

A Human Spring

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LET ME COME back to the story about Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Communist leader. When asked what he thought about the French Revolution, he famously answered: *“It’s too early to say.”*

This was considered a typical piece of ancient Chinese wisdom—until somebody pointed out that Zhou did not mean the revolution of 1789, but the events of May 1968, which happened not long before the interview in question.

Even now it may be too early to judge that upheaval, when students tore up the cobblestones of Paris, confronted the brutal police and proclaimed a new era. It was an early forerunner of what is happening today all over the world.

QUESTIONS ABOUND. Why? Why now? Why in so many totally different countries? Why in Brazil, Turkey and Egypt at the same time?

We know how it started. In the souk of Tunis, of all places. I have been there many times, when Yasser Arafat was staying in that city. The market always struck me as a happy place, full of noise, eager shopkeepers, haggling tourists and local men with jasmine flowers behind their ears.

It was there that a policewoman confronted a fruit vendor and overturned his cart. He was mortally insulted, set himself on fire and set in motion a process that now involves many millions of people around the world.

The Tunis example was taken up by the Egyptian masses, who assembled in Tahrir Square and eventually overturned their dictator. Then it was our turn, and almost half a million Israelis went out into the streets to protest the price of cottage cheese. Then there were upheavals in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and other Arab states, collectively known as the Arab Spring. In the US, the Occupy Wall Street movement staged its own Tahrir Square in New York. And now millions are demonstrating in Turkey and Brazil, and Egypt is aflame again. One may add Iran and other places.

How did this come about? How does it work? What is the hidden mechanism?

And especially: why at this point in time?

I CAN think of two interrelated phenomena in contemporary life that make the uprisings possible and probable: television and the social media.

Television informs viewers in Kamchatka about events

in Timbuktu within minutes. The huge demonstrations in Istanbul’s Taksim Square could be followed in real time by people in Rio de Janeiro.

Once upon a time, it took weeks for people in Piccadilly Circus in London to hear about events in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. After the battle of Waterloo, the Rothschilds made their killing by using messenger pigeons. In 1848, when revolution spread from Paris throughout Europe, it took its time, too.

Not any more. Brazilian youngsters saw what was happening in Gezi Park, Istanbul, and asked themselves: why not here? They saw that determined young men and women could withstand water cannon, tear gas and batons, and felt that they could do it, too.

The other instrument is facebook, Twitter and the other “social media”. Five young men sitting in a Cairo café and talking about the situation could decide to launch an on-line petition for the removal of the incumbent president, and within a few days tens of millions of citizens signed. Never before in history was such a thing possible, or even imaginable.

This is a new form of direct democracy. People don’t have to wait anymore for the next elections, which may be years away. They can act immediately, and when the groundswell is powerful enough, it can develop into a tsunami.

HOWEVER, REVOLUTIONS are not made by technologies but by people. What is it that arouses so many different people in so many different cultures to do the same thing at the same time?

For example, the rise of religious fundamentalism. In recent decades, this has happened in several countries and with several religions. Jewish fundamentalism is setting up settlements in the Occupied West Bank and threatening Israeli democracy. All over the Arab world and many other Muslim countries, Islamic fundamentalism raises its head, causing havoc. In the US, evangelical fundamentalism has created the Tea Party and is dragging the Republican Party to the extreme right, much against its own interest.

I don’t know about other religions, but there are news stories about Buddhists attacking Muslims in several countries. Buddhists? I always thought that this was an exceptionally peaceful creed!

How to explain these simultaneous and parallel symptoms? Commentators use the German philosophical expression, *Zeitgeist* (“spirit of the times”). This explains everything and nothing. Like that other great human invention, God.

So is the *Zeitgeist* behind the upheavals now? Don’t ask me.

THERE ARE many curious similarities between the mass revolts in different countries.

They are all made by young people of the so-called middle class. Not by the poor, not by the rich. Poor people do not make revolutions—they are too busy trying to feed their children. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was not made by the workers and peasants. It was made by disaffected intellectuals, many of them Jewish.

When you see a group of demonstrators in a newspaper picture, you do not know at first glance whether they are Egyptians, Israelis, Turks, Iranians or Americans. They all belong to the same social class. Young people alienated by a heartless globalization, confronted by a labor market that no longer offers the bright prospects they expect, university students for whose skills there is little demand. People with jobs, but who find it hard to “finish the month” as we say in Hebrew.

The immediate causes are varied. Israelis demonstrated against the price of cottage cheese and new apartments. Turks protest against the plan to turn a popular Istanbul park into a commercial project. Brazilians rise up against a small increase in bus fares. Egyptians are now protesting against the efforts of politicized religion to take over the state.

But at root, all these protests express a common disgust with politics and politicians, with a power elite that is seen as remote from ordinary people, with the immense power of a tiny group of the ultra-rich, with a barely understood globalization.

THE SAME mechanism that makes these revolutions possible also produces their outstanding weakness.

The model was already apparent in the Paris events of May 1968. These started with a student protest which was joined by millions of workers. There was no organization, no common ideology, no plan, no overall leadership. Activists gathered in a theatre, debated endlessly, giving voice to all sorts of possible and impossible ideas. In the end there were no concrete results.

There was a certain spirit. Claude Lanzmann, the writer and director of the monumental film *Shoah*, once described it to me this way: the students were burning cars.

So every evening I spent a lot of time finding a secure place for my car. Until I suddenly said to myself: What the hell! What do I need a car for? Let them burn it!

This spirit lingered for some time. But life went on, and the great event was soon just a memory.

This may happen again now. Again the same thing is happening everywhere: No organization, no leadership, no program, no ideology.

The very fact that everyone has a voice on facebook seems to make it easier to agree on “against” than on “for”. The young protesters are anarchist by nature. They abhor leaders, organizations, political parties, hierarchies, programs, ideologies.

You can call a demonstration on facebook, but you cannot hammer out a joint ideology that way. But, as Lenin once remarked, without a political ideology there is no political action. And he was an expert on the art of revolution.

There is a great danger that all these huge demonstrations will fade away some day—*Zeitgeist* again—without leaving anything behind, except some memories.

This has already happened in Israel. The mass demonstrations had some influence on this year’s elections, but the new parties are indistinguishable from the old ones. New politicians have taken the place of old politicians. But nothing real has changed. Neither on the national nor on the social level.

IN ANY democracy, real change can only take place through new political parties which enter parliament and make new laws. For this you need political leaders—now, in the era of TV, more than ever. It is not enough to generate a lot of steam—you need an engine to make the steam do useful work.

The tragedy in Egypt—a country I love—demonstrates this perfectly. The revolution overthrew the dictatorship, but in the elections that followed, the revolutionaries were unable to unite, create a joint political force, elect leaders. Victory was snatched by the Muslim Brotherhood, who were well organized with a solid leadership.

The brotherhood has failed. Power, after decades of persecution, went to their heads. They threw away caution. Instead of building a new state on moderation, compromise and inclusion, they could not wait. So they may lose all.

The democratic revolutionaries have yet to prove that they are able to lead a country—in Egypt or anywhere else. They may yet launch a world-wide Human Spring. Or they may leave nothing behind, except a vague longing.

It’s up to them.