Resistance, Sustainability and Technology: A theoretical framework drawing on Marcuse, Luxemburg and Habermas

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Why are some social change movements sustainable, while others either struggle to survive or fail outright? Since survival has been achieved in a variety of circumstances, we can rule out environmental factors such as repressive governments or violence as a determinate for success or failure. Instead this paper will propose a three part process for identifying potential success. The first step is to identify "one-dimensionality", drawying from the work of Marcuse. When a population realizes that an entire system is inherently desired to direct all human efforts toward a single end, the society has become one dimensional. In this case, we turn to Luxemburg's critique of incrementalism and parliamentary process to demonstrate that the only way to achieve system change is to eliminate the current system and replace it. To make this work in practice, Habermas's theory of Pragmatic Meaning is the process for meaning that we posit is most effective for sustainable change movements. Finally we will examine emerging social media and mobile technology as an exogenous variable that can provide movements with decentralized communication capacity, which adds safety for activists and a counter-narrative against a centrally controlled media. To examine these assumptions we will look at the OWS and January 25 movements in comparison with each other; do they fit the model and what can the model critique in terms of their methods and outcomes? We will also compare these with a historical example, drawing on a brief analysis of the Civil Rights Movement using the same model. Our goal is to better understand the practical implications of critical theory as part of a process for making change movements sustainable and impactful.

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Introduction

The development and sustainability of social movements, such as the Occupy Movement (OWS) and the January 25 Movement (Arab Spring) in Egypt, could broadly be considered an outcome of Marx's notion of coalescing class consciousness. I choose the description "coalescing class consciousness" since Marx described the rise of the workers as a collective realization and action undertaken by the working class of modern industrial societies. Within this framework Marx did not describe a system of leadership, avoiding the "how" question in his theory of system change. Since we are attempting to examine why certain social change movements are successful, this paper will explain the sustainability and success of social movements by developing a system of action drawing from later Marxist and Frankfurt School theory.

Within this are three theoretical variables and one exogenous variable. The first variable is the recognition of existing in a one-dimensional society. Marcuse identifies one-dimensionality as a system where all actions work to support the existing power structure (1964); in Egypt, everything supported the sustainability of the Mubarak regime, while in contemporary America everything crystallizes in the pursuit of profit. Luxemburg would then say that actions beyond the parliamentary or representative democratic mechanisms would be required to enact change (2006); in the case of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) this means occupation of public spaces and actions at strategic or symbolic locations, not writing letters and phoning into a congressional office. This was done in Egypt, much to the risk of protestors who succeeded in pressuring Hosni Mubarak to leave the presidency. Pulling from Habermas, an open system of communication, where dissent is allowed and there is trust that the speakers mean what they say,

is key to defining the normative aims of the movement and creating a space for new participants to understand the movement's aims and become participants (Finlayson 2005).

There is also an exogenous variable, which I define as a contemporary communication platform that does not rely on the central state or power structure for approval or broadcast. In fact, it is even more effective if the communication platform is new and is not well understood by the leaders within the power structure. The power center may be aware of the technology, but the impacts and reach of the technology may not be apparent, or may only be in the early stages of being developed. Recently, we saw in the Middle East the impact on social movements of internet-enabled mobile devices that can broadcast Twitter, SMS text messages, video and audio, and Facebook messages in real time. This technology does not rely on a central broadcasting source, and can produce extraordinary organizational impacts in very short broadcast periods[1].

The analytic approach will draw on the experience of OWS and the 25 January movement, providing tangible examples for each theoretical stage in this analysis. To close the analysis, I will explore how emerging communication technology can act as a catalyst for messaging and information sharing, which can reinforce sustainability and provide a counter-narrative to mainstream media outlets, lengthening the horizon of the future for a movement and increasing the likelihood that it will develop the momentum to grow and create change.

To frame this within a historical narrative, we will also compare our two modern examples with the arc of the Civil Rights Movement. What we expect to see is a systematic similarity

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[1] The government of Egypt literally turned off the internet during the build up to the Tahrir Square occupation, but the message was already out to hundreds of thousands of users; once the "send" button is hit, turning off the internet does not eliminate the message. See the Gizmodo article here (http://gizmodo.com/5746121/how-egypt-turned-off-the-internet) for a more detailed description of this event.

between the Civil Rights Movement and our modern cases in terms of how they fit into the theoretical framework we will develop around the OWS and 25 January movement.

Stage 1. Identifying one-dimensionality

As outlined above, we posit that the first stage in a successful social movement like OWS is the realization that we live in a one-dimensional society. We should be aware that identifying one-dimensionality is difficult because the one dimensional man exists in a society or a system that actively shapes his "…hope, fears, and values, and even manipulates vital needs. (Marcuse, 1964: xxvii)" The control of vital needs should be of particular interest to OWS leaders, because breaking away from this society could mean risking one's health and safety, which could be viewed as a high cost in exchange for existential freedom or individuality.

In modern American society, we could argue that the one dimensionality is defined as the increasingly ubiquitous profit motive. We have reached a stage where the driving political and social narrative is that all tasks can be done best by entities motivated by profit. This narrative is reinforced by a sub-narrative that all government programs are inherently wasteful, bad, and "socialist". Thus we end up with a society where all tasks, including health and education which do not respond to the profit motive except in perverse ways, are forced into a for-profit model. The sub-narrative of "socialist" government programs creates a dynamic where an individual who challenges the primacy of the profit narrative becomes an outsider, perhaps lacking patriotism[2]. The man (or woman) in this society loses their individuality in support of the rational, profit driven narrative; their vital needs are controlled in this system because critical

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[2] As a timely example of this kind of thinking see Newt Gringrich's *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine* (2010) Washington, D.C: Regnary

thought could lead to being branded unpatriotic or "socialist" and could impact their ability to find work, earn an income and meet their basic needs (for more see: Schrecker 1994).

Into this space stepped OWS. The initial leaders faced police brutality, joblessness and a complete lack of media coverage. What coverage there was carried with it assumptions about OWS being spoiled rich kids, rabble-rousers, or anarchists[3]. Were there not a strong current of general dissatisfaction with the government and the financial system, OWS may have failed. Instead, at significant risk and discomfort, they grew, and the dynamic of their growth can be addressed with Luxemburg's critique of incremental change.

Like OWS, the events of the January 25th movement centered on a recognition that after decades of "elections" and the almost continuous application of emergency laws, incrementalism at the voting booths were not going to bring about liberal changes in Egypt's political structure. It would take an act of defiance and occupation to force change, as well as the valuable decision by the military not to fire on protestors (and in fact support them at times). In the case of Egypt, the one-dimensionality centered on the continued maintenance of the Mubarak regime; the political system was rigged to keep Mubarak in office, the economy was rigged to keep his family and their supporters wealthy, and Egypt's foreign policy was designed to keep the regime armed.

While the January 25 movement faced serious threats to safety, which resulted in a large number of deaths and injuries, compared to OWS it had a far longer narrative arc supporting it. Prior to the movement, planning among unions, religious groups and youth leaders had been

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[3] See Ed Roger's commentary in the Washington Post from 11/16/2011 "OWS is Over" available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-insiders/post/ows-is-over/2011/11/16/gIQAk5okRN_blog.html
This is one of many examples from the mainstream news media that paints the OWS movement in a negative light, if they comment on them at all.

taking place for years (movements.org 2011). This meant that there was a strong narrative, and a recognized leadership that could be modeled on Habermas's Theory of Pragmatic meaning. We will address this later in paper.

What is critical at this stage though is the recognition that Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality can be so pervasive that a party might think they are creating change when in fact they are just existing in an adapting phase of the one-dimensional system. This lesson is powerfully illustrated in the recent events in Egypt, where the military had refused to give up power (Huffington Post 2011). The military, which had been a critical part of the Mubarak regime's capacity to maintain security and economic ties with the West, had taken control after Mubarak fell, but there was a reasonable concern that they would not give up power when it came time for elections. At this stage, with a recent election that saw high turnout, we will have to continue to observe whether or not Egypt's governing apparatus and the vestiges that remained from the Mubarak regime will merely adapt to the evolving environment, or if the people of Egypt will have broken out of the one-dimensional governing system that pervaded Egypt for 30 years.

Stage 2. The Parliamentary system cannot or will not adapt change fast enough

Luxemburg's powerful response to Bernstein's incrementalism (2006) provides a theoretical foundation for why OWS can grow and create change. Luxemburg posits that the bourgeois democratic system actually supports the capitalist system, the dehumanizing aspects of the rational technological economy, and the system's propensity toward crisis and shocks. In this situation, incrementalism merely provides a slow shift that the power structure adapts to and neutralizes. The only way to create true social change in this case is to produce the change

outside of the system, and at the maximal end replace the system with something new. Having identified the one dimensionality of the system and started a movement, OWS can tap into the increasing realization that the current U.S. politico-economic structure cannot or will not create change, bar a significant movement outside the parliamentary process of policy making.

OWS is gaining momentum at a moment when general public opinion of Congress is at record lows and opinions of the financial industry are equally unflattering. There is a large portion of the population that recognizes the one-dimensionality of society, and recognizes that the government cannot change the system through policy while the financial industry has no incentive to change or "police itself", which is a laughable notion. At the same time, major revolutions have shaken other parts of the world, providing a replicable model for OWS[4].

The January 25 movement provides a fantastic corollary to how the OWS movement can actually succeed in a potentially hostile environment. Part of what makes this such a strong example for predicting the sustainability of OWS is that the protestors in Egypt faced far more danger, and a more aggressive security state. In spite of this, through organization and communicating the pervasive message of revolutionary change (as opposed to incremental reform) the January 25 movement was able to force the government of Hosni Mubarak to step down.

But the lesson that Luxemburg would try to impart on the January 25 movement is that you cannot create serious social change without eliminating all the apparatus of the old regime. The military was part of that regime, as discussed in the previous section, and with it came embedded norms and values instilled during Mubarak's reign. Luxemburg would find it dubious that true change could be achieved when the organ that provided transitional governance after

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[4] In an interesting show of solidarity, Egyptian and Tunisian protestors have stood in solidarity and provided support for OWS and the greater Occupy movement.

Mubarak left was one of the most powerful entities during his reign. This doubt would be supported by the recent violence and intransigence shown by the military to step down leading up to recent elections (BBC 2011).

Stage 3. Making the message stick

As the OWS movement has grown, it has moved past the inherent risks of being a non-entity in the greater information narrative and has grown to encompass movements in cities outside New York. As we have discussed in class though, creating a narrative and goals has been challenging at times as fissures within the movement have developed and been resolved through dialogue and mediation[5]. The generation of narrative, both internally and for public consumption, can draw on Habermas's work on Pragmatic Meaning and Rules of Discourse (Finlayson, 2005: 32-43).

Within the OWS movement, the example of what makes an "occupation" is an interesting example of pragmatic discourse. The disagreement between the New York leadership and the Washington leadership over the meaning of "occupation" drew out a discourse about how Occupy groups would go about interacting with the police and the authorities as they continued their actions. An approach to facilitating a dialogue between these two groups that could turn very contentious is to employ Habermas's Rules of Discourse (ibid, 43). While these rules are based on the notion of participants having the "…competence to speak…"(43), we can assume that in a movement like OWS those who will speak up have some level of competence. By allowing all views to be aired, debated and related to needs and desires, without exclusion by coercion, the process of Pragmatic Discourse will eventually lead to a unified set of norms for

[5] During class Rich provided an example of one of these fissures, when the New York leadership expressed disagreement about whether the D.C. operation was indeed an "occupation" based on their negotiation with the D.C. police for an extended permit to stay in Freedom Plaza.

OWS. This process can also be useful in creating a unified message for public consumption; this is critical, since centralized news and information services will either not hear the message, in which case alternative means of communication must be used, or the message will be distorted.

The January 25 movement provides a superb case study of Pragmatic Meaning at work. While social media and internet were important components of the information sharing regime of the movement, the back story of how a message was shaped and leadership emerged is remarkable. By the time the movement began, there were no apparent fissures within the protest groups. Information flowed effectively, even across changing mediums as the internet and mobile phone services were shut down. Most importantly, protestors across age, gender and class lines all shared a notion of what the protest was about, the aims of the movement, and the methods that would be employed in pursuit of those ends.

At the root of the January 25 uprising was a group of young Egyptians who were computer savvy and could build common cause with laborers who were striking in Mahalla al-Kobra (movements.org 2011). Starting in 2008 the group planned to organize a strike in solidarity with the textile workers, protesting the economic inequality, lack of opportunity and high food prices. As part of their strategy they started an April 6 Youth Movement page on Facebook, which garnered far more attention than they were expecting. The group grew to 70,000 members, but when the strikes were violently put down the April 6 movement split and the group went underground. During this time, members of the group did find ways to attend trainings in strategic non-violence and organizational management and organize further outside of Egypt (Frontline 2011).

When the time came for the January 25 movement, what we witnessed from a Habermassian perspective was the actualization of pragmatic meaning. Multiple groups acted in concert to organize, and there was recognition of methods for protesting that were shared ubiquitously. While Facebook was an organizing tool, and had been a primary conduit for large-scale information sharing, what was really accomplished through it was the development of shared meaning across socio-political and socio-economic groups. Those without Facebook had received word of demonstrations from those with Facebook, and through public discourse over three years the best ideas and methods for demonstrating and organizing had been well established. What made the January 25 movement such a strong example of pragmatic meaning was that even when the internet went down the core message and narrative of the movement could be shared and understood across multiple channels (see Sutter 2011 for an interesting narrative of Facebook and Pragmatic Meaning at work).

This aspect of recognizing shared meaning, and understanding how long it can take for shared meaning to be developed seems to be one of the weaknesses of the Occupy movement. While OWS garnered rapid attention and has grown quickly, it did not have the admittedly odd luxury of having to survive underground for a number of years, during which time identification of leaders and preferred notions and goals was developed and refined.

Exogenous variable: An emerging, de-centralized communication platform as a causal mechanism for revolutionary social change

Major social revolutions and movements have been evolved in ways that the preceding social theories help explain, but from the starting phase through the organization of an internal communications system and an external public message, successful social revolutions have often relied on an advance in communication technology, or a new technology being put to use in a

way that the power structure could not control or foresee. If we look at the example of the Reformation, the printing press allowed for the decentralized production of written text in local languages. The Church, which had controlled the production and distribution of written materials, suddenly faced a competing narrative of Christianity that could reach a large audience without needing a large corporate logistical structure. During the Civil Rights Movement, images in print and on television of peaceful protestors being shot with fire hoses and attacked by dogs helped galvanize the narrative of righteous struggle against a vicious, racist political apparatus. In both cases the messages or images could be broadcast quickly, and helped tell a narrative that countered the one told by the leaders in the power structure.

We are seeing this in OWS. In the early stages, with limited news coverage, the movement took advantage of twitter, mobile audio/visual content, and blogs to build momentum (Preston, 2011). As they grew, the news media began to tell a narrative of the movement that was possible to counter with social media, especially smartphones, that can load information directly onto the web. Similar to what we saw in the Middle East, the OWS movement is able to use tools like Twitter to share information, organize, and project a narrative outside of the bounds of the mainstream media[6]. The technology is highly adaptable, and is not well understood by elites within the power structure; it provides a platform for all competent voices to be heard and responded to, without coercion and without the need to rely on standard channels of communication, such as corporate television or print media.

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[6] For example if one were looking for information on OWS on Twitter, they could search the hastag "#ows" to find related Tweets, many of which have accompanying multimedia. For a striking example of what can be tweeted see Adbuster's page on suppressing non-violent dissent: http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/suppressing-nonviolent-dissent.html

We will look further into detail about the role of social media in the Egypt revolution, and explore a crucial detail about why is played such a powerful role. Contrary to the often exuberant analysis of how social media such as Twitter and Facebook are changing political behavior and voice, the social media platforms are not a causal mechanism in uprisings like the one in Egypt in January 2011. There is a complex set of social factors that are foundational to effective social movements; before social media becomes part of the equation the recognition and understanding one-dimensionality, the failure of the parliamentary system, and the development of a shared meaning and narrative of change must take place. These three things had been taking place in Egypt for years, and when the time was right, Facebook in particular provided a system for amplifying the message.

Much of this amplification though had little to do with message and more to do with community. As with OWS, where social media can act as a counter narrative to the news media, social media in Egypt helped create a sense of community. In this case, if we were to compare the impact of different social media systems, Facebook would have a powerful effect, since protest-related groups were reaching numbers in the hundreds of thousands. The increasing intensity of the protests since 2008 in combination with a system that allowed people to see that their feelings were shared with hundreds of thousands of other Egyptians could be posited as a driving factor in people coming out to the streets when the Mubarak regime turned off the internet[7]. When the net went down, people knew there was a community outside and knew what that community believed in and was working for.

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[7] See note #1

Of course a large caveat must be added to the end of this section. To avoid the trap of making social media sound like a catch-all answer to the problems of organizing for social change, it must be noted that social media can be used for the opposite purpose. Facebook, Twitter and other social networking platforms are merely an amplifier of human intent, like any other mass communication system. Morozov makes a strong case for carefully considering the implications of assuming that the internet is inherently a force for good, and implores us to avoid being "cyber utopians" (2011). Governments can use these tools to control information, spy on dissidents, and track citizens just as easily as citizens can use them to organize.

What perhaps sets them apart from more traditional systems such as radio is that they are decentralized and amplify the intent of thousands of individuals, many of whom a unlikely to want to see violence. The space for non-violent voices could be further analyzed as an explanation of why we seem to be developing an association with social media and social change.

Historical Perspective

To provide some historical perspective to the argument that movement sustainability can be broadly understood as a process of recognizing one-dimensionality, replacing the parliamentary system, forming pragmatic meaning around goals, and amplifying it all with a new, decentralized communication technology, we will briefly look at the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. While not meant to be an exhaustive review of the Civil Rights Movement, the goal is to see if we recognize features of the previous model in them.

The Civil Rights Movement

When we look at the Civil Rights Movement we see a phenomenon that coalesced around a set of principals and grievances, but was not necessarily initially driven by one group. Through a series of actions, leadership emerged and a shared understanding of the movement's goals developed. It formed in response to the one-dimensional society that was based on the military-industrial complex and racism, and protesters found common cause in pushing for civil rights and an end to the war in Vietnam. In this way, unsurprisingly given the time he was writing, we see Marcuse's analysis at work.

Knowing this, the Civil Rights Movement did recognize that incremental change was not going to happen on its own within the parliamentary system, and began a process of social change through large-scale peaceful demonstrations. Leadership had emerged from disparate groups across the South, and there was a shared recognition of method and message. Like we saw in Egypt, strong networks formed over long periods of time, and initial steps to create a movement were small and high risk, which was what set the bonds between the activists to expand their work (see Gladwell 2010).

By time the movement was going in earnest, there was recognition of how the two major grievances fit together in the change narrative (Vietnam and race) and there were trusted leaders who could speak for the movement, led by Martin Luther King. We thus satisfy the question of whether pragmatic meaning was developed within the movement.

This is not to say that there are not problems we could learn from when looking at the movement through the lens of a Marcusean or Luxemburgian analytic. Marcuse might question whether the elimination of segregation and the passage of the Civil Rights Act were real changes,

or just a one-dimensional system adapting to changing social dynamics. Luxemburg would probably agree and would find a compatriot in black feminist Audre Lorde, who said:

> "….the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change…" (1984; 113)

While this was a black feminist critique of mainstream feminism, it might not be so hard to imagine Rosa Luxemburg sharing this sentiment when seeing Martin Luther King in the Oval Office with Lyndon B. Johnson. Perhaps the lesson the leaders from the January 35 movement and OWS is that even the most successful movements must be aware of cooptation and always be pushing for change even in the face of apparent victory.

Conclusion

The sustainability of OWS, the January 25 movement, and social revolutions before it was based on a core group recognizing the need for critical dialogue and change in society, the need to go outside the standard government structures to achieve it, and a strategy and message kept the movement together and appealed to the citizenry enough for the movement to gain popular support. The lessons we see in the work of Marcuse, Luxemburg, and Habermas, as well as the experiences of revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia in particular with social media, demonstrate a model for sustaining critical social dialogue and social change. Applying these lessons in the current context, OWS and January 25 could very well lead to significant change in a country and in a world that is in desperate need of multi-dimensionality and a new connection to the life-world.

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