

Social Revolution Everywhere

A lot of people have been linking to a blog post at the BBC entitled *Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere*. It's an interesting piece leveraging off the current ripple effect of the tumult in Tunisia and Egypt looking further sociologically and historically with a creative blast of big picture generalisation. The author Paul Mason introduces the thought:



We've had revolution in Tunisia, Egypt's Mubarak is teetering; in Yemen, Jordan and Syria suddenly protests have appeared. In Ireland young techno-savvy professionals are agitating for a "Second Republic"; in France the youth from banlieues battled police on the streets to defend the retirement rights of 60-year olds; in Greece striking and rioting have become a national pastime. And in Britain we've had riots and student occupations that changed the political mood.

What's going on? What's the wider social dynamic?

He produces twenty dot-points to answer his question which revolve around the phenomenon of a "new sociological type: the graduate with no fear... with access to social media." I want to make three points of comment.

Firstly: I find much of what Mason says agreeable and fascinating. He doesn't do this explicitly, but you could summarise his observations as the synergism of two sociological forces – the fearless graduate, and social media. In Mason's observations these young graduates are not just fearless, they are diverse (including empowered women), not prone to idealism, educated, connected, knowledgeable, and most importantly, frustrated and *connected*:

*11.To amplify: I can't find the quote but one of the historians of the French Revolution of 1789 wrote that it was **not the product of poor people but of poor lawyers**. You can have political/economic setups that disappoint the poor for generations – but if lawyers, teachers and doctors are sitting in their garrets freezing and starving you get revolution. Now, in their garrets, they have a laptop and broadband connection.*

In Mason's observation when frustration meets connection (via social media) you get an avenue for ideas, thoughts and friendships quickly and powerfully evolve, promulgate and congregate. Memes develop quickly – allowing bad or weak ideas to die away and powerful ideas to flourish. Networks coalesce so easily. "During the early 20th century people would ride hanging on the undersides of train carriages across borders just to make links like these." But now it is "possible to bring down a repressive government without having to spend years in the jungle as a guerilla, or years in the urban underground." Critical masses and populism can form quickly (and with little cost or even inconvenience) such that vertical hierarchies are unable to keep up. In a power-savvy democratised connected generation "horizontalism has become endemic because technology makes it easy."

Secondly: I am still somewhat sceptical. If Mason's phenomenon is, indeed, reality, the weakness lies in the ease of connection. Yes there are underlying frustrations and some deep-seated pain otherwise they'd be no energy in this at all. But, when it comes to the toppling of regimes, will networked individuals that are able to "mix and match" their causes and "take a day off" remain committed when real blood is shed in the real world? The angry young students of the Baby Boomer 60's giving voice in pretentious street demonstrations in the West gave birth to a Generation X riddled with disillusionment and apathy for a reason: the revolution stopped when it got too hard. It was easy to walk the streets then, it is easy to

connect on twitter now. But then, as now, the number of people in the network for whom the cost is real is relatively small.

Two things to watch for:

1) How quickly will the networks dissipate when the going gets tough? When on-the-ground "nodes" in the network are physically taken out and the value of remote involvement is seen for what it is, not much.

2) What will happen to this horizontalism when it walks through the fire? Horizontalism for it's own sake is never stable. Classes emerge. Mason is right in that connectedness accelerates the generation of memes – but this does not mean that the powerful memes, the big ideas that move and shake the hearts and minds of people will return the favour. Memes of emancipation often invariably give way to hierarchy (even tyranny) as those who paid the price to make it happen seek to exact a personal reward or simply attempt to maintain an ideal that slowly grows stale. Utilitarianism is the default human state.

Thirdly: It is not everywhere. I see it in the Middle East. I see it *somewhat* in the UK and Europe. I do not see it in Australia. Perhaps we are fed too well. There is connectedness but little frustration. At the moment we will follow and friend to be part of a curiosity. Beyond that we simply don't care enough. I wonder what we *do* care about? Perhaps the social network will be adept at revealing raw nerves. I haven't seen any that matter in Australia yet.