

## WHY IT'S STILL KICKING OFF EVERYWHERE

Amiel and Melburn Trust Lecture 10 January 2013

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Good evening. We are two years on from the Arab Spring and in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood is in power; the Occupy protests exist more as a hashtag than a physical occupation of space; Pussy Riot are in jail. In Syria 200 people a day are being killed by Assad's armed forces.

It would be easy to say: the thing that started two years ago is over. But it's not.

I'm clearer now about what to call that thing: it's a revolution.

In some ways it parallels the revolutions of before: 1848, 1830, 1789; there are echoes of the Prague Spring, the US Civil Rights movement, the Russian "mad summer of 1874".

In other ways it is unique.

Above all: the relationship between the physical and the mental, the political and the cultural, seem inverted.

There is a change in consciousness, the intuition that something big is possible; that a great change in the world's priorities is within people's grasp.

But the physical, political reality is full of disappointment: the Egyptian economy is being privatized in the direction of a new elite; Salafism is rife in Tunisia and Libya; not a single one of the anti-austerity movements in Europe has so far stopped austerity. And Golden Dawn, an outright fascist party, has achieved 14%

in the polls. And 14% with knuckledusters and pogroms is a much more serious proposition than the 18% achieved by Marine Le Pen wearing a Chanel suit.

The essence of the situation is the collapse of trust in the old regime, combined with the inability to go on living the pre-crisis lifestyle, combined with the sudden awakening of new priorities within individual human beings.

I'll be talking tonight mainly about this: where the new zeitgeist comes from and the problem it's facing as it tries to achieve things concretely. But before that let's revisit the world of action. Indeed euphoria, to remember what we are talking about.

[PLAY VIDEO]

This is Qasr El Nil bridge on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2011: the so called day of rage.

The police drive back the protesters. They unleash water cannon and tear gas.

In response – they pray.

They display a kind of forbearance that has become common in the past two years: a determination to battle for moral superiority. And these are ordinary people: they're not Islamist radicals, they're doctors, civil servants, taxi drivers.

Nevertheless.

The police advance, and a battle takes place beyond visual range. Game over, in normal circumstances.

But these are not normal circumstances. The crowd fights back – and the veteran rioters among you will recognize

it's a different crowd. These are the football supporters who'd been told to get down to Tahrir to beat up the foreign agents and gays the government said were down there.

And now it's game over in a different way. The police are routed.

These images sent a message across the Middle East and, two years on, they still send a message across the globe. The message is if you:

- Systematically loot your own people
- Repress their aspirations
- Allow the creation of a rich elite totally divorced from the lives of ordinary people
- If you cannot offer young people any hope through the economic system
- And if you're not prepared to shoot them..

This will happen to you.

And this can happen to you in Beijing, Moscow, Washington, Johannesburg, London.

But what is "this"?

What is the nature of the unrest that has swept the globe and where does it lead?

In February 2011 I came up with Twenty Reasons Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere. In reality it's reducible to three reasons:

ONE: The collapse of the neo-liberal economic model compounded then by persistent attempts to go on making

neo-liberalism work: to ram the square peg into the round hole, turning a slump into what looks like a ten year global depression.

TWO: A revolution in technology that has made horizontal networks the default mode of activism and protest; which has destroyed the traditional means of disseminating ideology that persisted through 200 years of industrial capitalism; has made social media, and its essentially memetic form of communication, the irreversible norm.

THREE: A change in human consciousness. The emergence of what Manuel Castells calls "the networked individual"; the expansion of the space and power of individual human beings and a change in the way they think; a change in the rate of change of ideas; an expansion of available knowledge; a massive, almost unrecordable revolution in culture.

If I am right what we are seeing is not the Arab Spring, the Russian Spring, the Maple Spring, Occupy, the *indignados*.

We're seeing the Human Spring.

We are seeing something that reminds, long after the historians reduced it to battles and constitutions why they called 1848 the Springtime of the Nations; and why Hegel, writing in the aftermath of the first French revolution wrote:

"Our epoch is a birth-time. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation." (Phenomenology of Mind, 1807)

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Let's start with the economics: neoliberalism is finished.

As an economic model it died on 15 September 2008. Alan Greenspan's words in the subsequent House Committee hearing were prophetic: "I found a flaw", he said:

"A flaw in the model that I perceived is a critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak...That's precisely the reason I was shocked, because I've been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well." (October 2008)

Neoliberalism told them the market was self-regulating; that the self-interest of the deal participant was a better policeman than the regulator. It didn't work.

Neoliberalism created a dominant finance sector, told that sector to enrich itself and that sector has crashed the world economy.

We are left with what Nomura economist Richard Koo calls a "balance sheet recession" – in which fiscal stimulus, zero interest rates and the \$6 trillion global money printing operation can only keep the patient alive.

The Western elite can't address this prolonged stagnation because it can't bear to do any of the things that would end the depression: write off the debts, inflate them away, or step back from globalization to protect their own populations from its depressive effect on living standards.

So they're left staring at the old model: and not only is the dynamo of it knackered; it is rapidly losing social legitimacy.

All attempts to make the old model work without solving the global imbalances it rests on lead to the policy of austerity: not just fiscal austerity, as in Britain and southern Europe, but a longterm strategy of reducing the wages, welfare benefits and labour rights of the workforce in the West.

The austerity measures hit public sector workers, users of public services, then the welfare dependent and finally – with Quantitative Easing – those reliant on savings.

But one massively important group has been dealt not just a tactical setback but a strategic one.

In the book I called these “graduates without a future”. The first generation in the West since the 1930s who will be poorer than their parents.

They will leave college with 30, 40, 50k debts. The jobs on offer are – as the famous Santa Cruz “Communique from an Absent Future” told us in 2009 – the same jobs you do while on campus: interning, barista, waiting table, sex work. Their first job is often working for free or for the minimum wage. There is no way onto the housing ladder, and the ladder is now horizontal; and in retirement, the pension schemes are gone – for many workers in the USA the healthcare schemes are diminished too. And now, inevitably, not only universal benefits are called into question but universal pensions.

You can add in the specific grievances, country by country: medieval attempts to roll back reproductive rights; endless small wars conducted against civilians; racism everywhere; torture as the default option not just in anti-terrorism but in the policing of minorities.

In Europe relentless austerity – of the kind that forces you to eat or pay the rent; to forget cars, to forget as my team found in the Spanish village of San Miguel, a driver's licence.

As I've travelled around the USA and Europe to report this, it's become clear that whole generation is being forced to live as drifters – to relive the plots of 1930s movies: to get on a bus to look for work, to migrate, to sofa-surf, to enter relationships that are stark compromises between love and economics.

That is the easy bit of the answer: why did it kick off everywhere? Not simple economic grievance but the theft of the promised future.

Over the past two years I've become sick of hearing that the movement has "petered out". No. It has been massively repressed. Tear gas fired indiscriminately into crowds in Athens, rubber bullets in Madrid, tasers and pepper spray on campuses across America. Non-lethal policing is highly effective against non-violent protests. It tends to clear them away. But do not think it has cleared away the grievances in people's minds that led them to demonstrate in the first place.

What it does is push those who don't want to get their heads broken into a more sullen, silent, passive resistance: a resistance of ideas; or a resistance of small, granular social projects; or as in Greece anomie – where people just embrace the beauty of being hopeless, roll a joint, stare into each other's eyes.

The crisis of neoliberalism, compounded by the total failure to emerge of any alternative within official politics, simply leaves the question unanswered for the next generation: how does capitalism secure my future?

So that's the economics.

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As to the technology, I recently rewatched the rushes my team shot on 15 September 2008 in New York City, the day Lehman Brothers collapsed. Two things struck me: watching that guy in the suit, me, he doesn't know how badly capitalism is about to come unstuck. Second, all the technology is, by now, obsolete.

People on the sidewalk are filming the bankers exiting the building on their: Nokias, Motorolas, SonyEricssons – remember them? On this day, Facebook had 100m users. It now has a billion. On the day Lehman went bust Twitter had about 4m accounts worldwide. It now has 100 million.

In the four years since Lehman Brothers the iPhone has conquered the world; and now Android. As for the plain old internet: 1.5bn people had it in September 08, 2.4bn people have it now – that's 34% of the world's population. But remember that's an under-estimation: in Ethiopia, for example, there are twice as many Facebook accounts as there are internet connections. In Addis Ababa People stand at the door of the internet café and ask: "do you have Facebook?"

Before we look at what that has done to protest and ideology and politics and law enforcement; it's worth stepping back to make an obvious point.

The digital comms revolution is only one part of a wider technological revolution that's been under way since the



middle of the 1990s, which is affecting commerce – (goodbye Jessops) – manufacturing (goodbye workers, hello robots in many auto factories) – the speed of scientific discovery itself; and of course finance.

I argued in early 2009, and I stick by it with some conviction now, that we are at the beginning of what should be the fifth wave of tech innovation for capitalism. The roll-out and commoditization of new technology – from medicine to genetics to robots to comms – is a classic signal of the start of a 50 year upswing according to the long wave theories derived from Kondratieff.

However at the end of the last wave, policymakers discovered how to disrupt the wave pattern: by printing money they could stop a crash turning into a depression.

They did it after the Asian financial crisis of 1997, in 2001, after the dotcom crash, with the policy of cheap money; and they're doing it now with Quantitative Easing. And the problem this creates is you get what I call a "disrupted Kondratieff wave": where the tech upswing is trying to happen at the same time as the depression that usually comes at the end of the preceding cycle finally takes hold.

This gives a unique dynamic to the situation, so that only a few countries – and as a result of catastrophic policy – do you get true Depression era levels of destitution, fascism, emigration etc.

Moving back to the technology itself: it turns out the killer application of all these technologies – broadband, smartphones and the social media networks they make possible – is to empower human beings: to think what they

want, to act more autonomously, and to get knowledge they need.

Clay Shirky summed up the effect of these technologies better and earlier than anybody: "The current change, in one sentence, is this: most of the barriers to group action have collapsed and with those barriers we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done." (Here Comes Everybody, Chapter 1)

Let's look at the Egyptian revolution. The youth who took the decisive actions between December and February 2011 had assembled as a loose affinity network using Facebook, around the We Are All Khaled Sayeed page. When the time came to act they were able to form as small, quite distributed and horizontal groups: ten people on somebody's floor linked to another ten not by a command hierarchy but by trust, numerous nodal connections.

They acted: they immediately began to use Facebook and Twitter to feedback information much faster than the security forces could, and bypassing the state media, which was paralysed. When the internet was shut down, they bypassed it, using proxy servers, word of mouth: what they'd created on the internet they took out onto the streets.

Time and again you see over the past four years, beginning in Iran, the spontaneous defensive gesture, replacing the clenched fist, is this: the phone raised to shoot video or take pictures. "I'm recording you," it says. Of course the power of the gesture relies on international law, on an external media to publicise what's happening, but for me this is the new clenched fist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We saw it again, recently in Russia: on the night Putin's party was found perpetrating large scale voter fraud, and losing the vote in many large cities despite this, the proof, the outrage and then the call to action spread through social networks that – because they overlap blogging sites, twitter, facebook and peer to peer information transfer cannot be shut down: indeed I will argue they cannot even be adequately monitored nor even recorded.

The type of communication is horizontal and it is networked. Spin and lies and inadvertent mistakes are easily challenged, and not just challenged, neutralized.

The type of action that grows out of such networked protest movements is completely different from that which Weberian hierarchies take: it is sporadic, voluntary, time limited.

At the point you don't like it you break off; at the point it gets taken over, infiltrated, derailed, you stop and start again.

Whereas with the labour movement you would never squander an organisation you'd spent years building; now movements like Climate Camp can just decide: sod it, this is going nowhere; or the Clown Army – which seriously disorganised the Scottish police force by deploying slapstick in 2005 at Gleneagles, and then just dissolved.

Just as the movements are mercurial, the activists are: they can pick and choose, they can have a day off; they can contribute a bit to each effort; they can meld their social life into their political efforts. If you go to Athens or Barcelona, New York you will find numerous perfectly capitalist bars and cafes completely moulded around this counter-culture, this protest movement.

Castells captures perfectly what happened in 2011-12:

"By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the Internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments."

That is they embarked on something that is the opposite of the 20<sup>th</sup> century political practice: not parties, not campaigns, not united fronts but sporadic swarms. And then he says:

"From the safety of cyberspace people from all ages and conditions moved towards occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge." (Networks of Outrage and Hope, p2)

I don't say that these movements are only horizontal networks. And the actual moment of physical occupation of space was brief in most cases:

Tahrir got swamped by the masses, towards the end – though even now that core of people, that plebeian intersection between the Coptic TV actor, the secular leftist arab, the football fans, the educated young women always flock there.

Zuccotti got cleared so thoroughly that even I as a BBC reporter with a pass was not allowed to stand there and report once it was empty.

Sol in Madrid was an incredible experience for those involved "You could almost taste the freedom" one of my colleagues in Spain said;

The time in Syntagma, in the summer of 2011, under the orange trees, with assemblies of 3,000 going on amiably

late into the night, modeled explicitly on the traditions of the *agora* remains, for me, the high point of the Greek movement before the descent into really cruel violence and the rise of fascism.

For most people, occupying space, taking part in excruciating consensus sessions, general assemblies, etc was just one thing they did; the big question of course is what it leads to.

Over time the critique of horizontalism has evolved. Long before Occupy, Malcolm Gladwell set the tone: networks are useful only for low-risk, low impact activism, he argued in late 2010:

“The drawbacks of networks scarcely matter if the network isn’t interested in systemic change—if it just wants to frighten or humiliate or make a splash—or if it doesn’t need to think strategically. But if you’re taking on a powerful and organized establishment you have to be a hierarchy.”<sup>1</sup>

During the occupation of Zuccotti Park, Slavoj Žižek articulated a more nuanced criticism: the self-infatuation of the movements, the way they come to be about themselves:

‘There is a danger. Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have

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to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?’

The writer Thomas Frank also criticized the lack of structure, the self-obsession, the lack of preparedness to embrace goals and demands, and the lack of connection with real life. Instead he called for:

“a movement whose core values arise not from an abstract hostility to the state or from the need for protesters to find their voice, but rather from the everyday lives of working people.”

I think all these critics have something in common: they lived to see a time when structured, hierarchical movements with a clear counter-narrative and demands rose and fell. They understand the relationship between those kinds of movement and the old Fordist economy and the industrial working class.

They all equally understand that the Fordist economy and the male, manual working class of the 70s and 80s has been destroyed and is not coming back. Mark Fisher, the inventor of the term “capitalist realism”, says:

“Although anarchist tactics are the most ineffective in attempting to defeat capital, capital has destroyed all the tactics that were effective, leaving this rump to propagate itself within the movement.”

What I think all the critics miss is the absolute congruence between horizontalism, networked organisation, with its weak ties, gestures, lack of achievements – and modern work.

Indeed I will insist that horizontalism mirrors in great detail the way people exist at work, and the way they actually work.

It is the new structure of the corporation that forces us to live these multiple lives: we are Paul in the suit at work; Paul in the combat trousers at night; Paul the Nord two handed swordsman in Skyrim; Paul the Northern Soul obsessive on Tumblr.

Corporate life forces us to have weak ties to our workmates, to constantly compete with them, to value social networking skills higher than actual skills: that's how you get a job of course, when many skills are quite easily learnable you have to be the person who can communicate and learn skills.

Richard Sennett logged all these new attributes of modern work: weak ties, mercuriality, individualism in his book *The New Culture of Capitalism*. He wrote:

"Only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions ... a self oriented to the short term, focused on potential ability [rather than actual skill], willing to abandon past experience." (*The Culture of the New Capitalism*)

The revolts of 2010–11 have shown, quite simply, what this workforce looks like when it becomes collectively disillusioned, when it realizes that the whole offer of self-betterment has been withdrawn.

Where I differ from these critics is:

First: these movements are not trying to take power. They're trying – consciously or unconsciously – to form a counter-power within capitalism. It's a counter-power that rejects the conformist, stereotyped mass culture the elite and the mainstream media sign up to, but is not yet prepared to offer an alternative.

And there is a strategic reason for this: this generation has learned the lessons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has learned, as the communard Louise Michel once put it: power monopolized is evil.

It has grown up with Foucault, with Deleuze and Guattari, with the idea that power relations inherent in hierarchical resistance movements are likely to lead to – at best George Galloway, at worst to Stalinism and Maoism which killed 20 and 36 million people respectively in order to impose non-peasant methods on agriculture. It has read Primo Levi, and it has read Vassily Grossmann.

On top of that – if they only knew it – these movements attempting to carve out alternative, more civilized, more self-controlled social spaces within capitalism are doing exactly what the pre-Leninist workers movement did. It annoys them when I say this, but they remind me of Edward Bernstein, the most centre left of the German social democrats, “who said: the way is everything, the final goal nothing”. It really is not that far from that to the famous #OWS poster:

“What is our one demand? Occupy Wall Street, 17 Sept 2011, Bring a Tent”

Furthermore, there is no such thing anymore as “normal life” divorced from this experience of crisis and fragmentation.

Those who think by immersing themselves maybe in the working men’s club, or becoming an organizer for a trade union, the *indignados* somehow connect to a reality that rectifies the weaknesses of horizontalism are missing the point.



First – both with #OccupySandy and to a much larger extent in Spain, where the M-15 movement have become like the Russian Narodniks in 1874, the organizers of hundreds of campaigns and squats in working class communities – the former occupiers have begun to fan out into normal life.

What they find there are poor, disenfranchised people – often highly articulate but shattered – in the same precarious position as them. Castells points out that the crisis has forced sections of the poor and working class to start adopting the non-market economic practices that the lifestylist protesters have been doing for years: occupying land, squatting buildings, bartering, informal lending networks.

Castells, for me, sums up a quite awful truth for those wish the horizontalist movements would just wake up and return to the 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of structured politics:

“Networked social movements... could not exist without the internet. But their significance is much deeper. They are suited for their role as agents of change in the network society, in sharp contrast with the obsolete political institutions inherited from a historically superseded social structure.”

If he is right, then we are nowhere near the end of the fragmentation that will have to take place – within liberalism, social democracy, conservatism, churches, trade unionism, Leninist parties, highly structured NGOs.

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And that is because of the third big factor that is driving change. A change in human behaviour, psychology,

thought patterns, attendant on the economic and technological changes.

It is the least tangible but I've come to the conclusion this is probably the most important of the three big changes that underpin the unrest: it can survive quite a lot of reversals.

When the horizontalist movements arose, and the new culture around them – of raves, hip-hop, art activism, body art, sampling, photomontage, graphic novels – people immediately compared them to the 1960s.

In the book I say there's a more profound parallel and that is with the era before the First World War. It too was a period of probably even more rapid technological change than ours; then, as now, many of the new technologies enhanced personal freedom. In almost every novel of the time there's a liberated woman; there's often an easily spottable gay man. And there's a pervasive freedom, individualism.

It was Virginia Woolf who wrote "on or about December 1910 human character changed". What she meant was the combined impact of modernism in art and literature, suffragism and its allied women's social and sexual rights movements, mass consumption and new technology had created new kinds of human being.

The Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig captured it in his memoir – the World of Yesterday. Beards disappeared; women showed their legs, played sport: "There was more freedom and more beauty in the world... in those ten years there was more freedom, informality and lack of inhibition than there had been in the entire preceding century." (p218)

How does the internet and social media and mobile comms change thinking and behaviour?

I think it completes, and makes irreversible, the small scale social revolutions that started in the late 1960s: women's rights, gay rights, divorce, contraception, the human rights revolution in general.

In the west, psychologists and sociologists documented the behaviour changes quite early on: Sherry Turkle, studying early computer gamers and bulletin board enthusiasts, noted the emergence of the so-called "decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time" – and argued that people were using the internet as a "social laboratory of the self".

Margaret Wertheim argued – and this was before Facebook, Twitter and even broadband – that we were using the internet to create a "collective mental arena", where the act of sharing knowledge for free was causing the self to become "leaky", "joining each of us into a vast ocean, or web, of relationships with other leaky selves".

In the 1990s, these early sociologists of Internet consciousness documented the behaviour patterns that are common now: swarming, multiple personalities, masquerading, stalking, community formation, intense personal relationships, seeing the online world as real, or hyper- real, and the constant attempts to create utopian communities.

But they were writing the pre-history: because social media has brought these behaviours out of the world of the hidden, the online, the furtive parallel universe: and into the coffee bar, the living room, the university lecture theatre, the barricade, the tent camp.

There is of course a downside – or a claimed downside – to all this multitasking and hyper-social behaviour. There's a growing body of cognitive experiments that show people fully immersed in the new technology perform worse on abstract thinking, on retaining facts, on inductive logic, on mindfulness etc. (See Nicholas Carr, "Does the Internet Make You Dumber" WSJ 5 June 2010)

I'm prepared to accept this is true. But here's one possible response to it: it's quite similar to what happened to physical skill when production moved from workshops to factories in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

People who used to be able to make a Chippendale table now struggled to make a table leg. But if you measured the collective effort it was more efficient and collectively more intelligent. It is no surprise that the fragmented, de-centred, hyper-social self performs badly on tests designed in the Doris Day era.

But what this evidence points to, like it or not, is that the cognitive, behavioural and psycho-social impacts of the communications revolution are real, rapid, and unending.

And above all they have created a zeitgeist – a series of signifiers that I think we're now in a position to understand. Whether it's the V for Vendetta mask, the verbose sign written on cardboard, the chant 'Ash'ab nurid izgat al-nizam' – or the less obvious things: like the acceptability of graffiti as both art and protest; the covering of people's bodies by tattoos and piercings. The ubiquity of graphic novels, of dance music; the white liquid Maalox which you put on your face against tear gas, and which the artist Molly Crabapple has now put onto the face of an oil painting.

The most important thing about these slogans, images and gestures is not what they say in isolation but what they express cumulatively.

I think the answer is: scorn for the charade played out in the workplace: for discipline, hierarchy, targets achieved, the cheap business suit, the insincere smile, the dead language of corporate communications. And solidarity with one another; large parts of humanity signaling across borders and cultures their belief that a kinder, more human system is possible; and that it will be born out of the chaotic, ironic, playful qualities of human life—not by pitting one cruel hierarchy against another.

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So where does it all go next?

I think we have to start by admitting that what is new in the situation does not abolish what is old. There are still unions, armies, Leninist groups with their perfectly preserved practice from the mid-1970s, hierarchical mainstream political parties and enough people coming out of university prepared to don a suit, look geeky, avoid drugs and, eventually, become special advisers, party staffers or MPs. And there are still workers, peasants and the bourgeoisie.

So the classic revolutions – Egypt, Libya – and probably those still to come, Iran, Russia, China – will follow a modified form of the usual path: the eruption over democracy and human rights, then the move towards social justice and distribution issues, which splits the movement and – finally poses the issue of whether the old power can come back in a new form: by force. This is the classic pattern established by 1848-51.

But here's the difference with 1848: by the mid-1850s capitalism was delivering, under the guise of autocratic regimes in Europe, an upswing in living standards. Today, globally it is hard to see a long-term sustained recovery; and in the west, unless there's a break with globalization, social conditions are on a race if not to the bottom then to the point at which they meet the rising conditions of Asia and Latin America half way. Shocking though this sounds, in some parts of the USA they are already not far off.

So for these reasons it is hard to see the upsurge of 2011-12 being followed by a long social peace such as we saw in the 1850s and 60s.

In terms of the movements, 2013 is clearly the point at which they are having to evolve to address the weaknesses of pure horizontalism, of "no demands", and the rising scale of hopelessness in some countries.

In Spain, the de-facto leadership of the M-15 formed the Democracia Real Ya movement – which does have demands and indeed a programme. It looks as if these are the people behind the launch of Partido X last week, though how it operates alongside the very strong Communist and anarcho-syndicalist left is a big question. In Greece there's Syriza, which might get the chance to form a government. So the "action" might be moving to politics, rather than the streets.

In many ways 2012 was full of lessons to the pure horizontalist movement that politics abhors a vacuum, even one created for the best of intentions. As things turn nasty – for example with the attempt to roll back reproductive rights in America – it becomes clear that, although you can try to "live despite capitalism, there are certain things you can't "live despite": you can't

live "despite" fascist pogroms, you have to stop them; if you're a working class young woman in America you can't live "despite" the mass closure of contraception and abortion services.

So people are propelled back into the structures, the system – to use it as a shield – even if they have no belief in that system. So the theatre group besieged by fascists in Athens, over the production of a gay themed play, demanded that the police protect them, and eventually they did, with tear gas. And Mitt Romney lost to Obama among women by a staggering 12 percentage points, largely because if you're a woman faced with a matter of fundamental rights, even if you're a horizontalist and dislike Obama's politics, or just cynical about the system in general, you're going to use your to protect yourself.

As conditions in some countries look more and more similar to the 1930s, the experience of the 1930s is worth revisiting. The first four years of the crisis – 1929-33 were, everywhere, a swing to the right: you had austerity programmes enacted, the rise of fascism, and the left was by and large self-marginalised due to the Comintern's "Third Period" ideology.

It was the rapid move to economic nationalism in 1931-2, combined with the rise of the far right, and the persistence of wide-scale poverty and unemployment, that made the 30s what we remember them as – a radical decade.

After the threat of a far right coup was defeated in France in 1934, the left "got real": liberalism got real, social democracy got real about the existential threat they were facing.

The slogans and practices of 1929-30 were junked as the hand waving and the general assemblies and the tent camps may possibly be junked in the coming years; but people did not just flock back into the old political moulds.

At the most general level it's possible to say the mass of ordinary people imposed a kind of plebeian optimism and good sense onto left and liberal democratic politics in the 1930s. They invented new tactics – like the factory occupation – and they used what they could of the old apparatus to shield themselves. In both America and France, the occupations, for example were conducted through unions that either barely existed (France) or had to be newly created out of a split with the old formations (the CIO split from the AFL).

The rise of fascism propelled them from what Malcolm Gladwell might call low-risk activism to high-risk activism. Castells points out it is not hope that propels us to take high risks, neurologically, but fear.

It took the rise of fascism in the 1930s to force humanity to fight for the progressive world it created after 1945. Flawed as it was, it is this world – of human rights, democracy and relative working class affluence in the West—that is now in jeopardy.

And as long as these things are in jeopardy, it will go on kicking off.