Insurgencies don’t have a plan —they are the plan: Political performatives and vanishing mediators

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Abstract:

2011 turned out to be an extraordinary year. The clustering of insurgencies around time and geography gave a political ring to the seasons: commentators spoke of the Arab Spring, the European Summer, and the US Fall. TIME magazine even named “the protester” person of the year. Similar revolts emerged in the following years in Mexico, Turkey and Brazil. Some faulted them for their lack of plans and proposals, a criticism that misses the point by confusing the disruption of the given with the task of reconfiguring it. Insurgencies are not standard political practices or policy-making exercises. They are about saying “enough!” and refusing to go on as before. They are in fact operators of difference: insurgencies are the plan in the sense that a medium can be the message. I will argue that they open up possibilities that may or may not prosper but nonetheless allow us to glimpse something other to come; that they are political performatives—participants start to experience what they strive to become; and that they function as vanishing mediators that put different worlds in contact with one another. I address these points in a discussion about the material remainder of the Arab Spring and the student mobilizations in Chile.

In “Shoplifters of the World Unite” (Žižek 2011), an article whose title might be a play on words on Marx’s “Proletarians of the world, unite!” or a homage to the song by The Smiths with that same name, Slavoj Žižek characterizes the riots in the UK as a “zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing.” Participants had no message to deliver and resembled more what Hegel called the rabble than an emerging revolutionary subject. The problem is not street violence as such but its lack of self-assertiveness, for this violence appears as “impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival” (Žižek 2011).

Žižek then shifts his focus to the Arab uprisings that toppled ruling dynasties of corrupt autocrats and to the Spanish indignados (the outraged) who camped in public squares just before the May 2011 elections to protest against the disconnect between elected officials and the bleak life prospects of the unemployed youth. Žižek is openly sympathetic towards these revolts but also pessimistic about their prospects. He asks us to “avoid the temptation of the narcissism of the lost cause: it is too easy to admire the sublime beauty of uprisings doomed to fail” (Žižek 2011).

What makes this piece of advice so disconcerting is that it comes from someone who wrote a book titled In Defense of Lost Causes. Why are his lost causes worth defending and others narcissistic dead ends? Why are Egypt and Spain false positives of emancipation if the lost
causes Žižek endorses fail just as unceremoniously? His criterion is whether they have a plan, a program of change. The recent ones didn't, which is why they “express an authentic rage which is not able to transform itself into a positive programme of sociopolitical change. They express the spirit of revolt without revolution” (Žižek 2011). The failure of these insurgencies is the failure to come up with a proposal to replace the given. Without a plan, revolts lack the dignity of revolutions and are doomed to become lost causes of the narcissistic kind.

This is unconvincing for at least two reasons. First, there are narcissisms and narcissisms. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan saw primary narcissism as an inevitable moment in the development of a human organism. Infants don’t perceive themselves as a unity because they are immersed in a chaotic play of autoerotic instincts (Freud 1957, 73-102) or because they cannot overcome une image morcellée du corps or fragmented image of the body (Lacan 1977, 1-7). A sense of totality—the possibility of saying “I”—doesn’t exist from the beginning and must be formed. Primary narcissism is the vehicle for the formation of this “I”. The infant starts to perceive itself as a unified entity as she takes herself as an amorous object. This is a productive narcissism. It is quite different from the pathological variant that arises when the “I” has been configured yet the subject remains stuck in the loop of self-love. Insurgencies experience something analogous to primary narcissism because their sense of what they are and what they want is not there from the beginning. It never is. Collective identity is a task and not a presupposition. Narcissism plays a role in the formation of a first person plural. This “we” is shaped on the go as people confront their adversaries and try to figure out what they want and how they can achieve it. By taking for granted that a narcissistic streak will turn insurgencies into lost causes Žižek forgets that love of oneself plays a role in the process of building a “we” among the multiplicities that make up any rebel drive.

Secondly, I find Žižek’s criticism unconvincing because recent insurgencies provide political thought with the opportunity to come to terms with the loss of the loss, a Hegelian trope that Žižek once described most elegantly and persuasively as the realization that we never had what we thought we had lost. It is a loss without mourning, an affirmative loss. It moves us away from essentialist arguments about the plenitude of freedom, oppression, evil, justice, or identity by reminding us that these concepts and experiences never had an essential core. The loss of the loss modifies our understanding of insurgencies. It makes us part ways with a grammar of emancipation that was never there to begin with: an alternative to the existing order comes in handy but doesn’t play a central role in rebellions. One can then begin to think the difference between insurgencies and programmatic initiatives without resorting to a hierarchy of stages or levels that places programs above insurgencies in the political food chain. The difference between one and the other is not one of degrees or stages. It is a difference in nature: insurgencies aim to disturb the status quo whereas programs want to govern it.

The nod to Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media (1994) in the title of this article is a cue for how to proceed in this displacement of our understanding of insurgencies. McLuhan didn’t underestimate content but argued that by focusing on the message or content alone
one misses the more radical impact of new media, namely, that the medium itself is the message: it creates a new environment or modifies the pre-existing one by changing the way people do things and relate with one another. He illustrates this by reference to the light bulb, a medium without a message that made the regime that allocated work, play, and rest in accordance to daytime and nighttime largely obsolete. Insurgencies from Tahrir Square to Taksim and Zuccotti Park endeavor to perform a similar re-partitioning of the given. They are the plan in the sense that their occurrence is significant regardless of what they propose. Demands, manifestos, programs, and other things we associate with content are figured out on the go because insurgencies are more about opening up possibilities than designing a new order. They do so by challenging our political imaginaries and cognitive maps. Let me put it in slightly different terms, and perhaps more strongly given that it involves something in excess of programs: policies, and policymaking, are not the higher moment of insurgencies—markers of their passage from revolts to revolution—but signs that insurgent activism has been taken over by mainstream politics. There is nothing wrong with this; it is simply not what characterizes rebel activity.

I will substantiate these claims by arguing that insurgencies are passageways between worlds. They are a way of enacting the promise of something other to come. They also show us political performatives at work—actions through which one already lives what one is fighting for—and the fleeting nature of politics and the people. And insurgencies function as vanishing mediators. But I modify this notion by reloading Fredric Jameson’s original arguments to introduce success and misfires into the structure of mediators and to show that nothing really vanishes without leaving a remainder. I then discuss the material remainder of two insurgencies: the Arab Spring and the student mobilizations in Chile.

About Programs and Insurgencies

The insurgencies spearheaded by a diverse and eclectic mixture of rebels in so many places —from the Maghreb, Yemen, and Syria to Spain, Chile, Israel, New York, Mexico, Turkey, Brazil, and elsewhere—generated a stage for a very public articulation and mise-en-scène of grievances and desires. Protesters were fed up of living in places where the powerful are unaccountable and social justice is a farce. They spoke of human rights and democracy, free and secular education, affordable housing, lower bus fares, the defense of urban spaces from land speculation, the accountability of financial companies responsible for the crisis, the obscenity of massive income inequality, the lack of jobs and life prospects for most young people, the dissatisfaction with corrupt and incompetent politicians, and so on. “What defines these demonstrations”, says Giuseppe Cocco, “is that they represent nothing yet express everything”: they break away from conventional modes of political organization, expose the problems of representation and vindicate a mode of radical democracy born in the interface of social networks and the streets (Cocco 2013). Their rage manifested itself in inscriptions like “If you don’t let us dream we won’t let you sleep”, “Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean that it’s not happening”, “Sorry for the inconvenience, we are
changing the world”, “The barricade closes the streets but opens the way”, “I’m not anti-system, the system is against me”, “They don’t represent us” and “Nobody can predict the moment of revolution”. It also appeared in identity-forging cries like “We are the 99%” and “Wall Street is Our Street”.

What you don’t find in these protests is a programmatic outline of what a future society will look like. This is because the recent insurgencies, like those that preceded them in the practice of emancipation, were animated by the belief that present-day conditions harm equality, freedom, social justice, and so on that they can make a difference by acting to make another, more equal and just world emerge from this one. They might have wanted to have descriptions of how a different order might look, but organizing the future was not their top priority because they were already making a difference by merely demonstrating, occupying, and generally defying the order of things.

The paradox is that critics are right when they say that these revolts lack a sociopolitical program, but they don’t realize that this is not necessarily a fault or a weakness of these occurrences. On the one hand, as Manuel Castells says, “Insurgency does not start with a program or policy strategy” (Castells 2012, 13), and if it did, this might be counterproductive. In Occupy Wall Street “the movement was popular and attractive to many precisely because it remained open to all kinds of proposals, and did not present specific policy positions that would have elicited support but also opposition within the movement” (Castells 2012, 187). On the other hand, policy platforms are not the business of insurgencies, and if they need one, they will come up with it. Paul Krugman put it nicely: when one looks at something like the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York (and the subsequent replication of the occupy movement on a global scale) “we shouldn’t make too much of the lack of specifics” because their main thrust is to change the political climate; the specifics will be filled in later (Krugman 2011).

Insurgencies that preceded these ones had no discernible plan either. You won’t find one in the Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989—which Jon Beasley-Murray describes as the first of the social ruptures indicating the end of modernity’s social pact, an index of the continued presence of the multitude and a presage of the left turns in Latin America (Beasley Murray 2010, 285; 289)—or in the water and gas wars that undermined the privatization of utilities in Bolivia in 2000 and 2003. Nor was there one in the protests that mobilized Argentinian society in 2001, encapsulated in the chant Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo (“All of them must go, not a single one can stay”, where “all” stands for corrupt and incompetent politicians) and that eventually led to the resignation of the president. The same is true of pro-democracy movements in the Mediterranean rim, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. These had a hazy understanding of democracy, a term that functioned less as the name of a regime than as a talisman and a surface of inscription for a variety of demands and desires. It basically meant “not what we have now”, which in people’s minds signified that they wouldn’t risk losing their jobs, going to prison, or having various parts of their anatomy beaten to a pulp for expressing opposition to the ruling Junta,
party or strongman. It was also seen as a means to empower people to demand accountability to authorities. But systematic proposals about what a democratic regime would look like were rare. Those who gathered under the banner of democracy were fighting for their dignity and their future and had no program of what would come later. Like those who participated in protests from Cairo to Istanbul and Rio de Janeiro memorable, they wanted to re-partition the given to have their voices counted.

So let us be clear: these experiences tell us that to rebel is to say “enough!” because those who partake in them don’t want things to go on as they are. Talking points about greater participation, justice, or the prospect of a better life are omnipresent but hardly count as a plan or alternative to the existing order. This is the norm rather than the exception. To think otherwise is to look at the poetry of revolts through the rear mirror of traditional narratives of emancipation.

This is why Jacques Derrida’s promise of justice, democracy and hospitality to come is so useful for understanding what is at stake in rebellions. “To come” doesn’t mean that today we have no justice, democracy, and so on but that sometime in the future we will or at least might have it. This would be a passive and thoroughly religious view of the promise, something that oscillates between waiting for Godot and praying for the Messiah to show up. There is nothing passive or pious about the kind of promise I am referring to. You have to act to make it come about. This is how dissenters of mainstream rabbinical Judaism like Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig understood messianicity. They were the dohakei haketz, says Michael Löwy, those who do not wait for the savior but hasten the end of times by engaging in messianic activism to precipitate the arrival of the Messiah (Löwy 2005, 104), a name Benjamin used as shorthand for revolution. One does not remain clueless about what is coming our way either; rebels are not like expectant parents who prefer not to know the sex of their unborn child. It is not pure chance or dumb luck because, as Michelet put it, every epoch dreams the next, it tries to imagine how things might turn out. This dreaming occurs in a polemical setting in which people experiment with multiple, contradictory, and provisional images of thought that circulate among communities of action that are continually caught in controversies about what is to be done.

None of this adds up to a model or a program, although some might have interpreted it as if it did. Hence the loss of the loss I mentioned earlier: rebellions never had clear plans of what would come later but we assumed they did. We should have let go of this assumption long ago. The important thing is that the opening to something other to come involves a passage through the experience that we never had what we thought we had lost. Democracy, like justice and hospitality, is always to come in the sense that it will never cease to arrive (it has no final figure/destination) but already starts to occur as we strive to make it happen.

To say that things start to occur en route is not wishful thinking, an embracement of voluntarism or a variation on Humpty Dumpty’s musings: in everyday politics as in insurgent processes words don’t mean what we want them to mean and actions don’t
happen because we will them to occur. To say that things start to happen as we work for their realization is to talk about how political performatives work. J. L. Austin’s speech act theory defines performatives as utterances that are inseparable from the actions they announce, like “I swear”, “I pronounce you husband and wife”, or “You are under arrest.” They are ritualized utterances that require specific contexts of validity-- a court proceeding in the example of swearing, a civil ceremony in the case of a wedding, and policemen or a court order in the arrest. The notion of political performatives obviously draws from Austin. They refer to actions and statements that anticipate something to come as participants begin to experience—as they begin to live—what they are fighting for while they fight for it. They do so even if such experience has a precarious life outside communities of action. Todd Gitlin expresses this point well in his reminiscences about the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which he presided in the early 1960s: “You could begin to be free only by acting as if you were already free, and this entailed, as much as possible—and only you knew what was possible—getting out from under all the institutional deadweight that tried to convince you that nothing very much was possible” (Gitlin 2012). David Graeber echoes this view half a century later when talking about the tactic of direct action in the Occupy Wall Street movement: “For those who desire to create a society based on the principle of human freedom, direct action is simply the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free” (Graeber 2011).

This “as if” of freedom in Gitlin and Graeber’s comments is the bread and butter of emancipatory politics. It provides a bridge to connect political performatives with what Žižek calls enacted utopia. To quote him:

in the short circuit between the present and the future, we are-- as if by Grace--for a brief period of time allowed to act as if the utopian future were […] already at hand, just there to be grabbed. Revolution is not experienced as a present hardship we have to endure for the happiness and freedom of the future generations but as the present hardship over which this future happiness and freedom already cast their shadow--we already are free fighting for freedom, we are already happy while fighting for happiness, no matter how difficult the circumstances. (Žižek 2002, 559, his italics)

The passage makes it quite clear that Žižek doesn’t believe that all utopias are created equal. Conventional ones designate a universal without a symptom, a non-place forever stuck in the limbo of discursive purity, whereas the enacted variant tells us something about the performative layer of emancipatory politics. It anticipates something to come as people start to experience what they aim to become. Žižek toys with acknowledging the performative nature of this utopia in the shift from the hypothetical “as if” of freedom and happiness to the affirmative “we are already” free and happy while we strive for these aims. It is de facto rather than de jure happiness, although one would have to make the case that happiness can be anything other than de facto. The important point is that none of this calls for a program to describe the future or a road map to get there.
Jacques Rancière has his own take on the absence of programs. He poses it as a rhetorical question: “Do we not need to frame a specific temporality, a temporality of the ‘existence of the inexistent’ in order to give sense to the process of political subjectivization?” His answer is very clear: “I prefer to reverse the argument by saying that the framing of a future happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility. Revolutionaries invented a ‘people’ before inventing its future” (Rancière 2011, 13). The framing of the future stands for what I described as plans and programs. When Rancière downplays their role in emancipatory struggles he is not saying that representations of the future are a mere afterthought. He simply wants to underline that revolutionaries usually deal with them later in the game, in the actual process of addressing a wrong. This is because for him, politics begins when there is a subject of enunciation such as “we the disenfranchised”, “we are the 99%” or, more generically, “we, the people.”

Needless to say, the “people” is an operator of difference and not a sociological given; it is the name of a pariah, a part that has no part, the uncounted, or those that refuse to accept what they are supposed to be, to say, or see. They enact names like equality, liberty, or dignity that have no place in the existing field of experience but could come into being in another configuration of sensible experience. Insurgents from the Maghreb to Madrid and from New York to Rio de Janeiro were a people in this sense of the word. They were what Rancière calls an in-between, a process of subjectivization that was moving them away from where they are supposed to stay and beginning to live what has not yet arrived. This is the core of emancipatory politics. It is about opening up new possibilities and not designing the new order. Insurgencies are symptoms of our becoming other. Like rabbit-holes of the *Alice in Wonderland* variety, they are portals or passageways that connect the present with the possibility of something other to come.

**Insurgencies as Vanishing Mediators: Jameson Reloaded**

These passageways turn emancipatory revolts into vanishing mediators, a notion that Fredric Jameson (1973) coined to describe Max Weber’s account of the role of Protestantism in the move from the pre-modern world to contemporary capitalism. He describes a vanishing mediator as “a catalytic agent, which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms” (Jameson 1973, 78). Protestantism operated as a catalytic agent by disseminating the value or end-oriented rationality required by capitalism to flourish. This was an unexpected outcome of Luther and Calvin’s reforms. In the medieval world the means-ends rationality was circumscribed to monasteries, where monks organized their existence by acting in a way that would get them closer to God and make them worthy of him. By striking down the isolation of monasteries, this rationality was able to spread to all domains of life (Jameson 1973,77). But Protestantism eventually vanished from the historical scene of capitalism. This is not because capitalists embraced atheism or people lost their faith in God and stopped going to churches. What had happened is that capitalism had become sufficiently entrenched to succeed without the help of the Protestant ethics.
Jacobinism shared the same fate. It functioned, says Jameson, as a “guardian of revolutionary morality, of bourgeois and universalistic and democratic ideals, a guardianship which may be done away with in Thermidor, when the practical victory of the bourgeoisie is assured and an explicitly monetary and market system can come into being” (Jameson 1973, 78). So, regardless of whether it is Jacobinism or Protestantism, a vanishing mediator “serves as a bearer of change and social transformation, only to be forgotten once change has ratified the reality of the institutions” (Jameson 1973, 80).

Vanishing mediators are helpful for the discussion of insurgencies because both are connectors, passageways between the existing world and something else to come. But the concept needs retooling to expand its explanatory force. First, one should contemplate the undecidability of their outcome. Jameson—like Žižek, who refers to vanishing mediators repeatedly in his work—focuses on successful ones, those that do their job and then get out of the way. What about failure, though? Shouldn’t we include it in the structure of possibilities of the concept too? I imagine that Jameson would say no on the grounds that a failed mediator mediates nothing. In a line quoted above he describes a mediator as “a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms” and “serves as a bearer of change.” A catalytic agent is a trigger of change, so success in securing change, if we can agree on how to measure it, is the only outcome compatible with a vanishing mediator. A catalyst that fails to deliver the goods simply doesn’t count as a mediator.

Yet the same passage describes a catalyst as the facilitator of an exchange between terms. This shift from change to exchange involves something more than the sonority of the words involved. It indicates that the occurrence of an exchange is unrelated to the outcome it may have. If this is the case, then one would have to conclude that a vanishing mediator, as “a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies,” is always exposed to the twin possibilities that the exchange will succeed in transforming the given or that it may fizzle out as entropy or unproductive energy. The actual outcome of the exchange precipitated by the catalyst, whether as a midwife of change or not, will have to be ascertained retrospectively and not without controversy. There is no clear end to this kind of controversy. Participants in the events inventoried under the heading of “May 1968,” for example, set themselves to change the world. We have been rememorating their gesture for over four decades but there is no consensus about what they accomplished. Interpretations oscillate between describing “May 1968” as a colossal failure—the Fifth Republic survived, and so did capitalism—and characterizing it as a harbinger of post-disciplinary society and therefore as a vanishing mediator of present day society. One may take as a general rule that the outcome of a process of mediation is undecidable, or at least ambivalent, as the efficacy of the catalyst is a matter of polemic or disagreement.

Speech act theory contemplates this bifurcation of options. We have seen that performative utterances are inseparable from the actions they announce, but the effectiveness of those actions is never guaranteed. That is why Austin qualifies the outcomes: when performatives
succeed he calls them felicitous (e.g., two people who have been wedded by a competent authority) whereas when they miss their mark they are misfires or unhappy utterances (e.g., the marriage is declared void because someone impersonated a priest or a judge). What matters, at least for my argument, is that felicity and failure don’t modify the nature of a performative. A misfire is still a performative.

I want to draw from this to claim that success and failure are part of the structure of possibilities of vanishing mediators, although unlike performatives, or at least unlike our conventional understanding of these utterances, the outcome of vanishing mediators is a matter of controversy and will rarely be settled once and for all, like in the example of “May 1968.” Insurgencies that usher in a different order or modify parcels of that order are happy mediators whereas combats for emancipation that go nowhere in their efforts to modify the field of experience are misfires. These mediators are catalytic agents in Jameson’s sense of the word even if they eventually peter out without glory. Notably, necessity plays no role in this process. Misfiring insurgencies are lost causes not because they don’t plan their itinerary but because their enemies outsmart them, because they implode under the weight of internal squabbles, or for many other reasons. Which ones will become narcissistic lost causes and which will have a chance of losing in a dignified manner (or even succeed as felicitous mediators) depends on the fortunes of contingency.

Now we can move on to address a second issue in order to reload or update Jameson’s concept of vanishing mediators. Failure to deliver was one. The other refers to the force of the “vanishing” in the concept of vanishing mediators. We have seen that for Jameson the fate of these mediators is “to be forgotten once change has ratified the reality of the institutions.” There’s no ambiguity in his assertion: here today, gone tomorrow, and ultimately forgotten. I find this claim excessive and unnecessary. Nothing really vanishes without a trace—not the memory of a messy divorce, not the elation of victory, not the experience of missed opportunities. What is gone lingers and leaves its footprints all over the reality it helped to bring about. This is true even in the case of misfires, like when people develop a melancholic attachment to a lost object. For example, the communist revolution envisioned by nineteenth century socialists and upheld as the way forward by aging communist cadres: unable to let go of missed opportunities, they find themselves stuck in a loop, in a Möbius strip where they rehearse endless variations of what went wrong and what could have been if only they had done this or that. What is gone is never simply gone.

The theory of transition to democracy resulting from the study of democratization sponsored by the Wilson Center in the 1980s is a good illustration of this refusal to abandon the scene and simply fade away. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) wrote the tentative conclusions. They describe transitions as an interregnum—the interval between two reigns, orders of ruling, or regimes, in this case, the authoritarian and democratic ones—and outline the
critical path or standard itinerary they will follow. Transitions begin with the emergence of tensions between hawks and doves in the ruling coalition. This reduces the chances of consensus among rulers, relaxes the enforcement of prohibitions, enables a haphazard toleration of civil liberties that gives some breathing space for dissidents, and eventually triggers the resurrection of civil society. Resurrection is the moment of glory of social movements: they lead the struggle for democracy because political parties are disbanded, harassed, in disarray, or tolerated selectively as an alibi for the government to claim a semblance of democracy. Transitions end when new democratic rules are in place, political parties are allowed to operate freely, and the country holds founding elections. At this point parties reclaim what is rightfully theirs—the running of politics—and social movements, having done what they had to do, leave the stage and return to the social, which is where they belong.

This narrative conceives movements as understudies of political parties, caretakers of politics that shine during the state of exception of transitions, and then go back to do whatever they normally do. In a word, they watch the political game from the bench because they are not real players. I see things differently. Movements functioned as the vanishing mediators of democracy and then stuck to the political stage instead of going home after they did their job. This is because they didn’t know they were doing someone else’s job and had no proprietary habitat despite the qualifier “social” preceding the noun. They simply did what comes naturally, so to speak, if you want to change a state of affairs: you either do something or brace yourself for more of the same, which usually means extra time with whatever autocrat happens to rule your life. When transitions were over, movements didn’t leave the stage but became fixtures of politics alongside political parties and helped to configure our current post-liberal scenario. By this I don’t mean to say that electoral politics are over and that we have now moved on to other things. I speak of a post-liberal setting because the democratic politics of elections, political parties, and the entire paraphernalia of territorial representation coexists with other ways and means of aggregating wills, processing demands, and staging opposition. Social movements are one of these ways and means. They are a supplement of representation that expands politics beyond the classical liberal democratic framework.

The continued political presence of movements in the aftermath of transitions is a reminder that mediators are more than midwives of a mode of production, a regime of a new conceptual structure. They don’t simply disappear when their work is done. As I said earlier, things vanish, but rarely without a trace. Vanishing mediators have a spectral afterlife even if they are not the architects and engineers of whatever will come. The Protestant spirit “vanished” when the means-end rationality required by capitalism was firmly in place, but the sense of thrift and the moral imperative of saving for a rainy day persisted as part of the moral education of market agents, at least until hyper-consumption—and by implication, the generalization of debt—became the engine of capitalist growth.

Similarly, revolts like the ones I have been discussing are passageways that open up possibilities of something other to come, which is why I compared them with the rabbit hole
of Alice in Wonderland: they are attempts to negotiate passageways between incommensurable worlds, to connect existing and possible ones. To ask that they also provide us with blueprints of a future order is to demand from them something they simply cannot (and are not supposed to) provide. Yet like any connector, these insurgencies as mediators have a foot on the actually existing world that they seek to change and the promise of a different one that they want to bring into being. Traces of vanishing mediators subsist in the aftermath of the insurgent moment. This lingering is not an accident in the otherwise normal functioning of mediators. Like failure, it is part of their structure of possibilities. This is why mediators don’t stand in a relationship of pure and simple exteriority with the outcome they facilitate. They contribute to shape the scene they help to bring about and are therefore operators of constituent power.

The Provisional Status of Unplanned Insurgencies

The corollary to this discussion is that rebellions might turn out to be lost causes but we can’t peg their failure to the absence of a script. Failure will be a contingent outcome of their actions and inaction in the strategic relationship into which they enter with their various others regardless of whether they have a plan or not. So even if progressive critics assume the role of a Cartesian evil genie trying to fault rebels for the absence of a sociopolitical program, they won’t trick them into believing they are virtually nothing as long as they think they are something.

At this point someone might object by saying that even if this were true, by not having a blueprint of the future, events like those that supercharged 2011 and those that followed in their wake in Mexico, Turkey and Brazil might turn out to be episodic and fade away with the return of the repetitive rituals of politics as usual. The quick and honest answer to this objection is, “so what?” All insurgencies are episodic. Emancipatory politics is not a perpetual present of revolt but something extraordinary—literally: out of the ordinary. Rancière actually describes politics—or the practice of equality he calls emancipation—as a rare occurrence. Politics for him is “the tracing of a vanishing difference” that “occurs as an always provisional accident within the history of forms of domination” (Rancière 2010, 35). “Vanishing”, “provisional”, and “accident” are the keywords here; they underline the distance separating rebels from institutional politics. Walter Benjamin understood this well. For him, people who revolt try to stir things up to pierce the continuum of history. They aim to disrupt the time of domination, which is why he was so taken by the image of French revolutionaries shooting at clocks in different places of Paris: the rebels wanted to mark the interruption of the continuity of history, of the history of the victors. Michael Löwy (2005, 92) updates this Benjaminian trope. He recounts that in 1992, when many countries were preparing to celebrate 500 years of Columbus’ arrival to America on 12 October 1492, Brazil’s largest television and communications conglomerate, O Globo, sponsored a clock that kept track of the time leading to 12 October. The indigenous population had nothing to celebrate and gathered under the clock to shoot arrows at it to prevent it from further registering the history of their oppression.
The insurgent moment is therefore of the nature of the event: a lot of dreams and organizational efforts go into it but in essence it is something unplanned and difficult to capture within a system of rules because rules are precisely what are being put into question. This is the common trait of recent experiences of rebellion from Egypt to Spain to the various “Occupy” actions. As mentioned above, they are “the tracing of a vanishing difference.” But we shouldn’t conclude from this that the evanescent nature of insurgencies makes them irrelevant or turns them into a way of blowing off steam without changing much of our everyday life. They are not irrelevant. The occupation of public space gives visibility to a cause that defines itself on the go and functions both as a catalyst for public opinion and an energizer of sympathetic voices. These experiences have been pivotal for the inclusion of inequality, economic injustice, corruption, impunity, and the deficit of participation and accountability in the public conversation. To return to McLuhan, content is not irrelevant but it is not all that important either: the medium is the message because it sets out to reconfigure the lived environment. Similarly, the insurgencies rather than their proposals are the plan because they aim to modify the boundaries of the given and the narratives through which we make sense of it. Occupations and the general assemblies they trigger are the iconic, visible trait of rebellions that will eventually fizzle or morph into other modes of collective action.

Does this mean that the goal of insurgencies is to become mainstream politics? Not really. Governing or becoming government may be the desired outcome of their actions. This is possible because all rebellions exhibit a diversity of tendencies, including those that want plans and blueprints of the future. But becoming government cannot be their destination. If it were, we would be forced to speak of a continuum between emancipatory revolts and the administration of a new status quo. This in turn would authorize critics to fault insurgencies for having no policies at hand. So, let me say it very clearly: insurgencies are no more, and no less, than the aforementioned “tracing of a vanishing difference,” the vanishing mediators that put the present state of affairs into contact with other possible worlds. Theirs is a structural evanescence, not an accident that may or may not occur.

**The Spectral Remainder of Insurgencies: A Material Afterlife**

Let us turn now to the aftermath of these movements. I have mentioned repeatedly that the fact of their occurrence is already significant. Many of the revolts we have been discussing will fail if we measure success in terms of regime change (assuming we agree on the critical mass of change required for us to speak of meaningful change). But even if they fail, or vanish as misfires, they will have had a spectral remainder. Immanuel Wallerstein coincides with this claim when he describes the impact of OWS. He describes the movement as “the most important political happening in the United States since the uprisings in 1968, whose direct descendant or continuation it is.” (Wallerstein 2011). He concludes by saying that it will have succeeded and left a legacy even if it peters out due to exhaustion or repression (Wallerstein 2011).

Sometimes the remainder is the exemplary role of insurgencies that capture the
imagination of people in distant lands. They function as variants of Kant’s index of the moral progress of humanity. For him revolutions are the sign of such progress due to the enthusiasm they generate among onlookers, people who are touched by the drama unfolding in the streets and express sympathy for one side or the other (Kant 1991, 182). Taking sides manifests itself through sympathy and solidarity with struggles outside one’s country as well as in the replication of their insurgent spirit by those who witness it from afar. The Arab Spring is one of the exemplars of 2011. Tahrir, or freedom in Arabic, functions as a signifier of change that has energized dissenters all over the planet. The epicenter of OWS in New York renamed Zuccotti Park “Freedom Square”, and in Israel one could see hand-written banners with the inscription “Tahrir Tel Aviv”. So there is an element of classical internationalism, but also of willful replication of exemplary acts and gestures. The enthusiasm generated by these uprisings also breaks with territoriality because it expresses itself in the streets but also by virtue of a social media that cuts across time zones, that processes events in real time, and dissects them in a seemingly endless stream of commentaries that are re-tweeted, liked, commented, and shared 24/7. Like global cable news stations but without the filters of subscription and editorial line of those stations, the social media never sleep and make it more difficult to contain a phenomenon within its parochial surroundings. I am not saying that without this networked space insurgencies would peter out, but that this media dislocates territoriality by disregarding borders and creating information at a speed and on a scale that is still difficult to grasp. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media have become amplifiers of insurgencies, further eroding the traditional distinction between actor and spectator. They are giving rise to a spectactor, a spectator who also acts or site of enunciation where the distinction between acting and the spectator is difficult to make.

But perhaps the most notorious point is that the afterlife of emancipatory struggles also appears in the displacement of the cognitive maps through which we make sense of our being in community. This displacement is as material as the change of rulers, the rewriting of constitutional texts, or the crafting of new institutions. I will illustrate this with two examples.

1. The Arab Spring: Debunking the Myth of the Omnipotence of Power

The first one takes us to the North of Africa and its surroundings. An entire generation of Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians, and Yemenis grew up under the shadow of a single strongman and his cronies. The continual assault to undermine people’s will to act reinforced what psychologists call “learned helplessness”. The British artist Damien Hirst depicts this in a sculpture aptly titled “The Acquired Inability to Escape.” It consists of an office desk and a chair enclosed by glass: one can see what lies in the other side of the glass, but there is also an awareness that somehow there is no way out. Authorities used familiar mechanisms to instill this sense of impotence. One is the relentless cult of personality presenting the leader as the First Worker, First Sportsman and First Whatever of...
the nation—or in North Korean fashion, simply Dear Leader. Corruption also figures prominently. It is a way to secure the allegiance or at least the passive compliance of business, commercial, trade union and other organized interest groups. And then there is the terror generated by everyday harassment, arbitrary detention and torture. Terror seeks to instill the paranoia-inducing distrust of others and the belief that resistance is futile because the ever-present eyes and ears of the police and their network of informants will eventually find out what you are up to. Like Etienne de la Boetie’s voluntary servitude, learned helplessness prevents people from seeing alternatives. They are as bewildered as the anguished characters in Luis Buñuel’s film *The Exterminating Angel*, who arrive at a dinner party and eventually find themselves inexplicably unable to leave the home of their hosts even though the doors are wide open and nobody is stopping them. Tyrants seek to replicate this predicament by fostering the paralyzing myth of an impotent population confronting an omnipotent, omnipresent and irreplaceable regime and leader.

Insurgencies show that the spell of power can be undone because the emperor has no clothes. They change people’s frames of reference by offering windows of possibility, the rabbit holes I described as passageways to other (this-worldly) worlds. The encounters among strangers in the swath of urban space of Tahrir Square meant more than a mere convergence of bodies in the manner of an arithmetic sum of individuals. People felt the exhilaration of making a difference by the mere fact of being together. This is precisely Maurice Blanchot’s point about May 1968: the *soixante-huitards* were not interested in seizing power because what they wanted was altogether different, namely, “to let a possibility manifest itself, the possibility—beyond any utilitarian gain—of being-together” (Blanchot 1988, 30). The circulation of images of the experience of occupying Tahrir and resisting attacks of government forces precipitated an enhanced connectivity that reverberated much further than the space of Tahrir. The physicality of occupation was supplemented by a virtual being-together of those who wanted to change their world. People in the square and elsewhere in Egypt felt that they could touch the sky with their hands in the fleeting moment of their being-together. A moment, I may add, of enactment of the people.

The rhythm and direction of change can be subsequently co-opted and colonized by the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood and other variants of orthodoxy, by the regrouping forces of the governing party or by myriad other political entrepreneurs. But even when this happens, if it does occur, these parties realize that Egyptians (like Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians, etc.) have lost much of their awe of power and the powerful, and that it won’t be easy to reinstate an autocracy with a different dressing. One commentator wrote, “Activists across the Arab world speak of breaking through the barrier of fear so that even the harshest repression no longer deters” (Black 2011). One should not underestimate the role of fear as a disincentive for action, but this is an accurate depiction of one of the collateral effects of the Arab Spring. It is particularly true of the Syrian uprising, where people have shown admirable courage in the face
of the government’s unrelenting brutality despite their fear and not because they have none.

What matters is that the powerful lose their sacral aura. The spectacle of confused tyrants put on trial, gone into hiding or fleeing abroad with the public monies looted during their time in government, is a wonderful educational experience. It is an eye-opener very much like the guillotining of Louis XVI that taught the French that the body could go on living without its head and that rulers were not demigods. This is the existential pedagogy of emancipatory politics and it is foolish to dismiss it as subjective gibberish. Its lessons are likely to linger long after the effervescence in the streets subsides.

2. The Student Revolt in Chile

The second example takes us to Chile, the poster boy of successful neoliberal policies whose Gini index of 0.5 makes it the OECD member country with the highest income inequality and, in global terms, the thirteenth most unequal in the entire planet. It also has the highest cost of education in the OECD after the United States and a President who openly states that education is a consumer good. High school and university students disagreed and mounted a challenge to the funding policies for schools and privatized higher education. Chileans were generally supportive of their cause, if only because graduates start their working life with a huge debt and their parents will have to foot the bill if they don’t find jobs. Polls indicate that the approval rating of student demonstrators was far higher than that of the right wing president, his political coalition, and even the left of center opposition. At the high point of the protests in July and August 2011, 77% of the people surveyed had a positive view of the student leaders and nearly 82% expressed support for the movement’s demands. In contrast, the approval rating of the president was 26% and his Minister of Education mustered only 19%. The left of center coalition Concertación por la Democracia did even worse: only 17% approved its performance (see La Tercera 2011a and 2011b; Centro de Estudios Públicos 2011). Students seemed immune to protest fatigue, with nearly 210 protests in an eight-month period (Koschutzke 2012, 19). They mounted extensive mobilizations in demand of free public education (400,000 plus people in demonstrations across the country) and occupied schools (over 600) and universities (17 of them) knowing that this could force them to graduate a year later. They were also well versed in guerrilla theatre: kiss-a-thons for free education, a flash mob of zombies (the living dead of a dysfunctional educational system) dancing to the music of Michael Jackson’s Thriller across from the Presidential palace, and a 1800 hour urban marathon—one hour for each million US dollars required to fund the education of 300,000 students per year.

At the time of writing this article the student insurgency had not succeeded in modifying the educational policies of the government. Neither had they managed to secure its commitment to change an educational model in which the affluence of the borough—a reflection of the strength
of its tax base—determines the quality of publicly funded schools within its territory. Their activism, however, has disturbed the given in various ways. It opened a discussion about the limits of privatized higher education and made people aware of the life-long consequences of policies that enshrine inequality in the allocation of funds for schools. Students have rubbed the idea that education is a consumer good.

Their mobilizations also put into question the country’s political table manners, which in the post-Pinochet era construes radical political demands as memories of a long gone past, celebrates consensus, and privileges the technical discourse of people with limited goals, professional agendas, and little passion. This is partly due to the way in which institutional discourse processed (or failed to process) the aftermath of the traumatic overthrow of President Salvador Allende during the original 9/11, the one of 1973. The political class tends to refrain from describing Pinochet’s rule as barbarian, at least in public. “Coup” and “difficult times” suffice, just like “The Troubles” was the euphemism of choice to describe the war in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. In 2011, the Ministry of Education went as far as to modify primary school textbooks by dropping “dictatorship” as the qualifier of Pinochet’s 17-year rule and replacing it with the more tactful “military regime” (Acuña 2012).

But the repressed manages to return, which is a reminder that repression is not infallible. In Chile the repressed returned under the guise of a student mobilization. The adversarial politics spearheaded by students has nudged the country out of the prolonged state of exception in which it had been living for nearly four decades. One can see this in the acrimonious controversies between students and government officials played out live in the media and in their refusal to back down from confrontations with the political elite. Their relentless criticism of the educational policies of the right wing government did not spare the opposition Concertación por la Democracia either. The Concertación implemented well-meaning reforms during its four consecutive administrations, yet generally stuck to the neoliberal educational model inherited from the Pinochet era. Students refused to whitewash their policies. They said, quite correctly, that the Concertación had had two decades to come up with an alternative. Criticizing both the government and the Concertación was refreshing. It made consensus less of an obsession in the public mind and, at least during the many months of protests of 2011, moved the vector of politics from Congressional committees and expert commissions to the streets. Their neither-nor position allowed them to bypass the usual wrangling between government and opposition. Change will probably come about through the encounter of these different political performances.

The student revolt also undermined the success story that Chileans have been telling themselves for the past three decades: that the country is different—more rational, less unstable, and with an outlook that makes it a natural partner of industrialized nations—because in Chile the market works and macroeconomic indicators are sound. Business-speak cuts across the Chilean political spectrum and is prevalent among all classes, ages, and occupations. Its
ubiquity is only comparable to that of the managerial language permeating the audit culture of UK universities, where something that is not subject to assessment is in principle suspicious, firings are called restructurings, and Heads of Department line managers. Student protests in Chile highlighted the class divisions embedded in the educational system and its lifelong consequences on social mobility. Their stubborn refusal to back down in their criticism of privilege, exclusion, and the perception of education as a consumer good pierced the immunitarian privilege enjoyed by the neoliberal economic model in Chile. This is one major reason why the mainstream itself, or at least its center-left component, has warmed up to the idea that criticism of the market as the primary mechanism for allocating resources and rewards is not off the table.

To cut to the chase, the spectral remainder of the student revolt is that it managed to disturb the given by undermining consensus, addressing the traumas of the past, and questioning the triumphalism of neoliberal discourse. Their protests have renewed overly ritualized political exchanges and opened up political discourse to ways to deal with the trauma of the coup that overthrew Allende and gave us Pinochet. In the final line of Philip Roth’s novel, Portnoy’s Complaint, the psychoanalyst utters the only line of dialogue after nearly 300 pages of Portnoy’s soliloquy. He says: “Now vee may perhaps to begin, yes?” Analogies must be taken with caution, but perhaps Chileans can now lighten up the weight of their ghosts and “may perhaps to begin, yes?” to pick up their history from where they left it in 1973.

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Whether we look at events associated with the Arab Spring or the mobilizations of students in South America and those spearheaded by Occupy movements, they all have great dreams about what will come but no real blueprint of what the future will look like. They are episodic and at some point will be overtaken by old and new politicians embarked in the everyday practice of running the machinery of government. Yet insurgencies will have a spectral afterlife that is anything but ethereal because it impregnates practices and institutions as much as ways of seeing and doing.

The materiality of this afterlife manifests itself in the cognitive shifts insurgencies generate, the learning experience of life in the streets and of participating in general assemblies to chart their next steps, in the memories of these experiences, in the leaders that could emerge in the process of occupation, in the subsequent campaigns and partnerships they foster, and in the policy changes they bring about. Inventiveness is another face of this materiality. Activists who are children of the digital age came up with the human microphone, an anachronistically low-tech solution devised to circumvent the New York Police Department prohibition of amplifiers and hand-held bullhorns. The familiar “Mic check!” could be heard as a speaker took to the podium without a microphone in her hand or lapel. It prepared the assembly for an unusual way of amplifying sound: people
would repeat in chorus what a speaker said so that those further away could hear too. At first sight some might have confused it with a scene from Monty Python’s film *Life of Brian*, when Brian tells a crowd gathered under his window “You are all individuals!” and they repeat in chorus “Yes, we are all individuals!” But it wasn’t similar at all. It was not an exercise in acquiescence but rather a practical solution for a police injunction and a way of experiencing being-together in Blanchot’s sense of the word.

Tactics and practices devised by activists become part of a collective political know-how, a political jurisprudence of sorts that functions as a toolbox available for anyone else to use. It is not always easy to establish the paternity of these tactics and practices because once they enter into circulation they become recombinant as people retouch and adapt them to their needs. OWS assemblies modified available hand-based sign language and used it to express agreement, disagreement, a point of order, or the blockage of proposals. In Syria, where the government ordered its forces to shoot at protesters, activists came up with *tayar*, an equivalent of flash mobs: they gathered for 10 minutes and then dispersed before the army or police arrived. All this was done before in other struggles.

The material afterlife of insurgencies also appears in the cultural artifacts they leave behind—songs, graffiti, manifestos, pamphlets, photos, films, blogs, websites, and an assortment of testimonies in the social media. Then there is the foreseeable torrent of conferences, workshops, publications (including this one), interviews, media analyses, assessments by activists, and everyday conversations trying to make sense of the experience of these insurgencies long after they pass.

So even in failure, if we measure failure by the absence of a plan for a future society, insurgencies will have had a measure of success.

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**Notes**

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