks and the shift in focus from economic globalisation to the 'global war on terror'. Increasingly, elements of the anti-globalisation movement were subsumed into the wider opposition to the 2003 Iraq war and Washington's continuing presence in Afghanistan. Much effort was expended by activists in organising the demonstrations and making the case against the war.

Notwithstanding the focus on security issues, the economic dimension exploded onto the stage again at the end of the decade. The almost collapse of the global banking sector and the huge government bailouts to prevent it in 2008-09 has now been followed by a series of proposed and extremely tight retrenchment, especially by governments in the industrialised world. The decision by these governments has sparked growing social anger, especially as the decision to subsidise the wealthy banking elite has meant that the cost of reduced future public spending will fall disproportionately on the less well-off; the welfare state, already cut back during the neo-liberal period, faces further curtailment and a sense of personal insecurity and injustice. At the same time, there has been very little other means for the protestors to express their discontent; political representation has largely broken down as all political parties largely subscribe to the same neoliberal policies.

Similar sentiments may also be felt in the developing and non-democratic world. The impact of the economic downturn in the industrialised world following the financial crisis led to falls in trade and economic growth and performance in many of these countries. These factors, coupled with rising labour informality and increasing precariousness as a result of less spending on public safety nets and social security, has only compounded people's resentment. Little surprise then that such frustration initially manifested itself in protests against governments' neo-liberal policies before transforming into broader demands for political change.

### Where next?

Given these trends, what does the current social – and global – unrest point towards? Potentially, there is the prospect of a change in the nature of governance. Moreover, that change is likely to be at the global level, as the nature of the crisis and its ramifications has not only been felt internationally, but has also highlighted the limited scope of the predominant model of nation-states to cope with them. But how and where that change will come is uncertain; it may come from in the form of an external shock, or it may come from within.

Cambridge professor [Nicholas Boyle](#) asserts that change is on the way and that it will be externally generated. What will precipitate it is a global event of significance that will complete what the 2008-09 financial crisis began, by achieving a breakdown in current international relations. In his book published last year, ['2014: How to Survive the Next World Crisis'](#), Boyle argues that the second decade of each century is important for shaping the direction of future political organisation. His assumption is based on the fact that this has happen in the past five centuries. This has included: Martin Luther's nailing of his theses to the Wittenberg church door in 1517, heralding Protestantism and the Reformation; the beginning of the Thirty Year's War in 1618 which led to a system of nation-states; the end of religious conflict with the emergence of the Hanoverians in 1715; the establishment of peace in Europe at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and its collapse and instability in 1914.

The importance of a century's second decade is based on generational changes. On one hand the leadership associated with the end of the previous century will be largely moving on. On the other hand, those who replace them have either little or no experience of anything other than the main trends and social forces underpinning the past generation. This perspective fits neatly in with the sense that the period 1980-2009 has been the heyday of liberal democracy, a concept which is dominant across the industrialised world and to be aspired to by the developing countries.

In contrast to Boyle, there is another school of thought that suggests that the catalyst for change may come not from without, but from within. This is the thinking behind [Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2000 book, 'Empire'](#). For Hardt and Negri the present structure of power has already been undergoing change. Until the latter half of the twentieth century the imperialism had been the dominant force, whereby nation-states sought to conquer and control territory. By the end of the century though, imperialism was being replaced with 'Empire.' Specifically, this meant the emergence of a constitutional order supported by a coalition of global institutions and organisations and which support the territorially boundless and atemporal process of globalisation.

The change in the form of governance from imperialism to Empire is important in two main respects. First, it has a totalising effect, as the order associated with Empire strives to encompass everyone. Second, the pursuit of totality has meant a change in the nature of society, away from the historical 'people,' which 'tend[s] towards identity and homogeneity internally while posing difference from and excluding what remains outside' and towards the multitude: a 'place of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself...' (103) Moreover, given the totalising nature of the Empire's project, any opposition to it may only be achieved from within – consequently, the multitude.

But to what extent are the current social protests reflective of the multitude? Arguably, a great deal, since it is suggestive of the distinction between the social movements of yesterday and today and how they have approached democracy. Take the examples of two countries experiencing a transition to democracy: in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, various social groups were able to coalesce behind a consensus and bridge their base in civil society with political society through the formation of the Workers Party in Brazil; meanwhile in Egypt today, it is not possible to imagine all those involved in the revolution against Mubarak making the same leap. While some of the revolution's participants have been willing to enter the political process, others have noted the limitations of liberal democracy and especially the failure of political parties to adequately represent individuals and groups opposed to the neo-liberal model.

The differences between the Brazilian and Egyptian cases point to the difference between 'the people' and the 'multitude'. The social movements of the 1970s and 1980s that provided the impetus and pressure for change in southern Europe and Latin America shared many of the collective forms of identity that dominated the century. As well as a strong labour component, they included a range of distinct social groups, from human rights and LGBT activists to intellectuals and religious communities. In contrast the social movements that have emerged recently appear more indistinct in their identity. By contrast

the nature of the groups making up the current protests are more amorphous, consisting of a diverse range of individuals and groups, some with a clear collective identity and others with none. The diverse nature of these movements is reflected in the media's resort to the use of the term 'middle class' to describe many of those involved in the protests, despite the fact that the term now encompasses such a wide range of income levels, social backgrounds and cultural tastes. At the same time, the term 'middle class' is made problematic by the growing impoverishment of the bourgeoisie through increased uncertainty in the labour market and social protection over the past three decades.

### Final thoughts

This article has considered the scope, nature and origins of the current social protests. Despite their diversity in terms of regions, there are some common features associated with them. Although much of the attention has been focused on their political impact and the rejection of prevailing regimes (whether through rejection of the democratic political class as in Israel, Chile and Spain on the one hand or efforts to overthrow them in non-democratic states, as in the Arab world), their initial cause has been largely economic. At the same time, the fact that they started as economic protests is of particular concern to regimes, since they encompass a wide range of individuals and social groups – to the extent that it is not possible to classify them as anything other than with the vague term, 'middle class'.

Underpinning these social movements is a sense that change is imminent: not only in terms of immediate material gains that might be extracted from governments, but also in the current structures of governance underpinning the models of neo-liberalism and globalisation. But what form that change will take remains uncertain. As Boyle on one hand and Hardt and Negri on the other contend, the impetus may come from without or within respectively.

If change is prompted by external means, it will be hard to anticipate where it might take us. Boyle argues that it will lead us further away from the nation-state model towards a potentially more global form of governance. But as his examples of the five centuries show, change may not necessarily be orderly; the experiences of 1618 and 1914 saw an end to order and the emergence of periods of extreme volatility. However, if the change is internally generated – potentially through the multitude – then there are possible signs already in place regarding how the future may turn out. In particular, it is likely that we may be in for more uncertain times, reflecting the sporadic, diverse, dispersed and diffuse course that social protest is presently taking. Governments will never be able to fully satisfy their electorates, since efforts to co-opt some groups may be successful while others will continue to sit outside the system, reflecting the growing scepticism of many regarding the representative nature of liberal democracy within a context dominated by neo-liberal globalisation. In sum, an age absent of ideological consensus may well be on the cards.

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