

How Protests Have Become Revolutions of Ideas

By [Eamon Kircher-Allen](#)

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When graffiti appeared last spring on a wall near Tunisia's Interior Ministry that read "Thank you, Facebook," it was not just praise for a social media company that had facilitated the country's uprising. It was also a celebration of the sense of shared experience that defined the Tunisian revolution and the many other historic protests and revolutions that erupted in 2011.

One of the defining characteristics of the new age of protest is the dovetailing of the desire and the ability to connect — across neighborhoods, cities, countries and even continents. In every contributor's country, a new awareness of shared destinies and a global community permeated protest movements. Social media technology was one tool that advanced it, but so was a reconceptualization of the meaning of public space and the view that a plurality of ideas is superior to dogma. Collaboration is as important as the outcome.

So these were not just political revolutions. They were also revolutions of ideas —

the globalization of protest as a strategy.

To be sure, protesters' grievances vary greatly according to local circumstances, although there is surprising consistency across regions and even continents when it comes to issues like housing, unemployment, inequality and the frustration of young people who have studied hard and cannot find jobs. At the same time, the philosophy of change through mass, collaborative and inclusive action is common to almost every movement.

Consider Tunisia, where Mouheb Ben Garoui, a 24-year-old activist, writes in our book about how fellow citizens from all walks of life and no definite political affiliation poured out of their homes to occupy squares and demand a say in the country's future. Facebook helped, but mainly because it magnified and accelerated the process.

As in other countries, the very act of seizing territory meant a lot to protesters. In the squares of both Tunisia and Egypt, demonstrators who had felt alienated and isolated under repressive regimes were overjoyed to discover that they were not alone. Sitting in the square became more than an act of defiance. In Spain, Greece and in the Occupy Movements of the United States and Britain, the occupied zones became places where a new democratic society could be practiced, sometimes through the time-consuming process of group decisionmaking.

In Greece and Spain, protesters told us that their neighbors' stories were a revelation. People unburdened themselves to strangers. As Spain's indignados sat in the squares, they felt for the first time connected to the people in their communities, a feeling that became a large part of why they stayed.

The story of Egyptian protester Jawad Nabulsi, 29, shows how some activists used technology to mobilize people. Nabulsi, who worked for charities in Upper Egypt that raised money to provide running water and electricity to poor households, wrote in our book about how Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point" and Jim Collins' "Good to Great" affected his thinking about social change.

"I had gone to villages and slums, saw the depth of problems in these places and assumed they could not be fixed. I'd tell myself, 'They are too humongous; it's like throwing something in the sea,'" he writes. Reading Gladwell and Collins, Nabulsi realized that he didn't need to change the whole country but just "a circle of key players who could have an influence," and that he "needed to focus on the leaders in the community and work with them." He began setting up Facebook groups to connect like-minded people.

These groups took on a life of their own. Seeing that there were others who felt the same frustrations, people became willing to make their voices heard in Tahrir Square, and, like the Spaniards, rediscovered their community. Satellite, tweets and Facebook statuses beamed that same message to the world.

The immediate political results of this new connectivity are tenuous. Egypt, Tunisia and Libya have had their regime change, but it is unclear what role, if any, the young idealistic revolutionaries will play in their countries' future.

In Egypt, the power of the military is more concentrated now than it was under former

President Hosni Mubarak. In the United States, the protests of 2011 will have a lasting effect only if Occupy Wall Street activists and their counterparts elsewhere remain organized and continue their work on fighting foreclosures. They certainly will not feel motivated to turn out to support President Barack Obama's re-election campaign if their voices are not heard in the White House as they were in Zuccotti Park and other public spaces from Oakland to Madison.

But if the movements' gains are uncertain, the connectivity that they created is likely to endure. With U.S. protesters citing Egyptians and Spaniards as direct inspiration, online communities from Syria to Europe cross-pollinating, and continuing strong turnout for rallies like those on May Day 2012 in the United States, it is clear that the spirit of community is here to stay.

Worldwide, it is clear that if politicians do not respond to demands for fairness, freedom, a more prosperous future and government that actually serves the people, the protests will continue.

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