What Was To Be Done? Protest and Revolution in the 2010s

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Organize for success. This is the key point of Vincent Bevins's much-discussed *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (PublicAffairs, 2023). Before you begin, imagine what it would take for you to win not just the first battle, but the next one, and the one after that. What will have to happen and who will do it? In Egypt's Tahrir Square and Ukraine's Maidan plaza, Bevins tells us, protesters found themselves blinded by the light of their own unexpected success, unable to shape the vast forces unleashed. But Bevins argues that these groups were not just unable to organize but unwilling to do so, committed to a hegemonic ideology—horizontalism—that foreswore explicit, designated leadership. These protesters therefore opened up a power vacuum they were unwilling to fill. As a result, their movements were often recuperated by conservative, nationalist, or fascist organizations—like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or the Right Sector in Ukraine—who lacked such scruples, and were more than happy to negotiate on behalf of the movement. The main characters in his narrative return in the penultimate chapter to reflect on this oversight and its consequences:

> Mahmoud Salem, the blogger who crossed the Nile to fight for Tahrir Square in 2011, recalls that final battle scene from the movie trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* when Sauron is defeated. Why did they think that if Mubarak fell, all evil would simply disappear from the land? When Lucas "Vegetable" Monteiro told me that the Movimento Passe Livre had made no preparations for what happened after they successfully killed the fare hike, he smiled, and then burst into humbled laughter. They had forgotten quite a big detail! Theo, a young Hong Konger who fought alongside the braves in 2019, looks back wistfully on the approach they took in the second half of the year. They certainly weren't going to beat Beijing in an open confrontation, so what was the endgame? History does not possess a supernatural, metaphysical quality that pushes it forward relentlessly. Many people in my generation (and I think I, too, was guilty of this teleological mode of thought at the beginning of the decade) think that if you simply gave the thing a kick, it would come unstuck and move in the right direction. Paradoxically, liberals, socialists, conservatives, and anarchists alike have all thought that way, even as they define "the right direction" rather differently. But if you burn down your building, diving providence does not supply you

> with a better one. If you chop down a tree, you do not immediately get a bigger tree. Sometimes you are just left with a stump. As industrial society becomes ever more complex, the range of possible unintended consequences grows larger. If your car isn't running well, it is not recommended to light it on fire and hope that a better one comes along.

I quote this long passage not only because it is one of the few direct statements of the book's conclusions but also because it gives the reader a sense of the book's omniscient narrative style. Who is the "they" referred to in Mahmoud Salem's question? Is this really what the millions in the streets that day thought? Bevins uses what is called the *free indirect style,* in which an omniscient narrator voices the thought or speech of characters directly, without attribution. But this can make it difficult to know who is thinking or speaking: Salem, everyone in the streets, Bevins? This collective confession, linking Mahmoud in Egypt, Monteiro in Brazil, and Theo in Hong Kong to a generational ideology Bevins formerly shared allows him to conclude the paragraph with a philosophy of history and a few aphorisms which are clearly his and his alone, but now ascribed to these movements in their entirety. What's more, it turns out that everyone—"liberals, socialists, conservatives, and anarchists"—subscribes to a vulgar philosophy of "just give it a big kick." Does anyone really believe everyone believes such a thing?

This narrative fog is in some sense a result not just of style but of method. As Bevin notes in the introduction, *If We Burn* is not a work of history, comparative sociology, or political theory, nor much less a militant assessment of the cycle of struggles circa 2011. It is a journalistic narrative of "the mass protest decade" based on hundreds of interviews conducted in a dozen countries. To tell the story of these mass protests through the experiences of its participants, Bevins would ask interviewees "almost intentionally stupid questions: What led to the protest explosion? What were its goals? Were they achieved? If they weren't achieved, why not?" To uncover the "missing revolution" and to provoke the kinds of reflection synthesized in the paragraph above, he would ask "something like: 'What would you tell a teenager in Tanzania or Mexico or Kyrgyzstan, who may live through a political explosion, or might attempt to change life in her country? What lessons would you draw from your own experiences and impart to them?'" The answers are quite fascinating, and one can learn much about how uprisings unfold from *If We Burn*. But Bevins's journalistic approach can lead us to attribute the effects of these uprisings directly to the ideas of their participants, and particularly participants who were central to the organizing which initiated things. But in mass action, effects are not the result of individual intention, first, because people act together and therefore the effects are extra-individual and second, because they act in conflict with reactive and sometimes proactive forces. In mass action, events occur which no one had quite intended. This requires analysis to attend as much to what people did as what they thought.

Take the book's discussion of Tahrir, for example. Bevins interviewed many of the key players who kicked off the occupation of Tahrir and the so-called Egyptian Revolution, and his account contains useful information about the planning, intention, and choice that underlies any so-called "spontaneous" uprising. Inspired by the example of the Tunisian Revolution, anti-regime and anti-police activists called for a protest on January 25, National Police Day, whose size and ferocity surprised them. Protesters managed to make it to Tahrir Square, which they had not expected. Hoping to extend this energy, they called for another protest on January 28, after Friday prayers. This was the climactic "Day of Rage" in which, in addition to seizing and occupying Tahrir Square

for the duration, participants burned down over ninety police stations. This was no longer a protest but a revolution and would require a shift in tactic and strategy among the organizers of January 25 Day of Action. Bevins describes the "Day of Rage" as a day of opportunity missed:

> One wave of Egyptians battled cops on the Qasr al-Nil bridge, holding their ground while suspended over the Nil, pushing back, taking losses, and then advancing again until the police simply retreated. At that point, the revolutionaries could have taken anything. They chose to stay in Tahrir Square, the default destination for many in the crowd; it was an empty piece of land, and its conquest offered no strategic value.

This is not exactly true. Though the uniformed police force had collapsed, the army remained in the streets, having secured key sites, such as the Presidential Palace, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Maspero television building, beforehand. Participants did in fact go to these strategic sites, but a superficial analysis could tell them that their options were to violently attack the army, or to attempt to win them over, sowing division among the ranks. The unfortunate slogan of the movement that emerged then, *The people and the army are one hand,* indicated both a hope that the army or some part of it would side with the revolution, but also a tacit admission that the army would safeguard any process of transition, and violently repress any "revolution" that aimed to disempower it, unless revolutionaries were to render it inoperable. At this moment, Hosni Mubarak had not yet stepped down, and still had control over the state television, radio, and newspapers, which continued with their propagandistic, state-directed coverage, not to mention the secret police, who were still arresting, abducting, and in some cases killing protesters. Bevins therefore narrates as a free, unmotivated choice what was in fact quite constrained. He sees as power vacuum, as pure space of possibility, what was in fact not a vacuum at all but rather a decrease in the pressure of power. Given the size of the crowds, and the army control of key sites, the choice was to stay in Tahrir or disperse, and staying in the plaza had obvious benefits: it paralyzed the city and created a central hub for organizing and the relay of information, especially important once Mubarak shut down parts of the internet.

Nonetheless, Bevins is right to ask why this near-revolution and others failed. What could have been done, if anything? It is this "if anything" clause which falls out of the picture with Bevins's psychologizing approach. Was the outcome of the Egyptian Revolution really the result of bad strategy, or ideology? If so, it behooves Bevins to be clear about what could have been done from this point or earlier, what could have succeeded, and here his book is frustratingly vague. He makes the most basic error that any book which offers a periodizing or historicizing claim can make—he defines a new era of "mass protest and missing revolution" without defining it in relation to whatever era preceded it. As such, it is only a half-periodization and much of what Bevins ascribes to the "mass protest decade" is hardly specific to the twenty-first century or in some cases to the twentieth. Revolutions almost always take revolutionaries by surprise, and few of them result directly from plans laid out in advance. The dynamic he describes, where protests against this or that injustice become revolutions, usually after some moment of violent repression by the state, is not at all new: it is apparent in many of the most famous and studied revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is just how revolutions start.

This lack of a full periodization also leaves us without any concept of success, since the era can only show us what's missing. This half-periodization produces a half-concept of revolution. What would success have looked like here? What does revolutionary success look like in general? Aside

from vague gestures to the Russian Revolution, Bevins does not say. This leads one to wonder how much of the dynamic he describes is really attributable to the "mass protest decade." One can imagine a similar set of claims for other decades, particularly the sixties. But even the world revolution of 1917–1923 might ultimately be described as an era of mass action and missing revolution.

Bevins finds one exception to the rule of leadership foresworn in the 2019–20 Chilean "Social Explosion" (*Estallido social*). As happened also in Brazil, this was a protest over the price of transit that became a general uprising with a welter of concerns and demands. And like Brazil, Chile featured a strong institutional left with a basis in social movements—figures like Gabriel Boric and Camila Vellejo emerged from the 2011 student movement and entered Congress—but unlike Brazil, there was a right-wing president and therefore no concern from left groups about upsetting their paymasters. The uprising managed to extend itself and deepen, paralyzing the Chilean capital for months. Fearing a violent massacre, Boric collaborated with liberals and centrists within the government to broker a deal for a new constitutional reform convention. Though the majority of the movement rejected this plan, Boric managed to build a successful presidential bid around the constitutional reform campaign, eventually gathering support from within the movement. For Bevins, this was not recuperation so much as good fortune: "Chile was lucky enough that it ultimately had its meaning imposed by a generation that understood the streets, had entered power at an earlier moment in the decade of interconnected struggles, and actually had the legitimacy to pull something off." Nonetheless, the constitutional amendment failed, raising the question of whether it was the right strategy and, as Bevins notes, Boric has yet to deliver substantial results beyond winning the presidency, much less to say revolution. Is Boric's claiming the mantle of the *Estallido social*, rejected by much of the movement, really that different from the Muslim Brotherhood's in Egypt or the Ukrainian right in Maidan? What would count as success for the participants of these movements, for Bevins, or for readers of this review? If the revolution was missing during these decades, what does a revolution look like?

Another problem is that Boric's exception that proves the rule is really no exception at all, and emerges only from the choice by Bevins to exclude movements from Europe, such as the Syntagma Square occupation in Greece and the 15M movement in Spain, both of which did feature mass parties firmly rooted in the movements, Syriza and Podemos, respectively. In Greece, Syriza even controlled the government briefly, but was forced to prosecute the austerity it earlier railed against by virtue of its position as a debtor nation within the EU's Economic and Monetary Union. Like the constitutional reform campaign in Chile, the Greek sequence featured a disastrous referendum campaign, led by Syriza, that ended in failure and led, ultimately, to the collapse of the party and the return of the right. The results that Podemos has gleaned in Spain have also been meager, and certainly not revolutionary. This path not only seems unexceptional but also unpromising.

Bevins excludes these cases and focuses on movements outside of Europe and the US because he wants to tell a story of how an ideology developed in the 1960s in the United States in particular and in "the traditional First World" in general—horizontalism—has shaped the tactical toolkit and strategic horizons of movements around the globe. There is a kernel of truth to this account, inasmuch as social movements today do live in the shadow of a long 1968 whose logic and repertoire have not been overcome, but this is, in my view and in the view of many others, less the result of ideology than of long-term structural changes in capitalism which are now global. In any case, 1968 was as much a global event, inspired by revolutionary developments in Cuba and

China and Algeria, as it was a Euro-American one, and the vectors of influence did not always move from center to periphery, as the influence of figures such as Mao, Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon make clear. For the US, the Civil Rights struggle, urban riots, and Black Power were as powerful if not more powerful examples than the student movements. And though there was certainly a well-developed anarchist and ultraleft tendency within the global '68, particularly in France and Italy, it was rarely dominant, and many of the groups and participants adopted a broad Marxist-Leninism that was quite "verticalist." Bevins focuses on the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in the United States—but when the SDS broke apart the two successor organizations, the RYM (Revolutionary Youth Movement) and PLP-WSA (Progressive Labor Party and Worker Student Alliance), were both Marxist-Leninist cadre organizations, as was the Weather Underground, another SDS offshoot.

Why then have the marginal anarchist and ultraleft ideas from 1968 fared better? *If We Burn* argues that this horizontalist ideology has permeated media representations of protest, which privilege the "traditional First World." According to Bevins, it is not so much that people in Turkey and Brazil are explicitly influenced by horizontalist theory but that what they see on television, on Twitter, or in films, has been selected by Americans and others who privilege such types of action. He gives few examples of what he means, and his interviewees aren't particularly clear either. Is *Lord of the Rings* or *V for Vendetta* horizontalist? Even if this were true, were the images of protest which his interviewees called to mind when determining what they would do really Western in origin? Only the square or plaza occupation is truly new to this sequence, and has it origins in protest marches to city centers that are as old as revolution itself. Everything else, barricades and street fighting, are consistent elements of mass uprising for as long as we have records. But if we are to look for the origins of the plaza occupation it lies, as Bevins acknowledges, in the 2001 Argentinazo in Argentina and, more proximately, the occupation of central Oaxaca City by the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca in 2006. And, of course, it must be noted that this tactic, which may have been discovered independently, like many scientific discoveries, spread from the Arab world to the West, and not the other way around.

Events in Argentina and Oaxaca did feature a strong emphasis on what Argentinians called *horizontalidad*, influenced by anarchist and autonomist theory, some of it European and American in origin but this can only be made into a product of the US New Left by a very hamfisted narrative. Anarchism has a long history in Argentina and Mexico, where it developed in directions distinctly opposed to European and American variants, and took on particular characteristics in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s against dictatorial governments. Mexico City was, let's remember, a key site within the global '68 student movement. An important source for the development of *horizontalidad* was the anti-globalization movement, highly visible within Western media but by no means a US or European-led movement, given the signal influence on it of the Zapatista uprising, and its many participants from the Global South, particularly Latin America. The Brazilian Free Fare Movement (Movimento Passe Livre) around which Bevins centers his narrative was certainly influenced by the anti-globalization movement but it is mistaken to identify these influences as emanating from the "traditional First World" when a key site was, as Bevins acknowledges, the World Social Forum founded in Porto Alegre in 2001, and which was intimately connected to the socialist movements in Latin America. Does it even make sense to talk about the "traditional First World"—when it comes to protest movements—in such a globalized world? Do the magnetic field lines really emanate from North America? The Free Fare Movement (MPL) and the World Social Forum have roots within far-left Brazilian groups stretch-

ing back to the 1960s, whose ideology cannot be easily rendered "Western" or "First World." Is looking for the origins of the "mass protest decade" futile, given the tendency of particular situations to select for certain tactics? Whatever the case, in examining the "mass protest decade" what we typically see are tactics moving from the periphery to the center and not the other way. After the protesters in Hong Kong pioneered the use of lasers, umbrellas, and hard hats in their battles with the cops, so-called "frontline tactics," this tactical toolkit proliferated in Chile and widely during the US George Floyd uprising. We now see these same tactics, clearly originating in Hong Kong, within the university Gaza solidarity encampments. What is Western about this? The story of Euro-American horizontalism that we get in *If We Burn* reifies the First-World supremacy it aims to undermine.

It also overemphasizes the continuity between the anti-globalization movement and the "mass protest decade." Here we need to distinguish between horizontalism (leaderlessness) and an embrace of spontaneity (planlessness). The mass protests of the anti-globalization movement were highly planned and coordinated, involving a systematic development of consensus between affinity groups, spokescouncils, and other formations necessary to field mass protests where so many participants traveled from somewhere else. While things happened that were unplanned, and participants acted autonomously, to call these events "spontaneous" is to miss their essential character. In the countries treated in *If We Burn*, however, participants rarely organize in this highly formal manner, largely because it would have been impossible. Protesters in Tahrir could not make decisions according to consensus, and most had probably never been introduced to such a concept. In any case, such an organizing model is impossible with so many participants not already organized into affinity groups of a few people each with designated delegates (a model of inclusive socialist organizing at least as old as the Paris Commune). Was spontaneity in these cases a choice, an ideology, or simply a structuring condition?

The one exception to this spontaneism can actually be found in Brazil, among the Free Fare Movement activists in São Paulo whom Bevins places at the center of his narrative. These activists were avowed horizontalists and believed that theirs was "a movement in which everyone is a leader, or where leaders do not exist"—an idea, it must be said, with its origins in nineteenth-century anarchism and not 1968—but this did not mean an embrace of the informal or spontaneous. On the contrary, their consensus-based model of organizing was highly formal. As Bevins says, in response to a proposed increase in the price of transit in São Paulo, "they planned the exact number of demonstrations that they thought would be necessary for [Mayor Fernando Haddad] to give in." Though Bevins faults them for not designating a single person as spokesperson, they do make unified decisions about how and with whom to communicate—quite different from the media free-for-all in other movements. Haddad's Workers' Party had a complex relationship with activist groups and NGOs, whom it tried to transform into clients, a fate the MPL wanted to avoid by maintaining autonomy. A single spokesperson would be a point of weakness, given the social entanglement of the Workers' Party with the far-left. At first when Haddad's office reaches out through a mutual friend for "dialogue," they refuse, but they do speak to the press and go on TV. Their strategy involves calling a series of explosive demos that blockade the streets, or engage in mass turnstile-jumping, fighting the police who try to stop them. This is Exhibit A for Bevins, who thinks this is an example of the "break things and see what happens" protest philosophy of the decade, but it is a poorly chosen example, since the group was extremely meticulous in its planning and had definite ideas about how to win. They also did win, surprisingly, getting Haddad to back down after repeated intransigence, even as mayors in other

cities canceled plans for fare increases. That they won is hardly remarked on by Bevins, even though it marks a signal difference from the other cases, all of which feature objectives which are either revolutionary or near-revolutionary and not winnable like the fight against the fare increase. This is because Bevins is concerned with what unfolds after and as they win. The MPL staged a series of increasingly bold protests that managed to keep thousands in the streets and outwit the police. But it appears as if, despite their well-laid plans, they were about to lose in the face of Haddad's intransigence until the São Paulo police made a misstep, attempting to clear the protesters at all costs, and shooting many people, including journalists, in the face with rubber bullets. This induced a shift in the movement, causing it to grow from thousands to hundreds of thousands. With admirable foresight, the MPL activists immediately recognized the danger and the opportunity of this moment—their force had been multiplied immensely, but their message risked being diluted if the protests became about police brutality in general. They held a press conference and also indicated their willingness to negotiate with the Mayor. And though they were at first rebuffed they held on—as the protests became more violent but also more intractable, swelling with a welter of incoherent demands. They managed to cash out and get the fare increase canceled. On balance, they did pretty well by their own standards. They even won on the day they had predicted, something that, as far as activist campaigns go, is pretty much a hole-in-one.

Lucas Monteiro, one of the MPL activists whose course through the movement Bevins traces, says that he wishes they'd had a plan for what to do after they'd won repeal of the fare increase. Though they hoped their victory would inspire others to direct action in general, they didn't plan to lead those actions, except perhaps inasmuch as they pertained to their ultimate goal, free transit. What is remarkable about the situation, for Bevins, is that they only achieved specific victory by inspiring a popular uprising they could not control because it had become about more than transit—about austerity and social welfare, but also about corruption and police violence. Groups critical of President Dilma Rousseff and the Workers' Party from the left—accusing it of abandoning its social policies—met uneasily with criticism from the right, who accused the Workers' Party, correctly, of corruption and cronyism. Increasingly the protests took on a patriotic character that cloaked itself in antipolitics. Wrapped in Brazilian flags, some attendees would beat up anyone identified with a political party. Needless to say, in order to intervene in such a chaos, the MPL would have needed to be an entirely different kind of group with more general aims, and with a much more general political program. And yet, it's not clear that they could have kicked things off on such terms. In any case, what needs to be pointed out is that their ideology was hardly spontaneist even if it was horizontalist. Their problem was not their disorganization or informality, but their inflexible and highly formal nature. As Bevins points out, their insistence on consensus made it impossible to admit the new members who wanted to join, and who joined the protests in order to help it win its demand. And while a democratic centralist (majority rule) Leninist organization might have fared slightly better, it would still find it impossible to integrate such members within the narrow time frame in which the movement shifted character; and there are plenty of examples of revolutions where formal parties with majority rule principles failed to integrate participants in mass action until long after the fact. This is why Trotsky and Lenin recognized the centrality of extra-party formations such as workers' councils, even if they ultimately aimed to dominate them with their parties. Informal self-organization is multiplicative, two by two, whereas formal organizations are additive, one by one, and therefore

formal organizations *always* tail mass action in revolutionary sequences and succeed only by playing catch up.

What should the MPL have done, if there was anything to be done? As Bevins notes, "someone must represent the group causing problems and negotiate victories" but which victories? The MPL did negotiate their victory but failed to transform into a group that could mediate, lead, or direct the protests after they had become more general in their demands. But what victories could have been negotiated at this later point? Here we see the issue with Bevins's focus on militants who he deems, in every instance, "protesters" in a book defined by a missing revolution. If these are protesters, then who is a revolutionary? And how does one negotiate a revolution? Perhaps the MPL could have constituted themselves as the Free Fare or Right to the City Party, gone to meet with Rousseff and Haddad, demanded free fares and other social welfare programs connected to the right to the city. To do so, however, they would have to be willing and able to negotiate on behalf of the movement. As Bevins notes, "the question is whether the people give such a minority the right to speak for them." As such, the problem doesn't lie within leadership but within the movements themselves. Leading such events is easier said than done and a look at revolutionary history, as well as the examples on hand from the "mass protest decade," indicates that such leadership is often rejected by the revolution itself. Parties lack disciplinary or policing power, and as such cannot force their members to agree with leadership—all they can do is expel or ignore them. Bevins is unaccountably sanguine about such negotiating or mediating parties, ignoring the paltry results of Boric, Podemos, and Syriza. The problem lies in his unwillingness to consider the problem of the state and state power. Imagine that the MPL had prepared itself for this generalization of the struggle and began negotiating with the Workers' Party and the Brazilian state. They would need to demonstrate their capacity to lead by their willingness to call off the protests in exchange for concessions. But what concessions could they win which would lead people to leave the streets? Would they even be able to call off the riots? Any gains they won at such a preliminary point—where the power of the state had not been threatened—would be too meager for those out in the streets, who were calling for a wholesale change in Brazilian society. They would need to clarify and sharpen these revolutionary aspirations in order to gain the trust of the people, but such demands could never be negotiated short of a complete economic and political collapse. In fact, it's not clear that the goal of leadership at such a preliminary moment should be to negotiate when the disruption caused to Brazilian society had been so minimal. What would it take to win free fares, and a free city, not to mention a revolution? Much more force than Brazilians had already bought. As such, any leadership that does not extend, intensify, and spread the disruption is not likely to be able to win anything significant. Bevins laments the issueless destruction of the mass protest decade, which has little to show for itself except burned police stations, barricades, and riots; and yet as far as revolutions go these events were not destructive enough. Only in Egypt was the reproduction of society threatened, and there only threatened, not actualized. Perhaps what these movements needed was less the ability to negotiate with the powers that be than to deepen, extend, and endure. This is also a matter of organization but of organization internal to the movement.

Think about the moment during the Egyptian Revolution discussed above. Street policing had collapsed, but the army had backstopped the state and its media, guarding key sites. What could a negotiating party have achieved at that moment, and would it have satisfied the desires of the participants? What leadership might the movement have followed? The passphrase of the movement was, *The people want the fall of the regime*, but such a thing was not negotiable by the

movement from its position of comparative weakness. The power base within the army and the state was certainly willing to depose Mubarak, but not to depose themselves. The task at that point then was not to mediate the movement but to extend, intensify, and amplify it, weakening the regime's grasp on power. As theorists of revolution since Marx have recognized, the first task of the revolution is the destruction of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people. This is a process that rarely happens all at once, but the depth of a revolution can in part be measured by the degree to which the state's monopoly on violence has been annulled, and its laws are no longer applicable. In Egypt, the street police had collapsed, but not the army. The biggest obstacle to such a development was not the movement's horizontalism or spontaneism but its populism. As they confronted the army guarding the presidential palace, protesters chanted, *The people and the army are one hand*. As noted above, this represented both an inverted wish for the armed people, and an accession to the power of the army to safeguard any transition of power and maintain continuity of regime.

None of this is to say that these movements could have succeeded as they were, nor to deny that movements would have to adopt new forms of organization if they were to succeed in becoming revolutionary. But these organizational tasks were less about representing the movement to power than representing the movement to itself, allowing for coordinated action. As Bevins notes, leadership is meaningless if no one will follow. It is also meaningless if it doesn't deepen and extend the revolution rather than trading for peanuts. These would need to be organizations not just for but of and by the vast majority, committed to the revolutionary transformation of society. Their purpose would be the amplification and coordination of revolutionary action, the expanded reproduction of the revolution through revolutionary measures. These would not be simply deliberating bodies, but working organizations, feeding, housing, and caring for people, and organizing revolutionary defense.

We can see glimpses of such ruptures within the "mass protest decade." A month after the January 28 Day of Rage, protesters (or revolutionaries?) trying to break into the Ministry of Interior building in Cairo were rebuffed by the State Security Investigation Services (SSI) and army; in Alexandria masses of people surrounded the SSI's building there, where it was rumored officers were destroying evidence of their crimes. But SSI officers violently attacked the protesters, instigating a violent three-way battle during which the protesters stormed the building, removing masses of documents from the building. Most of these were handed over to the army, however, rather than shared with the public. Elsewhere, protesters marched on the SSI buildings, but this time the army evacuated them, securing the documents. In these events one can see a partial suspension of state power, but one that reveals the limits that remained. Perhaps a revolutionary organization could have taken over the securing of these documents, and their transmission to the public. This would have, however, made this organization a target for the army, initiating a new and possibly more violent phase of the conflict. It would need to be a very strong organization to survive without negotiating away its power. Perhaps needless to say, whatever preparatory work had been done, such an organization would need to be almost entirely a product of the revolution itself, if it were to include its revolutionaries.

If We Burn wants to attribute the failures of the "mass protest decade" to ideology but it does not investigate the material origins of this ideology. Is it really true that protesters in Turkey and Hong Kong chose to barricade streets and fight the police rather than engage in strikes and boycotts because that is what they saw happen in American mass culture? Bevins views protesters as unreasoning automatons mimicking what they see and hear, but was there no reasoning to these

struggles, no invention, no imagination? Where did the shared tactic of occupying squares come from? Which movie is that? Another line of analysis might attempt to locate these tactics in the underlying material conditions which protesters faced, attributing the lack of strikes to declining membership in unions as well as the domestication of those unions by capital. Was this a choice or rather a matter of protesters availing themselves of the tactics and possibilities at hand, many of them as old as capitalism? Is the comparative absence of working-class parties and unions—of the sort that could be expected to mediate revolutionary conflicts in the twentieth century—really the result of ideology alone or does this ideology itself originate from a change in the character of class struggle in late capitalism, resulting from the ongoing global reorganization of labor?

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