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## **Book Chapter**

### **Revolt and Revolution: The Protester in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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# **Revolt and Revolution: The Protester in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

*Euripides Altintzoglou and Martin Fredriksson*

It is significant that *Time Magazine*, in the wake of the Arab Spring, named *The Protester* the person of the year of 2011. Since then revolts, social unrest and demands for systemic change have continued to spread, from the anti-austerity street marches in Europe and the progressive ‘No Borders’ global movement, to protests against neoconservative and xenophobic populist movements. The histories that are currently being (re)written, not only in the West but also in North Africa and the Middle East, and more recently in places like Ukraine and Thailand, show us that the immanence and promise of large scale political revolutions is as present as ever across the world. The solidity and stability that nations and economic systems strive for is continuously being challenged by different forces, with shifting means, for various reasons.

But revolutions can take many shapes and are not limited to organized attempts to overthrow governments or other more or less dramatic interventions in national and international politics. Technological, economic, social and cultural revolutions are continuously emerging, sometimes openly and dramatically and sometimes covert and gradually. As such, nations, societies and institutions are changing as they are confronted with revolt, revolution and resistance on multiple socio-cultural and political levels.

This eBook aims to explore moments of change that question and alter established structures. It is derived from the conference Revolt and Revolution II, held in Prague in November 2014. This volume is not a conference proceedings volume as it is deemed as the historical snapshot of the entire conference to include feedback and discussions that occurred during the conference as well as during down-time in a casual atmosphere. The conference presented an interdisciplinary dialogue between a wide range of participants that cut across and between disciplinary vocabularies to provide new synergies across domains and interdisciplinary perspectives on revolts and revolutions in its widest sense: reaching from outright political coupe d'états to ‘alternative’ kinds of revolts and revolutions that emerge in art, media, sexuality, subcultures and across institutions such as universities, hospitals and financial institutions.

Even though this book only presents a few snapshots from the conference we believe that it touches on some of the recurring questions that surfaced in Prague. The three-day long international conference provided a platform for a highly diverse group of intellectuals and political activists to discuss and above all problematize the contemporary conditions or revolutionary acts.

Just like the conference, this e-book opens with the big question: Why men rebel? In her chapter ‘Why Men Rebel? The History of the Great Question since Ancient Greece until Arab Spring’ Aleksandra Porada points to the fact that

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revolutions – in the sense of large scale political interventions to overthrow an established rule – have historically been notoriously hard to predict. Philosophers and historians have tried to find patterns and define the preconditions required for a revolution to take place, but none have succeeded.

Another key issue for our discussions – and possibly a first precondition for the possibility of resistance, is the emergence of the human subject and its readiness to see and find the courage to acknowledge its own power to act. Sartre once observed that ‘people are condemned to be free; they cannot elude their freedom’, and yet we make up thousands of ways to try do exactly that: to elude our freedom and recede our own agency to someone or something else. In ‘Agent Art vs. Resistance to Freedom’ Ceren Selmanpakoğlu discusses how art, too, tends to take part in this resistance to freedom by reproducing social reality and hiding our possibilities to change it, but she also explores the possibilities of another art, that confronts the spectator with the possibility of her or his own freedom.

The transformation of the acting human being onto a political subject is a second precondition for revolts and revolutions. This does not necessarily have to involve an explicit political motivation. In ‘Deflowered Revolution: An Ethical Examination of Neo-Liberal Tactics of Pacification’ Euripides Altintzoglou, takes the Tottenham riots to discuss the relationship between looting and politics, asking to what extent can we find political agency in acts that are often discarded as vulgar displays of consumerism gone astray. What are seemingly de-politicised violent acts are indeed significant events that have the capacity to produce radical change. It is precisely because of this potential that looting and rioting should be perceived as political events. Thus, Altintzoglou argues, we have to allow premature revolutionary acts to produce their own politics and not disregard them hastily on the basis of not having adopted an existing political agenda.

That revolutions can take different shapes and have different outcomes in different contexts becomes evident in Martin Blum’s fascinating account of the green movement in Eastern German. His article ‘East Germany’s Ecological Revolution: The Third Way’ describes a non-violent, everyday revolution that took place throughout the 1980s as grass roots movements in Eastern Germany explored different means to incorporate ecological thinking in everyday life in a communist society. Unhindered by monetary thinking this movement developed ideas such as urban ecology, alternative energy sources and the regulation of energy consumption long before they became mainstream in Western Europe.

We have already touched on the subject of art as an important factor for the development of a revolutionary subject. In ‘The Erotic as an Act of Resistance to the Despotism of the State: Nuruddin Farah’s *Sweet and Sour Milk* as an Example’, Sarah Nagaty explores the subject further in relation to literature of resistance, but she also introduces gender and sexuality in the discussion. For power, and consequently also resistance is intrinsically sexualized. Drawing on

Bataille and Foucault Nagaty discusses how the female body can be textualized as an act of resistance against patriarchal authority.

Several of these texts point to the revolutionary potentials hidden behind what might appear to be, or be discarded as, acts of mere desire, be it sexual or consumerist urges. Taken together they point to the multitude of revolutionary acts, agents and movements – asking not only why men rebel but what is actually a rebellion. In its extension this collection of essays also points to how revolts and revolutions are ever present in our everyday lives. In that sense the Protester is still the person of the year, and maybe it always has been. But what we must remember is that although the protester comes in many shapes and serves many purposes it is always driven by a desire for change.

One of the lessons to be learned is thus that we cannot expect all revolutions and revolutionaries to look the same and we cannot limit our understanding of revolts and revolutions to explicitly political or ideological acts. We may never know why men rebel, but we may see how the potentials of revolutionary acts reside behind seemingly irrelevant, disorganized outbursts of apparently aimless acts. Giving meaning to the sign carried by one of the protesters at the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in Zucotti Park, saying: ‘We’re here; we’re unclear; get used to it’.<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Boon, ‘Depropriation: The Real Pirate’s Dilemma’, *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South*, ed. Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 135-147.

## Bibliography

Marcus, Boon, ‘Depropriation: The Real Pirate’s Dilemma’, *Postcolonial Piracy: Media Distribution and Cultural Production in the Global South*, ed. Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 135-147.

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