

## **LIVING REVOLTS AND REVOLUTIONS NOW**

A talk by Jaya Brekke,  
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There has been so so much happening around the world this past year. It is becoming clear that we are in a period of global revolt, a period of transformation, where the future is very much up for grabs and the forces that will shape the future are very much in question. This is an extremely turbulent and extremely exciting time.

I want to give a brief overview of popular revolts that have been taking place over the past year or so. I think it is possible to talk about three different types of revolts - there are the anti-austerity demonstrations across mainly southern Europe, reactions to extreme political and economic policies that are wiping out people's social security and completely transforming the relationship between the state and the people. There are the revolutions taking place in Turkey, Brazil and Chile, where the difference is that these demonstrations and clashes are erupting after a period of tremendous growth in their respective economies and an overall increase in material wealth. In other words, a very different situation to Europe and the dramatic impoverishment that is happening. And finally there are the revolutions across north Africa, where Egypt has seen a new Spring and a new revolution take place only two years after they brought down their dictator, but where splits between factions and the military intervention seems to point towards much more unrest to come. That region, including Libya, Tunisia and the more extreme case of Syria, is seeing more and more militarized factions and what began as popular uprisings having become civil wars.

I don't think it is possible to draw major conclusions or make big predictions at this time, but I would like to discuss these examples in order to raise some questions that might be useful to bear in mind when working for socio-political change in these turbulent times.

To start with Europe, the major question in the case of Europe, and probably beyond, is the rewriting of the social contract, in other words, what is the future relationship between the state and the population going to look like. The social contract is a way to express the many legal, social and financial relationships between the state and the population - the rights and responsibilities of the citizens and the extent of the power and responsibilities of the state to provide for basic services. This is in dramatic transformation at the moment across not only southern Europe but also Scandinavia where the welfare state is being dismantled, and the UK, with various attempts at having the private and voluntary sector take over previous state responsibilities, including prisons, various parts of the benefits system, some parts of the health system, housing and aspects of policing.

When we speak of the movements that have sprung up across southern Europe, apart from the tactical similarities of taking the squares and using Twitter and Facebook to spread information, the fundamental similarity is a total disgust with a corrupt political class. Swiss bank accounts, tax frauds and slush funds set up by major businessmen to bribe central political figures have dominated mainstream media in Spain, with calls for the resignation of PM Rajoy, and in Greece, with the Lagarde list of major Greek tax evaders that Christine Lagarde gave to the Greek prime minister in 2010 and which they tried to keep secret as it contained names of politicians and top businessmen. No wonder people are furious at the political class.

People are of course also furious at the Troika, the IMF, EU and ECB, who have been dictating policy through the economic threats of withholding bailout money. A month or so ago the IMF made a public statement in which they admitted that they had underestimated the negative effects of austerity in Greece.

So let me speak a bit about Greece. It is where I have been doing most of my work and where I know the most detail about on the ground events. Speaking of the rewriting of the social contract, this is a county where the state is withdrawing dramatically, literally pulling the safety net from under people's

feet. Sudden poverty, violence, racism, drug abuse, homelessness, suicides, emigration, mental depressions and desperation are increasing constantly and have been for five years now. On the increase also is a multitude of new laws for the purpose of making strikes illegal, rounding up and arresting people, evicting people, detaining people and kidnapping and deporting people. A recent short documentary that we produced as part of our project a lawyer gave us the analysis that governance often operates with the “carrot and stick” tactic. But when there is no carrot left, and all you have got is a stick, you need to start inventing problems that are “solvable” in order to legitimise your existence and show some capacity. In this way, politicians, with the help of the media, have created unfounded national scandals in order to then send in the police to “clean up the situation”. The response from the political class becomes a law and order response rather than political and policy response to a situation of crisis. For example, the health minister invented a major threat to the Greek family nucleus – the foreign prostitute who brought HIV to the country. Statistically, there was no foundation in his claims, but his hysterical pronouncements brought about a major police operation where women were arrested because they were immigrants, and if they tested HIV positive, they were arrested on the spot for “endangering the Greek family man”, and their picture and full name was announced publicly. Another example is the infamous Xenios Zeus operation where police over the course of a couple of months rounded up over 40.000 migrants in mass arrests and detentions based purely on appearance (the figure by now is over 70.000). Many people were subsequently released as it turned out they had legal papers and the right to stay in the country, but by then the operation had done the job of signifying that migrants are a mass criminal threat and that the state has capacity to act on this threat. So these are the cases that then fill the Greek media scape and mental space while pension reforms and public sector layoffs are taking place en masse.

But now I want to move to more positive examples. I think a good transition that I would like to speak about is Slovenia. Slovenia, has become one of the prime examples of integration into the EU and economic growth in an ex-Yugoslavian country. But despite economic growth it is also a country that has seen major corruption scandals in the political class and some dramatic

neo-liberal restructuring. For this reason, towards the end of 2012 mass protests erupted in the country. Somehow this has been one of the most under-reported revolts in the midst of everything else happening around the world, along with Bulgaria that has seen its own major protests. In any case, the Slovenian government refused to enter into dialogue, instead using massive police force to repress demonstrations, and protests are ongoing. (See bottom of notes for some links to articles in English about the Slovenian uprising).

Turkey is another country where the government has been extremely violent in its handling of the protests. I think the death-toll is now at eight, while many more have lost eyes, broken bones, even a lost spleen was reported in the severe beatings that took place at Gezi Park, not to mention cases of torture at the hands of police. The Turkish example brings in another very interesting aspect of these demonstrations - the specifically urban aspect. Starting from anger at the planned destruction of Gezi Park in the centre of Istanbul, the protests since spread to other cities where the feeling of having no say over the shaping of the urban environment that one lives in and being ruled by an increasingly dictatorial government was widely recognised. Erdogan has been the PM of Turkey for quite a few years now and has ruled as Turkey has grown and become a major economic power with an ever closer relationship to the EU; now he is under strain after criticisms from European governments of his handling of the Gezi protests. (It is always easier for western governments to criticise others and forget their own treatment of demonstrators!) In any case, the events in Turkey raise two very important questions that can be further elaborated in the cases of Brazil and Egypt. The first question is this urban aspect of having a say over one's environment. To elaborate - both Brazil and Turkey are amongst the nations that have been applauded as developing with massive and steady economic growth that have seen massive and steady economic growth and increasing material wealth over the past years. So in this sense, they differ dramatically from what is taking place in recession-ridden Europe. So why are people angry? Why are they demonstrating?

To take the Brazilian example - a friend, Rodrigo Nunes, recently [wrote an opinion piece for Al Jazeera](#) discussing the demonstrations in Brazil that

exploded after there was an attempted hike in public transport ticket prices. I am not sure if you have seen the incredible pictures of the massive demonstrations in Sao Paulo and Rio? The point he made was that there is a difference between *quality* and *quantity* when it comes to development. Whereas in Brazil there has been a focus on quantity, and on the typical development models that we have known to have been exported by the IMF and World Bank for the last forty years or so, Nunes' argument was that despite material wealth increasing there was a growing dissatisfaction with the nature of development - in other words, with the quality of development and the quality of life. Transport prices being what triggered the revolts is a clear sign of that - if anyone has ever lived in one of the world's mega-cities of over 10 million you will recognise the drag and difficulties of getting around. With displacements and financialisation of property usually you will end up having to live relatively far from where you work and be dependent on public transportation. In other words, you might have a job, you might make a bit of money, but your quality of life, the way you live is a hell and your ability to determine your environment and the way you live is diminishing. These are the reasons for uprisings in developing countries that financially have been doing well.

The second question that the Turkey example raises is the relationship between religion and government. The protests against Erdogan were also inspired and highly fuelled by his increasingly moralistic governing. While this had the support of some elements of Turkish population, others, who are atheists and/or who value a secular government as well as freedom of cultural expression and sexuality, were furious at regulations that he began imposing restricting things like abortions and alcohol consumption on the basis of an Islamic ethical position.

To take another example where the question of Islam and government has been raised intensively is Egypt, that recently had its second "Arab Spring" overthrowing the government for the second time in two years, this time Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the brotherhood had huge support in the beginning and with a strong base also in local community work, their policies in government quickly resembled dictatorial policies where more

and more power was concentrated with Morsi. In any case, the conflict over the influence of religion on politics and government is continuing.

So, to conclude, to me it seems some of the major questions raised in recent events across the world, and in this period of global revolt are:

1. The dramatic changes in the relationship between the state and the population - what will replace the welfare state?
2. The nature of *development*, in other words, what does progress mean today? What is quality of life? what kind of environments do we want to live in?
3. The relationship between religion/spirituality and government. Given developments in the Muslim world and the United States, will the future see an increase of the influence of religion on politics? And what will be the consequences?

I will end with saying that the whole world is on fire and that these are very turbulent times, full of possibility.

## **Some relevant english language resources:**

### **Greece**

<http://www.crisis-scape.net/>

<http://blog.occupiedlondon.org/>

<http://icantrelaxingreece.wordpress.com/>

### **Slovenia**

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/social-uprising-in-slovenia-against-neoliberal-austerity-measures/5324218>

<http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/01/15/slovenians-demand-radical-change/>

### **Europe**

<http://www.x-pressed.org/>

### **Turkey**

[http://turkishspring.nadir.org/index\\_eng.html](http://turkishspring.nadir.org/index_eng.html)

<http://mashallahnews.com/?p=10341>

<http://occupygezipics.tumblr.com/>

<http://showdiscontent.com/archive/gezi-parki/>

<http://kuymulu.wordpress.com/>

### **Brazil**

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/06/201361973028606352.html>