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FROM POLITICS TO PROTEST

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Once upon a time in a small democratic country, something very strange happened. There was an election, and when the votes were counted, it turned out that the number of valid votes barely amounted to 25 percent of all those cast. The party of the right won 13 percent, the party of the center 9 percent, and the party of the left 2.5 percent or so. There were a few spoiled ballots, but all the others, around three-quarters of all those cast, had simply been left blank. The political establishment was deeply upset. Why had citizens voted “blank”? What did they want? How had the “blankers” planned this and managed to organize themselves?

The government’s frantic attempts to get its hands on the ringleaders of the blank-vote conspiracy ended in frustration and despair. It turned out that behind the blank votes were neither ideologists nor organizers. Nor was it a conspiracy, having been neither planned nor prepared. It was not even tweeted. The only rational explanation was that a majority of the people at one and the same time (and each separately from all the others) had arrived at the idea of dropping a blank ballot into the urn. As a result, there was no one for the government to negotiate with, no one to arrest, and no one to target with efforts at blackmail or cooptation. After a week of anxiety, the authorities reran the election. But this time, 83 percent of the ballots were left blank.

This is an abridged version of a tale that first appeared in the Portuguese author José Saramago’s 2004 novel *Seeing*. Now, however, something like this fictional “blank-ballot rebellion” has spread to the real world. The discontented ranks of those whom U.S. columnist Thomas Friedman calls “the square people” seem to have burst spontaneously upon the scene, occupying a space apart from both governments and

traditional oppositions.¹ The “square” could be Tahrir Square in Cairo, Independence Square in Kyiv, Taksim Square in Istanbul, the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis, Bolotnaya Square in Moscow, Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, Altamira Square in Caracas, or any of a number of other places like them. In more than seventy countries around the world,² people have turned out in public to mount sizeable, sustained protests that ignore political parties, distrust the mainstream media, have few if any specific leaders, and mostly leave formal organization aside, relying instead on the Internet and ad hoc assemblies for collective debate and decision making.

This new wave of vocal dissatisfaction is not gathered behind any particular ideology or clear set of demands. In Friedman’s words, it consists mostly of young people “aspiring to a higher standard of living and more liberty . . . connected to one another either by massing in squares or through virtual squares or both, and united less by a common program and more by a shared direction they want their societies to go.”

Epidemics of protest (to list just a few) broke out in the Arab world (starting with Tunisia) in late 2010 and early 2011, Russia in late 2011 and into 2012, Turkey in 2013, Ukraine late that year and into early 2014, and Venezuela starting in February 2014. Each angry demonstration was angry in its own way and for its own local reasons, but the protests add up to a worldwide phenomenon that has changed many of our ideas about what the future will look like. The protests have been massive affairs joined by hundreds of thousands of people. From July through October 2011, Israel was witness to the largest grassroots mobilization in its history. More than two-million people took part in the Spanish protests that same year, and more than three million joined the Brazilian protests of 2013. These demonstrations evoked significant sympathy among the general public and captured the imaginations of many young people. “There can be little doubt,” wrote Google’s Eric Schmidt, “that the new future will be full of revolutionary movements, as communication technologies enable new connections and generate more room for expression.” But, he added, “We will see fewer revolutionary outcomes.”³

The protesters showed open hostility toward institutions and voiced their mistrust of both the market and the state. In the past, protest movements tended to be about emancipation—advocating rights of workers, women, or minorities—and their street marches were aimed at gaining access to and representation within state institutions. The current movements flow from a different sentiment. They are driven not by unrepresented groups that want to enter the institutions, but rather by a new generation of rebels who aspire to do without existing institutions altogether. “It wasn’t because occupiers brought the politicians specific demands and proposals” that they made a difference, insisted Occupy

Wall Street activist David Graeber. “Instead, they’d created a crisis of legitimacy within the entire system by providing a glimpse of what real democracy might be like.”⁴

Mistrusting institutions, the protesters were flatly uninterested in taking power. Their revolt was not against the government, but against being governed. This spirit of libertarianism, or even of “anarchism with a small a,” is what Occupy Wall Street had in common with the Egyptian uprising against dictator Hosni Mubarak. But while the protests succeeded in fueling the anti-institutional imagination of some, they fueled other citizens’ fears of chaos and anarchy, allowing governments to portray the protesters’ urge for direct democracy as a threat to public order.

How can we make sense of all these protests? Do they signal a radical change in the practice of politics, or are they mere blips on the screen of public life, spectacular but ultimately insignificant eruptions of public anger? Why have the protests emerged in democratic and nondemocratic countries alike? And what makes the politics of disruption so evidently attractive across so many different societies?

Democracies and Nondemocracies Alike

The more than seventy countries touched by major political protests over the last five years include autocracies such as Mubarak’s Egypt and Ben Ali’s Tunisia, but also democracies such as the United Kingdom and India. Some, such as Israel, are prosperous; others, such as Bosnia, are poor and depressed. Some are big (Russia), but some (Bosnia again) are small. In most of them, social inequality is growing, though this is not always so—in Brazil it is shrinking. Protests have broken out in countries that are reeling from the global economic crisis of the late 2000s and its aftereffects—Greece and Spain spring to mind—but have also erupted in places such as Turkey, whose emerging economy continued to hum along at a high growth rate, barely fazed by global economic troubles.

If it is remarkable that the protest wave hit democracies and nondemocracies alike, it is also remarkable that governments both democratic and nondemocratic have tended to respond in eerily similar ways. Many have rushed to discredit protests as unspontaneous and as coming not from the people but from disaffected elites. In places as politically diverse as authoritarian Russia, electorally democratic Turkey, semidemocratic Ukraine, and EU member state Bulgaria, it was as if the responses emanated from a common script. It is unsurprising that strongman or would-be strongman figures such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin, Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Ukraine’s Viktor Yanukovich would air wild conspiracy theories blaming protests on U.S.-sponsored “foreign agents” (Russia), a murky “interest-rate lobby” seeking to profit from disorder (Turkey), or local fascists and Western-manipulated business oligarchs (Ukraine). But to hear

democratic leaders such as Sergei Stanishev—a former prime minister of Bulgaria and currently the head of the Party of European Socialists in the European Parliament—calling protesters the hirelings of shadowy oligarchic interests has been something else altogether. Nor has any government proven especially shy about using the police to contain (or, in some cases, attack) protests. The common message coming from the authorities has been not so much “trust us”—most know that such an appeal would be pointless—but rather “do not trust anybody.” And in both democracies and nondemocracies, governments have used the protests to split society into rival camps and frighten citizens with the specter of chaos and anarchy.

It is easy to understand why citizens of a country where the right to elect one’s leaders is effectively denied would look to street protests as a source of social and political change. But why would citizens of countries with free and fair elections do so? This is one of the critical questions that the current protest wave raises. Could it be that in many places elections, those occasions *par excellence* for voters to make their will felt, have now ironically become little more than a collective celebration of popular powerlessness, leaving citizens feeling that they need some other and more meaningful way of making their wishes known?

The rising popularity of the term “managed democracy” is suggestive. The concept is a slippery one: Different political actors use it for different reasons in order to describe widely varying regimes. Putin’s apologists euphemistically call his authoritarian regime, which uses rigged elections to legitimize the Kremlin’s power over society, a “managed democracy.” Critics of the EU’s democracy deficit condemn “managed democracy” when they complain that citizens of some member states have had key decisions taken from their hands by EU requirements that matters such as budget deficits must be “constitutionalized” or handed over to unelected bodies. The term has also been taken to apply to Hong Kong, with its mixture of competitive electoral politics and institutions designed to give Chinese Communist Party authorities in Beijing a huge say over Hong Kong’s affairs. And some worry that the growing power of money in politics is turning the United States into yet another kind of “managed democracy.”

This array of usages is instructive because it puts into question the idea of a clear distinction between democratic and nondemocratic regimes. In doing so, it requires us to reflect on the practical implications of two powerful but contradictory trends that are shaping global politics today. As information and communication technologies spread, public life is becoming more democratized and individuals are becoming more empowered. People can know more with greater speed and organize themselves more quickly and easily than ever before, raising a threat to authoritarian regimes. At the same time, however, the rise of “Big Data” in politics is allowing governments and large corporations to gather, organize, and instantly access nearly unlimited amounts of information

about the preferences and behavior patterns of citizens. The possibilities for manipulation (sometimes traveling under the benign-sounding label of “nudging”) and even coercion are obvious, as is the threat thereby posed to the foundations of democracy. Both nudging elites and protesting masses have this in common: The new information technologies facilitate their activities, and neither group finds the people’s preferences as expressed through the ballot box to be of more than minor importance. Elites approach elections as opportunities for manipulating the people rather than listening to them (Big Data makes voting marginal as a source of feedback), while protesters prefer to use elections as occasions for demonstrations rather than as tools to shape policy.

Elections: Celebrations of Powerlessness?

Sex is not love and elections are not democracy, but no one can understand the mystery of love without understanding the nature of sexual attraction, and no one can understand democracy without grasping what the practice of holding elections is supposed to mean. Democracy calls for simultaneously restraining the intensity of political actors *and* overdramatizing the political game. Democracy is supposed to spur the apathetic to take an interest in public life, while also cooling the passions of zealots. Mobilizing the passive while pacifying the outraged is at the heart of elections. But elections also ask us to judge politicians on the basis not of what they have done, but of what they promise to do. In this sense, elections are a machine for the production of collective dreams. Ban elections, and you agree either to live in a present where the future is absent or to embrace a future that is decreed to you by the state. Elections aim at leaving the future open. They bring change; they do not foreclose it.

Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first to suggest that the discourse of crisis is the native language of any genuine democracy. Democratic politics, he observed, needs drama. “As the election approaches,” he wrote, “intrigues become more active, agitation more lively and more widespread. . . . The entire nation falls into a feverish state. . . . As soon as fortune has pronounced . . . everything becomes calm, and the river, one moment overflowed, returns peacefully to its bed.”⁵

As David Runciman has written, “Tocqueville discovered on his American journey [that] democratic life is a succession of crises that turn out to be nothing of the sort.”⁶ Democracy operates by framing the normal as catastrophic, while promising that all crises are surmountable. Democratic politics functions as a nationwide therapy session in which voters are confronted with their worst nightmares—demographic collapse, economic crisis, environmental catastrophe, a new war—but are persuaded that they have the power to avert the devastation. When the elections are over, the world will magically return to normal. Is it sur-

prising, then, that politicians and the media portray almost every election as a turning point—as a choice that will define the fate of the nation for the next generation?

Democratic politics is impossible without the persistent oscillation between the excessive dramatization and the trivialization of the problems that we face. Elections lose their power if they fail to produce an overblown sense of crisis while at the same time inspiring an optimistic sense that the crisis can be solved. As Stephen Holmes likes to say, for elections to work, the stakes must be neither too high nor too low. If what is at stake is individual survival, it would be unrealistic to expect the election game to succeed. Recent developments in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that when the stakes become too high, people reach for bullets rather than ballots. And yet, if nothing of consequence is to be decided on election day—if voting loses its “drama”—why should anyone bother to go to the polls?

Some European countries stand today as classic examples of a crisis of democracy brought on by overly low stakes. Why should the Greeks or the Portuguese turn out to vote when they know perfectly well that, in the wake of the troubles associated with the euro, the policies of the next government will be just the same as those of the current one? In the days of the Cold War, citizens could resort to the urns with the expectation that their votes would decide their country’s fate—whether it would stay part of the West or join the East, or whether private industry would be nationalized. Large, imposing questions were the order of the day. Today, the differences between left and right have essentially evaporated, and voting has become more about one’s tastes than about anything that deserves the name of ideological conviction.

Elections not only are losing their capacity to capture the popular imagination, they are failing to effectively overcome crises. People have begun to lose interest in them. There is a widespread suspicion that they have become a fool’s game. It is true that elections have spread to more countries and in many places are freer and fairer than ever before; but though we vote more often than in the past, elections are no longer mobilizing the passive and pacifying the outraged. The decline of electoral turnout in Western democracies over the last thirty years, along with the eruption of mass political protests over the last five, is a powerful manifestation of the crisis. In most of Europe, elections have become an afterthought. Moreover, they now give birth to governments that are saddled with massive public distrust as soon as they take office.

The problem with elections is not simply that they leave the underprivileged underrepresented. When it comes to actually governing, elections matter less not only because the policy choices have been narrowed, but because elections no longer “manufacture” majorities and policy mandates. The fragmentation of the public sphere has turned modern democracies into places of vanishing majorities. In 2012, among

the 34 members of the OECD, only four featured a government backed by an absolute majority of parliament. And as elections fail to produce clear majorities and unambiguous policy mandates, voters come to believe that they no longer need to

feel obligated to support the government for which they have voted. The problem is exacerbated by the reality that parties, even when in the government, have a hard time making good on their promises.

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The paradoxical effect of the loss of drama in elections is their mutation into a ritual that has more to do with humiliating the party in power than with expressing confidence in the opposition. These days it would be miraculous to find a government that enjoys the support of a popular

majority for even a year after being elected. Consider the dramatic decline in support suffered by French president François Hollande. His approval rating has plummeted to 13 percent since he outpolled incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2012, even as nothing all that unusual has been going on in France. Hollande's case suggests that the relationship between the government and its supporters, which once resembled an unhappy but solid Catholic marriage, is now more like a one-night stand. Voters simply do not see their ballot as a long-term contract with the party that they have chosen. No longer predicated on one's expectations of the future, voting is now largely a judgment based on past performance.

Unsurprisingly, studies show that the advantages enjoyed by incumbents in Europe are disappearing. Governments are collapsing more quickly than before, and they are being reelected less often.⁷ "No one is truly elected anymore," the French political thinker Pierre Rosanvallon argues. "Those in power no longer enjoy the confidence of the voters; they merely reap the benefits of distrust of their opponents and predecessors."⁸

There is another perverse effect of this diminution of drama: Elections are failing to demobilize the opposition. Traditionally, electoral victory meant that the winning party would be allowed to govern. Like wars, elections had clear winners and losers, and the winners imposed their agenda—at least during the first part of their mandate. Oppositions could dream of revenge but would have found it ill advised to prevent the government from governing. All these received wisdoms are changing. When governing parties fail to win majorities or lose them on Day 2, it should not come as a shock to find that oppositions feel less obliged than they once did to treat the voters' verdict as final. The proliferation

of elections (parliamentary, local, regional, and presidential), the pervasiveness of public-opinion polls, and the new appetite for referenda make it easy for the opposition to claim that the government has lost its popular mandate.

The existence of minority governments makes those minorities that are in opposition unwilling to concede defeat. As the results of elections become less consequential, politics becomes more confrontational. The more governments are constrained (by the IMF, the EU, or investors and the bond market) from changing economic policies, the more political competition comes to revolve around identity issues. When voters realize that they cannot punish the bankers without hurting themselves, the finger of blame shifts to immigrants. In sum, voters no longer see elections as vehicles for mandating change, and governments no longer see them as effective sources of the ability to govern.

The Middle-Class Dilemma

Are popular protests a new institution meant to control politicians between elections? Or are they an *alternative* to electoral politics? And why is the middle class losing trust in elections? If we want to grasp the nature of the current protest wave, we need to look more closely at the consequences of the decline in citizens' belief that elections decide policies.

Historically, the rise of middle-class political influence has been bound up with the struggle for universal suffrage. Elections have been for the middle class what chess has been for the Russians or extramarital affairs for the French—a game they know how to win. The middle class felt at ease when people could vote in free and fair elections, as it was capable of assembling social coalitions and promoting its own interests and values. “Mistress of all” is how Tocqueville portrayed the middle class. We have thus learned to expect that, when the middle class takes to the streets, it will demand free and fair elections. But we can no longer be sure that the middle class's affection for elections remains. Russia, Thailand, Turkey, and Bulgaria present four interesting cases. They send vastly contrasting messages with respect to democracy, elections, and the political influence of the middle class.

In Russia in December 2011, after a questionably conducted parliamentary contest, the middle class hit the streets to demand that elections should be free and fair. Everyone acknowledged that Putin's party would most likely have won even the cleanest elections, but the point, thought middle-class Russians, was not to take power but to challenge the legitimacy of Putin's regime. In Thailand, the middle class's demand was “no elections.” They insisted on an “appointed committee” to fix Thai politics, and trumpeted the slogan “Reform before elections.” In the end, they got the May 2014 military coup, and they have been

happy to endorse it. In Turkey, the Gezi Park protests (which erupted in May 2013 over Erdoğan's plans to fell trees and reduce the green space around Taksim Square at the heart of Istanbul's heavily built-up modern downtown) led to far-reaching criticisms of the prime minister and demands for his government's resignation. Oddly, however, protesters did *not* call for early elections, for they doubted that they were speaking for most voters. The strong performance of the prime minister's party in the 2014 local elections confirmed these doubts. The Gezi Park protests had not been about forming an electoral majority, but instead had been an attempt to draw some limits around the power of such a majority.

Bulgaria's case was the most puzzling. There, tens of thousands of people (impressive numbers in a country of only 7.3 million) filled Sofia's main boulevard in mid-2013 to protest the naming of a notorious oligarch to head the national anticorruption agency. According to opinion polls, fully 70 percent of the public supported the demonstrators. Their movement did passionately cry out for fresh elections, but in the same polls that revealed the massive support behind them, most respondents (including the majority that backed early elections) said that they nonetheless considered themselves unlikely to vote owing to a lack of any parties or candidates worth endorsing.

The new ambivalence of the middle classes toward elections has drawn a number of different explanations. And of course, circumstances differ from one country and part of the world to another, and local circumstances matter. Still, there remains a clear global trend toward elections becoming less decisive. The world-spanning middle class borne aloft by the spread of markets and consumption—the class that Francis Fukuyama views as the engine driving the current global protest surge⁹—mistrusts elections because it does not believe in government. It does not want to be part of the government, and so finds it difficult to form winning political coalitions. It feels threatened (one can see this very clearly in Thailand) by a coalition comprising oligarchs and the impoverished masses who still see the state as the major source of their well-being.

There is an emotional tone to these protests that is both aspirational and defensive. Many "middle-class" demonstrators are protesting not because they are middle class, but because they want to be. That is, they feel themselves to be middle class in terms of education and values, but they find themselves being forced to live through parlous economic times. Incomes are pinched, good jobs may be scarce, and even those whose assets do put them firmly in the middle class are heavily indebted. Looked at through the lens of these circumstances, protests appear as attempts to safeguard and assert the middle-class individual's status in an all-too-often unfriendly world. Political activism compensates for the economic impossibility of being middle class in the midst of an intractable downturn or a long period of stubbornly slow growth.

Protesting empowers and voting frustrates because capturing the gov-

ernment no longer guarantees that things will change. Elections are losing their central role in democratic politics because citizens no longer believe that their government is actually doing the governing, and also because they do not know whom to blame for their misfortunes. The more transparent our societies become, the more difficult it is for citizens to decide where to direct their anger. We live in a society of “innocent criminals,” where governments prefer to trumpet their impotence rather than their power.

Take the question of rising inequality. If one wants to criticize it, who or what is to be held responsible: The market? The government? New technologies? Can any government do much to reduce inequality without destroying its country’s ability to compete in the global marketplace? The futile attempts of several leftist governments to raise the taxes paid by the super-rich potently underline the constraints that any government today must face when it comes to economic policy.

Instead of seeking to topple the government, then, should we pity it? Voters feel helpless today because the politicians whom they elect are candid about their loss of power. As someone wrote on a wall in Brazil: “I am tired of austerity, I want promises!” This captured something fundamental. In a democratic politics without alternatives, politicians try to make a virtue out of *not* making any promises. But a stance of “no promises” translates into less power for the voters. Democracy is nurtured by promises: Politicians who fail to make any cannot be held accountable. “I never promised you anything” is usually a line in pulp romance novels. After hearing it, the only thing the poor jilted one can do is run away and cry.

In his remarkable 2006 book *Counter-Democracy*, Rosanvallon anticipates the emergence of leaderless protest as an instrument for transforming democracy in the twenty-first century. Step by step, he claims, the “positive democracy of elections and legal institutions” will be surrounded by the “negative sovereignty of civil society.”¹⁰ The people will assert their sovereignty as the power to refuse. Do not expect politicians preaching long-range visions or political movements pushing inspirational collective projects. Do not expect political parties that will command the loyalty of their followers and capture the imagination of the citizenry. The democracy of the future will look very different. People will step into the limelight only to reject certain policies or debunk particular politicians. The core social conflicts that structure political life will be between the people and the elite—not between the left and the right but between the bottom and the top. The new democracy will be a democracy of rejection.

The new political man has no illusions about the effectiveness of government, but he nonetheless believes that the people have a responsibility to control it. The passion for transparency and the obsession with accountability are natural reactions to the fraying of representation.

A number of commentators were quick to view the mass protests as

a kind of NGO revolution. In some respects they are right. Many of the protest activists were socialized in the NGO community, and their stress on transparency and oversight comes straight from the NGO playbook. Yet the age of protest also may mark the twilight of the NGOs, which could become the period's big losers. The anti-institutional message of the protests drives the younger generation toward Internet-centered activism and distracts them from thinking organizationally. Moreover, since many governments doubt the spontaneous nature of the protests and are constantly seeking their alleged masterminds, NGOs are easy culprits. Not surprisingly, in numerous cases (that of Putin's Russia is perhaps the most notorious) governments have responded to protests by slapping harsh new restrictions on NGOs.

Neither Revolution nor Reform

Is the anti-institutional ethos of the protests and the antipolitical nature of their politics a strength or a weakness? Did the protests succeed or did they fail? Could disruption be a better instrument for radical change than either revolution or reform?

It is not easy to answer these questions. If the recent massive outburst of social fury might be considered a revolution, as many claim, it is a strange kind of revolution. In the twentieth century, revolutions still had ideological labels. They were "communist" like Lenin's, "fascist" like Mussolini's, or "Islamic" like Khomeini's. Today's protests, by contrast, sound like exercises in corporate branding: We have "Facebook" or "Twitter" revolutions and "Blackberry" riots. They have captured the public imagination without generating any new ideologies or charismatic leaders. These protests will be remembered for videos, not manifestos; happenings, not speeches; conspiracy theories, not political tracts. They stand as a distinctive form of participation without representation.

Although they do not claim power, they do offer an effective strategy of citizen empowerment in the age of globalization. In a world where governments are less powerful than before, corporations are more mobile, and political parties are bereft of the capacity to build a political identity around visions of the future, the power of citizens derives from their ability to disrupt. It is characteristic that protesters in most cases decided to disrupt public order not by striking, but by occupying public spaces. It was not the worker or the student who stood at the center of the protests, but the idealized citizen. Protests succeeded at influencing politics beyond national borders and at subverting any sense of security among the elites. Unlike elections, protests were able to represent effectively *the intensity of public sentiment*, and in country after country hostility to elites was at that sentiment's heart.

The protests showed that things could change. Even when not advo-

cating anything concrete, the protests asserted the possibility of change and thus accomplished something that elections once did—they kept the future open. The people who occupied the squares got a sense of power that was absent in the voting booth. The protests also created commu-

The global wave of protests thus has not marked the return of revolutionary politics. Like elections, protests serve to keep revolution, with its message of a radically different future, at an unbridgeable distance.

nity, with participants often making their protest activities a basis of their political identity. Protests have gained a wider popularity. A study of public attitudes in Russia a year after the protest movement's defeat demonstrates this best. Although political mobilization has declined in Moscow and other centers of protest activity, there has been a doubling of the numbers of those outside these centers who assert that, should they find their interests threatened, they will rise up.¹¹

Protests have been better than elections at triggering splits within elite ranks, both nationally and internationally. Elites fear nothing more than angry crowds without leaders or demands. Mass protests immediately divide the elite between those who want to engage and those who want to crush, between those who want to talk with the protesters and those who would rather arrest them. And while elections barely make a ripple in the international media, really large protests can grab world headlines. The protests also undermine elite solidarity on the international level. It is easier for democratic governments in the West to accept unfair elections than to endorse the violent crushing of mass protests.

Protests constitute a rebellion against the institutions of representative democracy, but without offering any alternatives. Even their clear preference for nonviolence is telling here, for it reflects among other things a fear of representation and hierarchy. Indeed, as soon as violence broke out around the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine, organized paramilitary groups seized the moment. Success in armed struggle requires saying goodbye to the notion of a leaderless revolution. When it comes to fighting, as when it comes to voting (which after all is a competition that is meant to offer the decisive result of a trial at arms without its bloodshed), these new protest movements can quickly melt away.

Mass protests are meant to take on (in a nonviolent way) the role that violent insurrections historically have played. Like mass insurrections, mass protests testify that the sovereign people exists and is angry. Protests function as an alternative to elections in that they develop an alternative way of representing the people. To play their symbolic role, the protests have to fulfill certain criteria. They must not only involve huge numbers of people, but must also be spontaneous and not orga-

nized by any political party. They should also bring together people who in normal political life would never be seen in one another's company (Facebooking Egyptian students and face-bearded Egyptian salafists, for instance). The protesters typically reject the idea of forming a political party or parties, and often even eschew the framing of political alternatives. The language of protest must be that of morality rather than policy. In short, protests are a revolt against the elites, but the protesters (whether they acknowledge this or not) leave it to those same elites to decide what will happen next.

The protesters in their pronouncements passionately reject the idea of a politics without possibility, but the protests themselves in fact add up to a form of acceptance of this new reality. None of the major protest movements has come out with a platform for changing the world—or even the economy. In this sense, we may be looking less at a possible engine of revolutionary activity against capitalism than at one of capitalism's safety valves.

The global wave of protests thus has not marked the return of revolutionary politics. Like elections, protests serve to keep revolution, with its message of a radically different future, at an unbridgeable distance. With the passage of time, it is becoming increasingly hard to decide which protests really succeeded. Two years after the massive demonstrations in Moscow, Putin remains in the Kremlin and Russia is even less democratic than before. In Egypt, the army is back in power and violently settling accounts with the Muslim Brotherhood, while many of those who two years ago were demanding elections are now praising the generals' July 2013 takeover as "the people's coup." In the United States, Occupy Wall Street vanished as dramatically as it had appeared. In Greece, resistance against austerity policies has waned. In Turkey, as we have seen, Erdoğan's side handily won the elections that followed the Gezi Park eruptions. The protest wave in Bulgaria has left the public feeling even more desperate and mistrustful than before. The protests everywhere succeeded in disrupting the political status quo, but they also helped the elites to relegitimize their power by, in effect, demonstrating that there is no real alternative to them.

The politics of protest signals the twilight of both the classic idea of revolution and the notion of political reformism. Revolutions are driven by ideologies and seek desperately to capture governing power—real revolutionaries have ideas and want to win at virtually any cost. Neither of these things was true of recent protests and protesters. With their lack of ideology and concrete demands, they were literally rebels without a cause. Political reformism accepts that the world is imperfect, but also believes that it is improvable. It seeks to work through institutions and not against them. Small steps and gradual changes based on insights and trial and error, the reformist canon tells us, mark the best path to political improvement. In its classic version, reformism combines changes

from within and on high with political pressure from outside and below. It utilizes elections as instruments for political change. Reformism was the strategy behind the success of Western societies in the last century, but reformism is not what our recent protesters are looking for.

The democracy of protests turns its back on both revolution and reformism. The bloody record of revolutionary governments over the last two centuries has left revolution discredited, while reformism appears insufficiently radical. The protesters subscribe to the notion that political gains for the underprivileged flow less often from reformism (which is too weak and unexciting a brew for their taste, anyway) than from calamities and disruptions in the fabric of the social order such as wars and revolutions. The democracy of protests is therefore built around an alternating succession of breaches and restorations of public order.

The recent protest wave seems to have the most affinity with what another French political thinker, Martin Breugh, calls “the plebeian experience.”¹² It is an eruption of civic energy that does not crystallize into political parties or organizations, but leaves traces and keeps alive the hope that the world can be changed as a result of the collective action of citizens. It is a moment, not a movement. It is an explosion of political subjectivity, and like any explosion, it by definition cannot be sustained.

In many respects, the current revolt against political representation resembles the situation in ancient Rome, where the plebs would occasionally quit the city, trooping out of Rome en masse in order to encamp atop a hill a few miles away as a means of expressing their civic anger. “There without any leader,” writes Livy, the great chronicler of the Roman Republic, “their camp being fortified with a rampart and trench, remaining quiet, taking nothing but what was necessary for sustenance, they kept themselves for several days, neither being attacked, nor attacking others. Great was the panic in the city, and through mutual fear all was suspense.”¹³

These Roman secessions were different from conspiracies and civil wars. They were less about changing rulers (though at times, as on this occasion in 494 B.C.E., new offices with new powers might be created) and more about agreeing on the principles according to which power would be wielded. As Livy indicates, the plebs agreed to return to the city, which could not survive without them, only when a senatorial envoy named Menenius Agrippa managed to fashion a narrative—by means of a famous parable about the stomach and the other members of the body (politic)—that recognized the plebs’ significance to society as well as their power.¹⁴

Protests are unpredictable. Unpredictability is the source of their political effectiveness but also the source of their weakness. Governments will never know when people might stir themselves to occupy the squares and thereby present the government with the awkward problem of a leaderless and hence unbribable popular uprising. But citizens will never know

whether and under what precise conditions their fellows will prove themselves ready to mass in the streets once more. What if the public interest is violated, but not blatantly enough to overcome the deflating forces of civic apathy and inertia? It is good then to have some more reliable resort than protests. For what if you hold a protest and no one comes?

NOTES

1. Thomas L. Friedman, “The Square People, Part 1” and “The Square People, Part 2,” *New York Times*, 13 and 17 May 2014.

2. The number of countries affected is given by the Economist Intelligence Unit, “Rebels Without a Cause: What the Upsurge in Protest Movements Means for Global Politics,” available at www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=ProtestUpsurge.

3. Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

4. David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013).

5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 345. I owe my knowledge of this Tocquevillian insight to David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

6. Runciman, *Confidence Trap*, 23

7. Moisés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic, 2013).

8. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 176.

9. Francis Fukuyama, “The Middle-Class Revolution,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2013.

10. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*, 14.

11. Levada Analytical Center, “Russian Public Opinion 2012–2013,” Moscow, 2013.

12. Martin Breugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*, trans. Lazer Lederhendler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

13. Titus Livy, *The History of Rome (Ab Urbe Condita Libri)*, bk. II, ch. 32, trans. D. Spillan (New York: Digireads.com, 2009), 70.

14. In the opening scene of *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare has Menenius Agrippa relate a version of this parable (or a “pretty tale” as Menenius openly calls it) to a group of hungry, angry plebs armed with staves and clubs whom he has encountered in the street on their way to the Roman Capitol.