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*Editorial*

SPRING CONFRONTS WINTER

**I**N GREAT UPHEAVALS, analogies fly like shrapnel. The electrifying protests of 2011—the on-going Arab spring, the ‘hot’ Iberian and Hellenic summers, the ‘occupied’ fall in the United States—inevitably have been compared to the *anni mirabiles* of 1848, 1905, 1968 and 1989. Certainly some fundamental things still apply and classic patterns repeat. Tyrants tremble, chains break and palaces are stormed. Streets become magical laboratories where citizens and comrades are created, and radical ideas acquire sudden telluric power. *Iskra* becomes Facebook. But will this new comet of protest persist in the winter sky or is it just a brief, dazzling meteor shower? As the fates of previous *journées révolutionnaires* warn us, spring is the shortest of seasons, especially when the *communards* fight in the name of a ‘different world’ for which they have no real blueprint or even idealized image.

But perhaps that will come later. For the moment, the survival of the new social movements—the occupiers, the *indignados*, the small European anti-capitalist parties and the Arab new left—demands that they sink deeper roots in mass resistance to the global economic catastrophe, which in turn presupposes—let’s be honest—that the current temper for ‘horizontality’ can eventually accommodate enough disciplined ‘verticality’ to debate and enact organizing strategies. It’s a frighteningly long road just to reach the starting points of earlier attempts to build a new world. But a new generation has at least bravely initiated the journey.

Will a deepening economic crisis, now engulfing much of the world, necessarily speed a global renewal of the Left? The ‘bullet points’ that follow are my speculations. Designed to instigate debate, they’re

simply a thinking-out-loud about some of the historical specificities of the 2011 events and the outcomes they could shape in the next few years. The underlying premise is that Act Two of the drama will entail mostly winter scenes, played out against the backdrop of the collapse of export-led economic growth in the BRIC countries as well as continuing stagnation in Europe and the United States.

## I. CAPITALIST NIGHTMARES

First, we must pay homage to fear and panic at the high tables of capitalism. What was inconceivable just a year ago, even to most Marxists, is now a spectre haunting the opinion pages of the business press: the imminent destruction of much of the institutional framework of globalization and undermining of the post-1989 international order. There is growing apprehension that the crisis of the Eurozone, followed by a synchronized world recession, might return us to a 1930ish world of semi-autarchic monetary and trade blocs, crazed by nationalist *ressentiments*. Hegemonic regulation of money and demand, in this scenario, would no longer exist: the US, too weak; Europe, too disorganized; and China, with feet of clay, too dependent upon exports. Every second-rank power would want its own enriched-uranium insurance policy; regional nuclear wars would become a possibility. Far-fetched? Perhaps, but so is the belief in time travel back to the roaring days of the 1990s. Our analogue minds simply cannot solve all the differential equations generated by the incipient fragmentation of the Eurozone or a blown gasket in the Chinese growth engine. While the explosion on Wall Street in 2008 was more or less accurately foreseen by various experts, what is now rushing toward us is well beyond the prediction of any Cassandra or, for that matter, three Karl Marxes.

## 2. SAIGON TO KABUL

If the neo-liberal apocalypse is actually nigh, Washington and Wall Street will be seen as the chief exterminating angels, having simultaneously blown up the North Atlantic financial system and the Middle East (as well as scuppering any chance of mitigating climate disaster). Bush's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan may be seen in historical retrospect as acts of classic hubristic over-reach: quick Panzer victories and illusions

of omnipotence, followed by long wars of attrition and atrocity that risk ending almost as badly for Washington as did Moscow's venture across the Oxus a quarter-century before. The United States has been stymied on one front by the Taliban, supported by Pakistan, and on the other by Shiites, supported by Iran. Although still joined at the hip with Israel, able to fill the skies with assassin drones or coordinate a lethal NATO assault, Washington has been unable to extract a guarantee of immunity for American forces in Iraq, limiting the number of boots on the ground in a fulcrum Middle East state. The democratic uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt saw Obama and Clinton obliged to politely applaud the beheading of two of their favoured regimes.

The obvious dividend of the pull-back—a more rational equilibration of US military might and objectives to shrinking fiscal resources and global economic economic clout—is still hostage to mad plans hatched in Tel Aviv or a mortal threat to Saudi absolutism. Although Canada's vast heavy-oil reserves and Allegheny gas shales reduce direct US dependence on Middle East fields, they don't unshackle the American economy, as some claim, from world-market energy prices determined by politics in the Gulf.

### 3. AN ARAB 1848

The unfinished Arab political revolution is epic in scope and social energy, a historical surprise comparable to 1848 or 1989. It is reshaping the geopolitics of North Africa and the Middle East, leaving Israel as an obsolete outpost of the Cold War (and therefore more dangerous and unpredictable than ever), while enabling Turkey, jilted by the EU (not a bad thing, it turns out), to reclaim a central influence in lands once Ottoman. In Egypt and Tunisia, the uprisings also helped to redeem the authentic meaning of democracy from the bowdlerized versions peddled by NATO. Provocative parallels can be drawn with 'floral revolutions', past and present. As with 1848 and 1989, the Arab mega-intifada is a chain-reaction uprising against a regional autocratic system, with Egypt analogous to France in the first instance, perhaps East Germany in the second. The role of counter-revolutionary Russia is today played by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms. Turkey impersonates liberal England as a regional model of moderate parliamentarianism and economic success, while the Palestinians (stretching analogy to the breaking point)

are a romantic lost cause like the Poles; the Shias, angry outsiders like the Slovaks and Serbs. (The *Financial Times*, for its part, recently encouraged Obama to think like the 'new Metternich'.)

It is well worth thumbing through Marx and Engels' voluminous writings on 1848 (as well as Trotsky's later glosses) in search of insights into the fundamental mechanics of such revolutions. One example is Marx's conviction, hardened over time into dogma, that no revolution in Europe—democratic or socialist—could be successful until Russia was either defeated in a major war or revolutionized from within. Substitute Saudi Arabia and the thesis still makes sense.

#### 4. PARTY OF THE PEOPLE

Political Islam is winning a popular mandate as sweeping (although perhaps no more long-lasting) as that given by the events of 1989 to Eastern European liberals. It could not have been otherwise. Over the last half-century Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia—the first two invading, the third proselytizing—have virtually destroyed secular politics in the Arab world. Indeed, with the inevitable demise of the last Baathist in his Damascus bunker, the great pan-Arab political movements of the 1950s (Nasserism, Communism, Baathism, Muslim Brotherhood) will have been whittled down to the Brotherhood and its Wahhabi rivals.

The Brotherhood, especially in its Egyptian birthplace, is the ultimate spinster of political movements, having waited more than 75 years to take power despite a mass support along the Nile that was already estimated in the several millions during the late 1940s. The perdurance of this veteran, multinational political movement in at least five Arab countries is also one of the key differences between the 2011 uprising and European precedents. In both 1848 and 1989, popular democratic movements possessed only embryonic political organization. In 1848, in fact, there were virtually no mass political parties in the modern sense outside the United States. In 1989–91, on the other hand, the vacuum of political organization and PR savvy was quickly filled by a bullying mob of German conservatives and Wall Street commissars, who pushed aside most of the actual grassroots leadership.

The Brotherhood, by contrast, has silently loomed over the Egyptian scene like the Sphinx. Its mass front organizations, operating in semi-legality, have built impressive elements of an alternative state including crucial welfare networks for the poor. Its martyr rolls (including the ‘Islamist Lenin’, Sayyid Qutb, murdered by Nasser in 1966) are as familiar to most pious Egyptians as lists of kings to the English or presidents to Americans. Despite its fearsome image in the West, it has evolved to embrace aspects of the free-market Islamism represented by the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

### 5. EGYPT’S EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE?

Yet as the first stage of Egypt’s parliamentary elections vividly demonstrated, the Brotherhood can no longer claim to be the exclusive representative of popular piety. That the makeshift Salafi party Al-Nour could win an estimated 24 per cent of the vote (compared to the Brotherhood’s 38 per cent) underscores the turbulence in the grassroots of Egyptian society. Indeed the Salafists, despite their initial abstention from the 25 January revolution, may now constitute the largest cadre organization in the Sunni world. Walking in the Brotherhood’s old shoes and handsomely subsidized by Riyadh, they cultivate an ominous vigilante conflict with the Copts and Sufis. The balance of power between the two Islamist camps will likely be decided over the next year by the price of bread and the politics of the army. If the Brotherhood had come to power earlier in the last decade, global growth would have reinforced both the attractiveness and possibility of the Turkish path. But since all weather vanes now point to bust, Ankara’s paradigm (like the Brazilian model in South America) may be stripped of economic success and lose considerable regional appeal.

On the other hand, the Salafi public image—incorruptible, anti-political and sectarian—will be automatically magnetized by further misery and perceived threats to Islam. Some element of the Egyptian military has undoubtedly already parsed the ‘Pakistani option’ of a tacit or formal alliance with the Salafists. Various circumstances might advance this scenario: the continuing resistance of the generals to a substantive handover of power; the Brotherhood’s inability to meet the minimum popular expectations of economic welfare; or the liberal-left coalition becoming the arbiter of parliamentary majorities. (Israel, on its side,

could destabilize Egyptian democracy with a single airstrike. How would Sunni parties respond to an attack on Iran?)

In the event, the Egyptian left has been studying the *Eighteenth Brumaire* since Nasser. It knows all about plebiscites, lumpenproletarians, Napoleonic rulers and sacks of potatoes. Its groupuscules and networks, in alliance with workers and youth of all denominations, were sinew to the revolution of 25 January as well as the reoccupation of Tahrir Square in November. Will an Islamic-majority government ensure the right of the new left and independent unions to organize and campaign openly? This will be the litmus test of Egyptian democracy.

## 6. MEDITERRANEAN BREAKDOWN

Southern Europe, meanwhile, faces the same devastation by structural adjustment and forced austerity that Latin America experienced in the 1980s. The ironies are murderous. Although north-central Europe has suddenly developed an acute case of amnesia, a few years ago the financial press was praising Spain, Portugal and even Greece (plus non-EU Turkey) for their competence in trimming public spending and boosting growth rates. In the immediate aftermath of the Wall Street debacle, the fears of the EU had been principally focused on Ireland, the Baltic and Eastern Europe. The Mediterranean as a whole was perceived as relatively well protected from the financial tsunami crossing the Atlantic at supersonic speed.

On its side, the Arab Mediterranean had little stake in the thrombotic circuits of investment capital and derivative trading, and thus had minimal direct exposure to the financial crisis. Southern Europe, for its part, had generally obedient governments and, in the case of Spain, strong banks. Italy was simply too big and rich to fail, while Greece, if an annoyance, was a Lilliputian economy (barely 2 per cent of the EU GDP) whose misdemeanours scarcely threaten the Brobdingnagians. Eighteen months later, German and Austrian Rush Limbaughs were screaming about the Mediterranean welfare queens blackmailing prudent burghers to surrender their savings and sell their children so that the Greeks can riot all day long and the Spanish can take longer siestas. Yet a more plausible case could be made that German success is in fact wrecking the Eurozone. With its low-cost Mexicos in the East, its incomparable productivity

advantages and its China-like fanaticism about huge export surpluses, Germany over-competes with its euro-kin in southern Europe. The EU as a whole, meanwhile, runs its largest relative export surplus with Turkey and the non-oil North African states (\$34 billion in 2010), ensuring their dependence upon remittances, tourism and foreign investment to balance accounts. The entire Mediterranean, as a result, is acutely sensitive to cyclical movements of demand and interest rates in the EU; whereas Germany, France, the UK and the other rich northern countries have major secondary markets to act as shock absorbers.

The euro is the fly-wheel of this multiple-speed *Grosseuropäische* economy. For Germany, the euro functions as a streamlined Deutschmark which, because it is less vulnerable to sudden appreciation, ensures the competitive pricing of German exports while subtracting little from Berlin's de facto veto power inside the EU economy. For southern Europeans, on the other hand, it is a Faustian bargain that attracts capital in good times but abdicates the use of monetary tools to combat trade deficits and unemployment in bad. Now that the Iberian and Hellenic pox has infected Italy and threatens France, a hard-love vision of euro-Europe is emerging from Berlin and Paris: fiscal integration via treaty revision. Having already lost control over monetary policy and been forced to defoliate their public sectors under supervision of EU and IMF technicians, the debtor countries are now being asked to accept a permanent Franco-German veto over their budgets and public spending. In the nineteenth century, Britain frequently sent its gunboats to impose such receiverships on defaulting countries in Latin America or Asia. The Allies yoked Germany in a similar fashion at Versailles and thus sowed the Third Reich.

Whether by submission to Sarkozy–Merkel or default and exit from the Eurozone (and perhaps the EU), the Mediterranean economies are being sentenced to years of rot and hyper-unemployment. But their populations will not go gentle into that good night. Portugal and Greece, having come closest to actual social revolutions in the 1970s, preserve the most hardcore left-wing cultures in Europe. In Spain the new conservative government presents a broad and inviting target to a revived United Left and the much larger, but still amorphous, youth protest movement. Indeed, embers of anti-capitalism are likely to be fanned back to flame everywhere in Europe. But the anti-immigrant, anti-Brussels right may gain far more than the left from the break-up of the Eurozone, and the

circling of the EU's wagons around the core. As with the Salafists in Egypt or the Tea Party in the United States, the European new-right parties have identity politics and scapegoating rage already packaged for immediate home delivery. An extraordinary ambition for the anti-capitalist left in Western Europe would be the reoccupation of the political space held by the Communists for thirty years after 1945. The movements led by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, on the other hand, have reasonable hopes of mounting a serious challenge for the much larger and well-endowed conservative franchise in their national politics. The far right take-over of the Republican Party in the United States provides them with an inspiring template.

## 7. ENGINE OF REVOLT

The campus rebellions of 1968 in Europe and the US were spiritually and politically fuelled by the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, guerrilla insurgencies in Latin America, the Cultural Revolution in China and the ghetto uprisings in the United States. Similarly the *indignados* of the last year have drawn primordial strength from the examples of Tunis and Cairo. (The several million children and grandchildren of Arab immigrants to southern Europe make this connection intimately vivid and militant.) As a result, passionate 20-year-olds now occupy squares on both shores of Braudel's fundamental Mediterranean. In 1968, however, few of the white youth protesting in Europe (with the important exception of Northern Ireland) and the United States shared the existential realities of their counterparts in countries of the South. Even if deeply alienated, most could look forward to turning college degrees into affluent middle-class careers. Today, in contrast, many of the protesters in New York, Barcelona and Athens face prospects dramatically worse than those of their parents and closer to those of their counterparts in Casablanca and Alexandria. (Some of the occupiers of Zuccotti Park, if they had graduated ten years earlier, might have walked straight into \$100,000 salaries at a hedge fund or investment bank. Today they work at Starbucks.)

Globally, young adult unemployment is at record levels, according to the ILO—between 25 and 50 per cent in most of the countries with youth-led protests. Moreover, in the North African crucible of the Arab revolution, a college degree is inversely related to likelihood of employment. In other countries as well, family investment in education, when incurred debt



is considered, is paying negative dividends. At the same time, access to higher education has become more restricted, most dramatically in the US, UK and Chile.

## 8. BREADLINES

The economic crisis combines the deflation of popular assets (home values and thus family equity in the US, Ireland, Spain) with steep inflation in essential cost-of-living items, especially fuel and food. In classical theory, where broad price trends are expected to move in unison with the business cycle, this is an unusual bifurcation; in reality, it may be more ominous. The mortgage crisis in the United States and elsewhere is internal to the larger financial crisis, and will either be solved by government intervention or simple destruction of claims to value. The base price of crude oil, in turn, may fall as industrial Asia slows down and production levels rise in Iraq. (The peak oil debate seems to me both indeterminable and interminable.) But food prices appear to be rising as a secular trend, determined by forces largely external to the financial crisis and industrial slowdown. Indeed, a growing chorus of expert voices has been warning since the early 2000s that the global food-security system is collapsing. Multiple causes feed back and amplify each other: diversion of grains to meat and biofuel production; neo-liberal slashing of food subsidies and price supports; rampant speculation in crop futures and prime agricultural land; underinvestment in agricultural research; volatile energy prices; exhaustion of soils and depletion of aquifers; drought and climate change, and so on. To the extent that slower growth will reduce some of these pressures (Chinese eating less meat, for example), the sheer momentum of population increase—another three billion people in the lifetime of today's protestors—will maintain the demand-side pressures. (GMCS, of course, have been promoted as a miracle solution, but more likely for agro-corporate profits than net harvests.)

'Bread' was the first demand of the protest at Tahrir Square, and the word echoes almost as loud in the Arab Spring as it did in the Russian October. The reasons are simple: ordinary Egyptians, for example, spend about 60 per cent of their family budget on crude oil (heating, cooking, transportation), flour, vegetable oils and sugar. In 2008 these staple prices suddenly shot up by 25 per cent. The official poverty rate in Egypt abruptly increased by 12 per cent. Apply the same ratio in other 'medium

income' countries and staple inflation erases a substantial fraction of the World Bank's 'emergent middle class'.

## 9. WAITING FOR CHINA TO LAND

Marx blamed California—the Gold Rush and its resultant monetary stimulus to world trade—for prematurely ending the revolutionary cycle of the 1840s. In the immediate aftermath of 2008, so-called BRICs became the new California. Airship Wall Street fell from the sky and crashed to earth, but China kept flying, with Brazil and Southeast Asia in tight formation. India and Russia also managed to keep their planes in the air. The resilient levitation of the BRICs astounded investment advisors, economic columnists and professional astrologers—all of them proclaiming that China, or India, could now hold up the world with one hand, or that Brazil would soon be richer than Spain. Their euphoric credulity, of course, arose from an ignorance of the superb sleight-of-hand techniques used by the Houdinis in the People's Bank of China. Beijing itself, in sharp contrast, has long expressed significant fears about the country's over-dependence upon exports, the insufficiency of household purchasing power, and the existence of an affordable-housing shortage side-by-side with an immense real-estate bubble.

Late last fall, articles of faith from the China optimists suddenly dwindled in editorial pages and the 'hard landing' scenario became the bookmakers' favourite. No one, including the Chinese leadership, knows for how much longer the economy can keep flying in the face of global headwinds. But the unavoidable casualty list of foreign passengers is already compiled: South America, Australia, much of Africa and most of Southeast Asia. And—of particular interest—Germany, which now trades more with China than with the United States. A thoroughly triangulated global recession, of course, is precisely that non-linear nightmare that I alluded to at the beginning. It is almost a tautology to observe that in BRIC-bloc countries, where popular expectations of economic progress have recently been raised so high, the pain of reimmiseration may be most intolerable. Thousands of public squares may beg to be occupied. Including one called Tiananmen.

Western post-Marxists—living in countries where the absolute or relative size of the manufacturing workforce has shrunk dramatically in the

last generation—lazily ruminates on whether or not ‘proletarian agency’ is now obsolete, obliging us to think in terms of ‘multitudes’, horizontal spontaneities, whatever. But this is not a debate in the great industrializing society that *Das Kapital* describes even more accurately than Victorian Britain or New Deal America. Two hundred million Chinese factory workers, miners and construction labourers are the most dangerous class on the planet. (Just ask the State Council in Beijing.) Their full awakening from the bubble may yet determine whether or not a socialist Earth is still possible.