

‘Not Ready for Democracy:’ Social Networking and the Power of the People The Revolts of 2011 in a Temporalized Context

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Abstract

This essay argues that the rise of social networking is to the detriment of the democratic processes that come to us from at least the time of the Enlightenment. Analysed from the perspective of temporality, the essay argues that liberal democracy has its own indelible rhythms and temporal processes, based fundamentally upon the technologies of writing and on the print culture they created. Postmodern neoliberalism and the revolution in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has created a ‘destabilization of the word’ that traditionally gave rhythm to democracy—and to society more broadly. The digitalized word has accelerated economy and society to the extent that it has left the slower rhythms of democracy in their wake. Social networking, as an outgrowth of the neoliberal information society, has propelled political action into this accelerated digital domain. From this perspective, it is argued that the revolts sparked in North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011 were a dramatic example of a postmodern political process that has no roots, no ‘strong tie’ links, and leaves no time for the development of a programmatic politics of the traditional kind. Social networking, in short, creates a political vacuum into which forms of power, potentially less democratic than ‘people power’, will invariably flow.

Keywords: Social networking; Arab Spring; neoliberalism; time and temporality; democracy; print culture.

Breaking the chains of servitude?

More than a few observers have argued that early 2011 may go down in history as the Middle Eastern equivalent of late 1989 in Central Europe. Political scientist Mary Kaldor, for example, sees 2011 as the *culmination* of that East European democratic impulse (Kaldor, 2011). In 1989, millions of ordinary people in cities from Prague to Bucharest via East Berlin toppled their indigenous Communist Parties in a vast wave of change that still reverberates powerfully today—in many largely unexpected ways.

In 2011, from Morocco in the Maghreb, due east to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and further still into Syrian Levant, millions of people suddenly engaged themselves in another spontaneous ‘great refusal’, or an unspecific unwillingness to continue their lives

as usual. An apparently cross-class agglomeration from these predominantly Arab societies decided that they had had their fill of the old regimes. A line from the opening passages of John Buchan's 1916 *Greenmantle* became a much-quoted epigram to illustrate the Arab upsurge. It reads: 'There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark' (Hitchens, 2011: 290). And so it seemed. From the liberal democratic perspective, especially, the sudden conflagration was seen as a good thing. The BBC World Service radio and BBC World television, for example, endlessly played footage from correspondents in Tahrir Square in Cairo, or on a hotel balcony in Benghazi, where their private views on what they were witnessing seemed to be obvious; the uprisings were viewed in similarly positive terms further to the political Left, as exemplified by Kaldor, and from the more radical Left by intellectuals such Slavoj Žižek, who thought the events in Egypt in particular to be both a 'miracle' and 'sublime' (Žižek, 2010).

For all the media excitement about Arabs finding their feet at last, and the praising of their undoubted bravery in inaugurating, possibly, a wider democratic phase across the world, where authoritarianism and the archetypal strongman was at last on its way to history's dustbin, it is evident that these portents actually say something else; something different from Kaldor's identification of the new-found 'power of civil society' or what Žižek sees as the 'breaking [of] the chains of servitude' (2011). Yes, the events of 2011 do say something positive and important about a universal thirst for fundamental democratic principles. And yes, these principles of justice and freedom and dignity have at least been seen to be more than the preserve of Euro-America—and more properly the entitlement of every human being. However, the comparisons with 1989 are flawed and misleading.

Much of the talk in print, television and the blogs of 'revolution' and 'people power' is reflective, fundamentally, of the comfort-zone thinking that most of the Left remain unwilling to abandon. As I will show, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumult that preceded and followed it was the acting out of the *final historical scenes* of a system of politics shaped by its classical Enlightenment-inspired mode. This was a politics of a form and quality that reached back to at least 1789. It was a politics of ideas that had their own history and their own traditions; a politics of ideas that had institutions and organizations that promoted political programmes that (at least in theory) represented the way forward for a particular interest group or class.

We live in a very different time, politically, in our post-Cold War age. The British intellectual Perry Anderson put it bluntly:

Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view. It can be put like this. For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer

any significant oppositions—that is, systematic rival outlooks—within the thought-world of the West (2000:17).

We live in a neoliberal-dominated world, where the market (and the market mechanism of competition) is seen as the only workable way to organize and develop the economy—and society too. In a sense, then, Francis Fukuyama was onto something when he argued in that fateful year of 1989 that liberal democracy (a neoliberal democracy) has triumphed and that the ‘end’ of a particular stream of ‘history’ had come to pass (Fukuyama, 1989). Politics, and political conflict and tumult of the kind witnessed in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, thus represents a post-Enlightenment turn, the contours of which are at present difficult to make out clearly. But these do not augur well for the promotion of the normative forms of democracy that have come down to us from Enlightenment-age Europe and North America. To get some insight into the nature of this negative development, we need to appreciate the role and function of *temporality in our modernity*, together with the effects that networked information technologies are having on our relationship with time.

The rhythms of democracy in a networked society

In 1989, as the storm of revolt was breaking over the heads of apprehensive communist elites struggling to figure out what it all meant, the West was undergoing its own upheavals—and had been for over a decade by that time. These were economic as well as political. Economic globalization (of which the revolts in Europe were undoubtedly a part (Harman, 1990: 3-94)) was forming a worldwide grid of capital flows that was intended to free business from the alleged constraints of the nation state and its stultifying bureaucracies. Neoliberalism led the charge. Globalizing capitalism was also becoming a networked capitalism, forming an increasingly close interlinking of markets and the societies that sustain them to create a ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, 1989). An important ideological element that took hold at this time was that the neoliberalized political institutions—parties and government bureaucracies—began to abrogate their historic role as the ‘leading actor’ in society—ceding it to the abstract dynamics of market-centred competition (Sassen, 1998)

Vitaly, this process was also technological. Globalization could not have evolved in the way that it did had Harvey’s ‘time-space compression’ not been made real by information technologies. And information technologies, in their turn, could not have had the developmental trajectory that they have enjoyed since the early 1980s without an unrestricted free-market competitive impetus which made them more powerful, more comprehensive in their range of application, and much, much faster. The intended effect was to make markets and production more efficient (and hence cheaper). But an

unintended (and still largely ignored) effect was to make society and social relations accelerate temporally. Life became faster, in other words, as economic relations sped up exponentially (Castells, 1996; Rifkin, 2000; Gleick, 2001; Hassan, 2003).

This speeding up of many elements of human social relations has a fundamental political problem associated with it. Politics, as sociologist Hartmut Rosa reminds us, is a social “‘institution”, a term whose Latin root indicates its static, durable character’ (2003: 44). It is a temporal point illustrated by French philosopher Jean Chesneaux who wrote that ‘Speed has become one of the paramount values and requirements in our modern societies. Yet democracy needs time, as a major pre-condition for political debate and decision-making; it cannot surrender blindly to speed’ (2000: 407). Building on these temporalized perspectives, William Scheuerman in his *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time* argues that liberal democracy has become de-coupled from economic and social life, and in effect has become too slow to function (democratically) in a ‘high-speed society’ (2004: 26-71).

The arguments of Rosa, Chesneaux and Scheuerman may be dismissed as describing simple common sense. It could be stated, moreover, that of course we know that political decisions should not be taken in haste, and that the political process itself should be as reflective and slow as is necessary to each particular case. But this knowledge does not get us very far; it does not get us to the root of the problem, the cause of our desynchronization from democracy, which is—perhaps counter-intuitively—the displacement of writing and reading in our networked society.

The temporality of the word and of politics

When we think of the communicative sources for our ideas of democracy and for the conduct of political institutions more broadly, we see that they lie in the writing and reading of the printed word, in books, pamphlets, newspapers and so forth. In the modern era, these political institutions were formed and their ideas disseminated to produce the 18th century Enlightenment. The French philosopher and political thinker Régis Debray termed this formative phase in our democratic development the ‘graphosphere’ (the realm of writing) wherein communication networks based upon print constructed a great periodization, an ‘arc of time’ that was only superseded with the coming of the digital age (2007:7). This might be read as somewhat prosaic, but in the context of democracy in our high-speed networked society, the effects of the digitalization of the word have been profound—and in ways that we have barely begun to consider.

So deeply has writing entered the consciousness of almost all human cultures, that we forget, or fail to recognize, that it is a technology, an invention like the flint knife or the

wagon or the laptop. Walter Ong realized this and in his essay 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought,' he reminded us that writing 'tends to arrogate to itself supreme power by taking itself as normative for human expression and thought' (1992:30). What we are and what we think, therefore, is closely bound up with the technologies that we use. In terms of writing and communication, this insight suggests some rather interesting consequences.

Debray takes up this line of reasoning in his concept of the 'graphosphere'. He argues that it is 'Impossible to grasp the nature of conscious collective life in any epoch without an understanding of the material forms and processes through which its ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have social existence' (2007: 5). The 18th century 'graphosphere', where print culture was dominant, is the context that shaped modern politics. It produced the political theories of the Enlightenment—the ideas of Hume and Locke and Paine and other contemporaneous *philosophes*—that constituted the so-called 'republic of letters'. A historian of this period, Robert Darnton, saw it as a 'great era of epistolary exchange' where 'writers formulated ideas, and readers judged them [and] thanks to the power of the printed word, the judgments spread in widening circles' (2009: 11). This exchanging of letters, books, pamphlets, etc., was the first global (or at least inter-continental) communication network of the modern period. Its rhythms were based upon the information and transportation technologies of the period, and, in interaction with the human capacities (and physical limitations) of reading, writing and debating, they made up the 'time' of modern politics (Hassan, 2012). Let us look at this idea in more detail.

Recent work in the social theory of time argues that space and time are indivisible concepts and inseparable social practices (May and Thrift, 2001; Adam, 2004; Hassan, 2009). Accordingly, a specific form of temporality also characterizes the 'sphere' that Debray discusses. Of key importance here is the idea that humans, individually and collectively, 'produce' social time and social space in the creation of their worlds. The temporality or rhythms of time that dominated in the 18th century were themselves increasingly technologically driven. This was the period when the clock and the machine began to give rhythm to the industrializing societies of Europe and North America. The technology of writing, moreover, was implicated within this intersecting 'timescape', as Barbara Adam terms it in her book *Time* (2004). These technologies, i.e., writing, the clock and the machine, are human creations and ultimately humans 'entime' their creations with the temporalities that dominated at the time of their creation. Writing, indeed, was encoded at its inception in 3500 BCE Mesopotamia with the temporal rhythms of that ancient society (Fara, 2010:11). That is to say, the physical practices of writing (and reading) were infused by innate bodily rhythms—the function of the hand and eye, primarily—that allowed the process to become practical. That the practice of writing and reading as we know it is 'entimed' is seen in the fact that we can only write

and read so fast, and there is a temporal limit to what can usefully be sustained with these actions. At its core, writing and reading are thus *organic processes*, and constitute an organically governed technology that corresponds closely to human temporal rhythms and temporal capacities.

Machine technology came much later, of course, but it too was infused with the more rigid and abstract temporalities of mathematics and Newtonian physics, serving to sublimate or displace the immanent, organic temporality that the practice of reading and writing contained (Hassan, 2009). Machines (fundamentally the clock) began to order and regulate industrializing societies in the 18th century, giving motive force to industry, but also to the culture of print, which could now be mass produced and widely disseminated to an increasingly literate society (Whitrow, 1986). Inexorably, society began to accelerate due to the inculcation of a competition-driven and machine-based rhythm that stemmed from the productive forces of capitalism.

Nonetheless, the practice of writing and reading remained more or less the same in terms of its physical routines—there was just far more of it, and far more people doing it, with correspondingly enlarged social, economic and technological consequences. The key point to bear in mind is that it is this temporal world, and its print-based culture, that enabled ‘thought to have social existence’ and gave birth to the ideas and practices of liberal democracy that continue to underpin the ideal type of governance in the 21st century (Scheurman, 2004: 27-61). With the rise of new computer-based information technologies, we see the beginnings of a schism in terms of temporal theory and the practice of liberal democracy. The main effect of this technological change has been that the ‘digitalization’ of the word, together with the new ability to ‘process’ it as information, has *destabilized words and their meanings* and has desynchronized them from the much slower rhythms of print-based democratic politics.

The Tweet and the Tyrant

Fast forward to January 2011 when the ‘Arab street’ began its historic mobilization. Journalists, media producers, theorists and analysts across the world made much of the fluid power of social networks being used by millions of people. For example, at the opening phase of the Libyan revolt, Syrian blogger and journalist Anas Qtiesh observed in the *Guardian* that ‘old media can still be censored, but...the people are now always a step ahead of the tyrants’ (2011). Are they? If so, in what sense? And what—from the temporalized perspective—does being ‘a step ahead’ actually mean for the process of political power and democratic change?

The self-immolation of a poor and frustrated Tunisian fruit trader in protest against a perceived humiliation at the hands of a government official provided the spark that lit the highly combustible ‘parched grasses’ that were now widespread across the region. The conflagration spread like a bushfire in a hot and dry summer. But it was also able to spread in the cold, late winter of North Africa and the Middle East because the fuel was information. There is no doubt that new media technologies in the hands of millions in the Arab world were the fundamental element that turned a group of rigid and conservative autocracies into fluid spaces of political possibility. The fluidity of the political dynamic is a central component of the process. So rapidly did information technologies allow the uprisings to occur, that virtually no one saw them coming, and fewer knew *where they might lead*. The media pundits in their London, Washington and Doha studios could only guess at how events might unfold. The demonstrators, too, were doubtlessly surprised to find themselves suddenly on a street or in a square with the unfamiliar scent of power in their nostrils.

This was power, but it was a diffuse and unfocused power. What was clear even to the untrained eye watching the footage from Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi and elsewhere, was that we were witnessing the nascent stirrings of ‘people power’ in that the global media showed the streets and squares being occupied by *all* kinds of people. These were not demonstrations led by wild-eyed Islamists, or repressed workers’ organizations, or even the local business classes seeking more autonomy. The crowds of 2011 were a mirror image of the entire social composition in each country. Men, women, young children and the elderly were united only in the advocacy of more freedom and more justice. Of the ecumenical nature of this ‘Arab Internet generation’, journalist David Hirst reflected a common observation when he wrote that ‘the virtual absence of factional or ideological slogans has been striking’ (2011:1). Such slogans that were evident were aimed through the media at the English-speaking world and stated simply and powerfully ‘democracy’ or ‘justice’ or *Liberté*.

Qtiessh was correct in his view that this generalized revolt constituted the people taking a ‘step ahead of the tyrants’. The elites of the region, tyrannical or otherwise, didn’t know what hit them. But where did this ‘step ahead’ take them? In terms of the political process, and its communication networks, this was a leap into uncharted cyber-spatial territory. What the world witnessed in early 2011 was not simply the destabilization or fall of dictatorial governments, or the scaring of authoritarian regimes into rapid concession making. In its essence, it was an example of networked-society politics conducted at the speed of the network itself, taking a ‘step ahead’ to create a *democratic* vacuum.

This was commented on at the time by various journalists and analysts who noted that in these popular movements no one seemed to be in charge. There was no popular and acclaimed figure or group that emerged in any of these countries, someone or something

that the majority could rally around. The point is worth restating: No Arab country that had a democratic upsurge in 2011 was able to produce a popular figure, or set of political policies, or political demands, that could galvanize a critical mass toward specific objectives. The people rapidly found their voices, but could not so easily find their feet.

The inevitable consequence was that elements of the old regimes were able to remain in power, as was seen with the army in Egypt, and with much of the elite in Tunisia. The vacuum into which the Arab masses stepped exposed their immaturity and their relative powerlessness. Immaturity should not be read as an orientalist labeling, but as a temporal description. A society (any society) may be spontaneously ‘democratic’, able to organize itself immediately at the grassroots level to distribute food, arrange security and keep essential services running. And this occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya where power vacuums opened up. All these examples show us that democratic action can erupt spontaneously, and seemingly without the need for the bedrock of tradition. However, as a Leading Article in the London *Independent* noted of the examples of Egypt and Tunisia, “‘people’s committees’ offer elements of a grassroots democracy. But little of this extends beyond the localities’ (2011). Democratic culture takes time to mature, and there can be no radical acceleration of this process in the way that is encouraged by networked communication.

The digital dialectic and the limits of the modern democratic impulse

To fully understand the process of the ‘temporality of democracy’ we need to look at the function of information in the neoliberal, networked society. There we see what Peter Lunenberg (2000) termed the ‘dialectic of information’. The dialectic has two elements of ‘space-time’ that together militate powerfully against the development of democratic forces that would be sustainable in the long term. First, there is what we might term the ‘digital space-time dialectic’. This is the dynamic, propelled by neoliberal communication networks, by which ideas are given social existence (Debray, 2007:5). With the growing dominance of digital networks in the conduct of social and political (not to mention economic) life, the rhythms of democracy, and its foundation on words and texts—as well as images—have been digitalized and therefore destabilized. Ideas are engineered and programmed to flow at hyper speed through the Internet and the myriad applications that connect to it (Schiller, 2007).

The loci of power, likewise, have become based upon the dynamics of computer networks. As Scott Lash has observed in his *Critique of Information* ‘power is swallowed [in an] implosion into a generalized indifference’, a shifting, contingent and diffusing process that ensures that ‘power is elsewhere’ (2002:75). David Harvey observes that information networks that carry the basis of political action and political processes now

take place increasingly inside this realm of ‘time-space compression’, effecting ‘a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices’ (Harvey, 1989: 285). Harvey goes on to say that the capitalism/network-driven disruption of the space-time of modernity means that we are ‘forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves’ (1989: 240).

The ‘Arab Internet generation’ was similarly ‘forced’ (through means of networkable technologies such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) to represent the world to themselves as a global digital media space that was wholly disconnected (in time and in space) from the physical world that they actually operated in. They had suddenly become disembodied representations of a revolt that was in fact being temporalized through a global media space of 24-hour news cycles, instant analysis, competing media priorities and the inevitable media train crash of event upon event that forms no predictable pattern nor signals any clearly discernible outcome. These actions and effects failed to articulate any political programme that might be sustainable.

The second element in play may be termed the ‘physical space-time dialectic’. This is the acknowledgment of the ineradicable fact that notwithstanding the accelerating tempo and flow of digital networks, of ideas and their political power potential, *people themselves remain physically on the ground*. This is the materially based realm of modernity, of flesh and blood, of ink and paper, of reading and writing and cognition, using ancient technologies with their inherent rhythms, and of machine-age distribution networks that created and sustained the processes of democracy until the advent of the digital age. Nothing can change much here. However, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the speed of digital age globalization has produced a ‘new polarization’ (what I would term a ‘temporal desynchronization’) (2000: 18). Bauman notes that in this process of polarization, the global elite is effectively freed from physical ‘territorial constraints’. And so because ‘information floats independently from its carriers’, those who have access to information have access to what Bauman calls ‘deterritorialized power’. Others, such as the vast majority of Arab communities, have ‘little chance of cutting themselves free’ from their physical and spatial bonds of poverty and joblessness and the compulsions of day-to-day living. People—classes of people—become the weakest link in the chain of effect from cyberspace to physical space. As Bauman puts it: ‘In cyberspace, bodies do not matter—though cyberspace matters, and matters decisively and irrevocably, in the life of bodies’ (2000: 18-20).

The fluidity of power and the contingency of power in networks means that the masses are sometimes afforded brief periods of access to this ‘deterritorialized power’. However, the speed (and disorientation) of digital networks that makes these glimpses possible, soon takes it away as ‘events’ become a part of the global media network. What we saw in the Arab world was that the power being held in the Arab streets and squares—a part of the ‘digital dialectic’ through Facebook, Twitter and so on—soon gave way to an

inevitable power vacuum ‘on the ground’ because ‘on the ground’ there were no roots. People power flowed back into the swirling digital ether. In North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, unlike Eastern Europe in 1989, networks of political modernity that could hold and coordinate and utilize power hardly existed. There was no rhizome or *samizdat*, or long-term organization, of *sub rosa* affiliations with strong and enduring ties. In 2011, the concepts of democracy and justice, though well understood and ‘natural’ attractors for the Arab masses, lacked the durable *analogue and material ties* that would hold them together as the *modern* political project requires.

The ‘step ahead’ that the people of North Africa and the Middle East took was, more accurately, a rapid leap into the void as far as the attainment of freedom and justice is concerned. These are concepts that have their own Enlightenment-era temporalities in terms of their practice, implementation and institutionalization. As current-day Iraq and Afghanistan make so painfully clear, quick solutions applied by what former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld engineered to be a mobile, light, scaled-down and highly *networked military*, simply do not work. 2011 was not therefore a ‘culmination’ (or even an evolution) of 1989. It was an articulation of a wholly new post-modern political process, one whose dynamics are fast moving, whose contours are indistinct, and whose trajectory is uncertain—just like the digital networks that gave life to the impulse.

Can the network society sustain democracy?

In an article titled ‘Digital Natives in Revolt’, the political theorist John Keane considers the Arab uprising from a critical-political perspective, and makes a few tantalizing observations. One finding mirrors my own argument in that he sees the ‘communicative abundance’ enabled by Twitter, Facebook and so on, as being as much of a challenge for democracy as it is an opportunity (2011:11, 12, 22). Even more interestingly, from the perspective argued here, is that he locates the transformations, and thus the possible problems stemming therefrom, in our relationship with *words* as the contingent bearers of information and meaning. He writes:

Just as in the 16th century, when the production of printed books and the effort to read codex type required a fundamental shift of perspective, so today a new mental effort is required to make sense of how democracies are being shaped by the new tools and rhetoric of communication, and why our very thinking about democracy must also change (2011:11).

Keane’s point is well made, but is not pursued systematically in the context of what is a short piece. Others have tried to figure out what this means in a more sustained context, and consideration should be given to some of the prominent among them. For example, Evgeny Morozov’s *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* is a sceptical

corrective to much of the hyperbole surrounding the democratic potential of the Internet. His main argument is that repressive governments, or even the liberal democratic governments of the West, are in a better position to organize information networks than are the masses that might spontaneously take to the streets. The Internet can be used by governments to infiltrate democracy networks and feed their own propaganda or misinformation. And in regimes where the government has no credibility with its people, the Internet can serve as an important source of truth—a truth that their governments are easily able to manipulate. This is useful stuff, and his book should be required reading for democracy activists everywhere. Morozov himself is a techno-enthusiast and believes that technology can promote democracy (a difficult proposition to argue against), but cautions that there is no ‘silver bullet that could destroy authoritarianism’ (2011: 319).

Malcolm Gladwell, writing in the *New Yorker* in late 2010, exhibits a similar cyber-scepticism in his ‘Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted’. Essentially, Gladwell argues that authentic and effective revolutionary change in politics and in society needs roots; or to temporalize his argument, revolutionary change needs its own *pre-history* that leads up to the revolutionary moment. He makes the important point that the much-lauded ‘Twitter Revolution’ in Iran in 2009 was in fact no such thing; the tweeting came largely from the West. Gladwell quotes the Iranian correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Golnaz Esfandiari, who wrote that much of the hype at the time was cooked up by western bloggers and journalists ‘who couldn’t reach—or didn’t bother reaching?—people on the ground in Iran [and so] simply scrolled through the English-Language tweets posted with tag #iranelection’. She went on to raise an important question: ‘Through it all, no one seemed to wonder why people trying to coordinate protests in Iran would be writing in any other language other than Farsi’ (cited in Gladwell, 2010).

Gladwell goes on to use the example of the civil rights movement in the United States in the early 1960s as an illustration of his argument that politics needs roots. Drawing upon established sociological theory, Gladwell suggests that this movement was successful, *ultimately*, because it evolved naturally (or at a pace that was not dictated by communications technologies). For example, the famous sit-in at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960 by four black college students, to protest segregation, had been in discussion for nearly a month. Such ‘high-risk activism’, Gladwell maintains, drawing again on the sociological literature, is a ‘strong-tie phenomenon’, a network of relationships that evolves through time and can only function and be sustainable if it has a pre-history of ideological contextualization and face-to-face interaction. It is, in other words, a mobilization that can only come about (and gain sufficient size) through the striking of organizational roots, and the sacrifices that this has historically demanded from both the individual and group.

Gladwell's analysis is deeply temporal. He argues, like Chesneaux and Scheuerman, that politics needs time. Only a political project that is able to evolve in the time that it needs—the time appropriate to its own specific tasks—will have a chance of realizing its objectives. In other words, a democracy that comes to us from the Enlightenment, but whose local articulation is able to take on many forms, is confined to the speed and the rhythms of the communication networks that made it possible.

This should not be read as nostalgia for a pre-digital age. There are political activists today who are highly Internet-savvy, but who also realize that there is no substitute for politics prepared and conducted in the traditional way and oriented toward the long-term perspective. Tina Rosenberg writes on the work and rationale of the Center for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), a pro-democracy group that cut its teeth in the Serbian upheavals of the 1990s and the 2000s. Their philosophy is that social networking can generate a 'wave of revolt', but that 'these elements alone do not a revolution make (Rosenberg, 2011). Rosenberg goes on to quote CANVAS 'trainer' Ivan Marovic who told her in an interview that classic revolution is:

...often seen as spontaneous...It looks like people just went into the street. But it's the result of months or even years of preparation. It's very boring until you reach a certain point, where you can organize mass demonstrations or strikes. If it is carefully planned, by the time they start, everything is over in a matter of weeks.

And so any analogizing of 2011 with 1989 is not simply wrong; it is dangerously wrong in terms of the future of the democratic political project that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. The revolutions of 1989 took hold and held fast and did not create a political vacuum or descend into ugly social chaos because they had deep enough roots in the social and political fabric of the countries concerned. The ideas contained in movements such as Czechoslovakia's Charter 77, or Poland's *Solidarnosc*, and the inspiration given to repressed peoples across Eastern Europe and beyond by prominent thinkers such as Andrei Sakharov, Yelena Bonner, Solzhenitsyn were what 'enable [d] thought to have social existence' (Debray, 2007: 5). The communication networks necessary for this transition from thought to social reality were satellite television, short-wave radio, secret meetings, *samizdat* literature, and so forth. These formed the information networks that nourished the democratic roots.

No one could have known it then, but the logic and motive force of the revolutions of 1989 would almost immediately collide with another resurgent logic: that of neoliberalism and the networked society that it would create. For many, this society would not appear as a force antithetical to freedom and justice and democracy, but from the perspective of temporality and the political process, that is what it is. Twenty-two years after the historical events, culminating symbolically in the pulling down of the

Berlin Wall, a generation has grown up in Eastern Europe and indeed across the world, for whom the information society is a mere fact of life. But what kind of society is this, and what kind of democracy can it offer? Neoliberalism brought free markets, finance, competition and consumerism on a global and interconnected scale. But these dominating features have meant that the democratic projects of the 1989 dissident movements would find little in the way of positive reception in new societies that would equate freedom with a new car or house, and democracy with a ballot every few years. With some understatement, Bärbel Bohley, who was a dissident figure in East Germany during the 1980s, said of the reunification with West Germany that the results were ‘less than what we dreamed’ (LA Times, 2011).

In this post-modern (and post-Enlightenment) context, economics, communications, processes of production and consumption—and the processes of political communication—have become highly informationalized. The tempo of these processes, and the tempo of society more broadly, are leaving modernity and its legacies, increasingly behind. And therein lies the problem. Our new relationship with speed, space and time has constructed a new digital timescape, one that we barely recognize as such, and one for which we are completely unprepared.

Conclusions

The media tagged the risings of 2011 the ‘Arab Spring’. Not only is the description lazy journalism (or, to be fair, journalism borne of the exigencies of time shortage) it is also wrong. Spring is a time when roots begin to grow and strengthen and eventually flourish. But in that region there were no roots, no rhizome that had been growing systematically and inexorably in the years prior to 2011. The people’s risings were spontaneous in the true sense of the word. They arose out of virtually nothing except a long-standing but unfocussed and largely unacted-upon anger and resentment against their oppressors; the spark was the opportunity provided by social networking technologies. At the time of writing, there are no unambiguous trends towards democracy here; and nor could there be. There are no deep-rooted social bases for it in the region. The most likely path (or paths) for the countries in the region are ones that are too easily predictable: either these ‘new’ societies will be born, weak and underdeveloped, into a context where global capital finds a positive reception for its offers of aid and investment—meaning subservience to undemocratic neoliberalism (Klein, 2007). This would be a relatively quick process, where local elites become locked in to the real circuits of power and information. The alternative path is one of years of grinding factionalism or bloody sectarianism, with Iraq as an extreme post-political prototype. Even here, roots may be struck and local articulations of democracy may begin to emerge. People may find their feet as well as their voices and identify their needs. But the process will necessarily be

slow and organic, and information technologies can have only the most peripheral of roles.

Shortly before his deluded boss was deposed, Egyptian Vice-President Omar Suleiman told the media that the people over whom his regime had ruled were ‘not ready for democracy’ (Steavenson, 2011: 26). Suleiman seemed to suggest that the *longue durée* necessary for democracy to take proper roots and have its culture develop, had not taken place. In this he was right. But in our networked society, the real issue is a different one that yields a different insight. The issue is one of temporality and the insight is that *democracy is not ready for the people*. At the broad economic level, a high-speed neoliberal network society has left the democratic process flailing in its wake. What the network offers as democracy cannot function as such. At the level of social networking, digital technology propels mass political action a ‘step ahead’—and toward a precipice. The masses, be they the Occupy manifestations in the West, or the freedom-seeking peoples of the broader Levant, are always going to be the weakest link in the digital dialectic between the immutable time of democracy and the accelerating time of the neoliberal network. Unless we recognize the relationship between time and the democratic process, and until we learn how to ‘temporalize democracy’, then social networking that is oriented towards rapid political action can lead only to a political vacuum—and that is the first refuge for the political opportunist.

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