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Talking of Revolution, Again: Interview with Fred Turner

By Simone Natale

What do Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados, and the Carré Rouge movement have in common? At least one thing: people involved in them make massive use of the Internet and recognize themselves as the members of a "digital" culture. The problem, however, is to turn the possibility of expression provided by new media into stable institutional change. An interview with Fred Turner, Associate Professor at Stanford University and author of "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

The term "revolution" became in a certain sense 'out of fashion' during the Nineties, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Recently, however, with the advent of the Arab Spring, of the indignados movement in Spain, of Occupy Wall Street, and the "carré rouges" movement in Quebec, the term seems to have entered in the public discourse, again. Also in relation to new digital technologies, "revolution" is a word we hear more and more frequently…
I am very excited to see the word "revolution" back in action. But I am also concerned. In the 1960s, the movements of what was called "counterculture" hoped to change American society by creating new kinds of communities organized around what they called a shared "consciousness" or state of mind. Communalists in particular hoped to find an alternative to the bureaucratic forms of organization that they associated with the military-industrial complex that had brought them the Vietnam War. While I admire the impulse to turn away from that complex, in the 1960s, the counterculture in many ways failed. That is, it failed to establish permanent, institutionalized changes in various areas. This is the challenge, I think, that today's revolutions are facing. We might have situations where communities gather, rebel in the streets, work collectively very rapidly, in ways that really make intense change. But the challenge, then, is to institutionalize that change. Making the change permanent. How do you turn these kinds of revolutions in the streets that we have seen in the 1960s and we are seeing again, into a revolution in the state capitals, in the governments, in the systems of that continue to govern? This is the question we need to address.

Do the phenomena of political mobilization which characterized recent history really have something in common?

They certainly do. Each made visible a certain kind of dissatisfaction with things as they are. Things as they are quite different in each of these countries: the Spanish situation is different from the situation in Northern Africa, which is entirely different from the American situation or the situation in Quebec. But what they have in common is a deep distrust of centralized power, and a deep dissatisfaction with the differences in the distribution of resources. Moreover, I think that each of the groups which animated these movements has done a particular good job in making problems visible. The Occupy movement, for instance, succeeded particularly well in attracting attention toward certain problems.

In Quebec, a movement that has recently acquired an astonishing degree of participation from all parts of the Quebecois society. was initiated by students protesting against the rise of tuition fees. What does this case teach us about the way universities might play a role in ongoing political struggles and movements?

I think it tells us a great deal about how important it is that university students work together with labor unions. I think it also tells us how far we have to go in overcoming class divisions here in the United States. I live in California, where the State Legislature has been gutting the University of California system, the crown jewel of American public education. Tuition and fees at the University of California, Berkeley, currently amount to more than $12,000 a year for California residents. With living costs factored in, a year at Berkeley costs about $32,500 dollars. In Quebec, several hundred thousand people took to the streets when tuition threatened to hit $3,800 US – a third of the Berkeley fee. While there have been modest protests at various University of California campuses, no one has launched the sort of sustained, multi-community protests we've seen in Canada.
Why not?

I'm willing to speculate that the answer depends on a difference in culture. The deep individualism that permeates California and America more generally makes it enormously difficult to see financial challenges as a structural rather than personal problem. It makes it difficult to think of oneself as the member of a class. This is doubly true for college students, people whose life stage is focused as much as anything on psychological individuation. Likewise, it has become enormously difficult for labor unions to see university tuitions as a labor issue. The class divides between workers and university students in the United States are so extreme and they linger in large part because so few Americans think or talk about themselves as members of a class at all. Until we do, solving the sorts of problems associated with public education will remain very difficult.

In the American context then, the role of universities is first and foremost to help students come to grips not only with their identities, but with the social, economic and cultural forces that shape them. To that end, I would like to see a great deal more collaboration between the American education system and the American labor movement – a collaboration that the Quebecois seem to have mastered.

During the Arab Spring, media gave a strong emphasis to the fact that social networks, blogs, and the Internet in general were playing a decisive role. Is this reality, or rather a journalistic exaggeration?

I think it's mostly reality. Digital media, which are widely available, dramatically amplify some of the things you need to do when you start a large-scale collective action. They make it possible to communicate with the other members very rapidly, and privately. They allow to record actions the government has taken against you, and to make them visible to other people even when the government denies them. They give you a voice to organize with, and a voice to challenge mass media that the government control. All those things are very important.

What they don't necessarily give you is the ability to centralize and stabilize the changes. They let you gather quickly, they let you move quickly, but the same thing that makes them so good at being quick makes them difficult tools with which to make change persistent. The history of the American revolution can be a help here. In 1776 you have a revolution, people take to the streets and go to war. But at the end of the day they sit down and write the Constitution and they build a new state. It is that second piece these tools are not helping with. I think that they helped to amplify a revolutionary urge that already existed in Arab societies, but they have not yet helped those societies – or ours – to build the institutions that would sustain a social and political change in the long term.

It is also true that digital technologies, including the Internet and social networks, are under the control of governments, corporations, of those same institutions against which these movements are struggling. How do you explain this contradiction?

It is a very complicated discourse, and it depends a lot on the country that you are working inside. Some countries are much more locked down around media than others: China, for example, has a number of practical systems for controlling public debate. In the States the system is more open, but at the same time it is in some way more constrained. I think one of the fictions animating the generation of the Sixties which has come back and bothers me, is that simply by expressing oneself, and by doing it through small-scale technologies that one accesses through corporate accounts, one can change the world. It is a little bit like saying that by consuming certain styles, by wearing certain jeans, by putting on a certain style of jacket, you can create a different culture and thereby a different society. But you are just expressing yourself in ways that benefit those who supply these things – jeans companies, jacket companies.

There are, in other words, two different risks. One risk is to work inside systems that are materially controlled by the state, where privacy is monitored, media are monitored and shut down, communicators are hunted down and killed. The other risk, which is in a way even more pernicious, is to take up styles of activism which are born inside the consumer society, and lead ultimately to more consumption, to more style, to more expression, but to little institutional change.

What makes everything more difficult is that institutions are boring. When I want to express myself I think about style, communication, and fashion, which are really fun, really individual-centered things. I do not think about writing laws, going into smoky backrooms and negotiating documents. All this is terribly boring. And it makes terrible television. And it makes terrible internet action. That's a problem.

The Arab spring was a powerful important source of inspiration for the movements that followed in the Western world. But neither in Europe nor in America these movements have seemed to be able to generate a comparable political change.

In the United States there is a myth according to which expression is the equivalent of action. This is simply not true, especially in a society as saturated with media as ours. The Internet gives us an environment in which almost everyone can express themselves in some way. This is wonderful for its own reasons, but it does not mean that everyone has equal authority, equal access to power, equal ability to make change. Power, particularly political power, is concentrated around material resources and institutions that govern access to material resources. It is not necessarily concentrated around expression and institutions that govern expression. If I want to be powerful, would I want to control the Pentagon or the New York Times? I think I'd want to control the Pentagon.

In the Occupy case, a number of Americans who might have been drawn to the issue were somehow suspicious of these kinds of expressive actions. There was a reluctance, especially for American labor Unions, to engage with Occupy. Labor unions have real power, but they are very careful about how they use it. That's the kind of thing that I think has got to change. The Occupy folks and the kind of Internet-driven visible expression that they do needs to find allies in places like the Labor Unions.

In Germany there is a new political party, called the Pirates Party, which obtained astonishing results in the local election of the city of Berlin, and according to the polls has now gathered an important degree of support at a national level, too. This party refuses any connection to the left or the right, and relies basically on hacker culture and on the idea that digital technologies can help people to participate to politics "from below." Do you think that similar movements might have a relevant role in the future?

I think that hacker culture can be very powerful. But it is most powerful when it targets institutions. WikiLeaks is a very good example. There has been a lot of hacking, but WikiLeaks really challenged the American military and the American state. That is a very powerful thing to have done, and I applaud it.

By the some token though, I think we have to remember that hackers do not come from nowhere. They come from educational system, they come from technological system, they depend for their training on the technologies they have access to. Certainly most people on this planet do not have that kind of access to technical knowledge.

There is a fantasy among hackers, some of them at least, that if they simply get together in their own élite, they will be

able to transform all systems. Now, this is true at the level of computers: hackers can transform all computer systems. But this is different from transforming the social system, and the idea that transforming one would necessarily result in transforming the other is still an illusion, in my view.

Steve Jobs, the creator of Apple, one of the entrepreneurs which most contributed to the configuration of the present productive system of digital media, is now considered a symbol for both left-wing and right-wing environments. How do you explain it?

I think Steve Jobs might solve a problem for us. Let me tell it historically. In the early 1960s, members of the counterculture had a problem: they wanted to overthrow the military-industrial state, but they did not want to lose access to the very cool technologies that that state had produced. These were record players, automobiles, and, later, drugs. So, the counterculture in many ways took those tools and turned them into tools by which to form a new kind of society. That's Steve Jobs' story, too. Steve Jobs is at the same time a corporate leader–a ruthless corporate leader-, and at the same time a counterculturalist, someone who offers us a vision of technology as a source for social and psychological change. He bridges these two worlds: he was at the same time the son of the counterculture and of the corporate culture. Thus, it gives us a vision of how one might live a way that feels authentic, but also lets you make a living with the resources that are around you. That's why he is a person who appeals to both left and right. And he is not the first person who appeals this way. Here in the United States, for instance, Newt Gingrich or Stewart Brand have appealed that way, too.

And yet, Steve Jobs is a particularly bad model for social and political change. You probably remember that he refused to allow political apps to be developed for the iPhone. Now, if the iPhone is the universal technology for public discourse, and if it can be controlled by a corporate leader, then public discourse is going to be controlled by a corporate leader on his own interest. This sounds more like a traditional corporate plutocracy than it does like liberation.

Digital technologies have an extremely important role in contemporary politics. Do you think that this is unique to our society, or that other technologies in other ages have played a comparable role?

Technology has always been important, and certainly Karl Marx would agree with that. However, I think that some characteristics of the current technological environment are qualitatively different. Digital technologies are everywhere. They are not just any technology; they are information technologies. They allow the circulation of ideas and emotions at an incredibly rapid pace. They allow images to be circulated, they allow identities to be produced, and they do it at mass scale and almost instantaneously. I believe, then, that there is at least something different here from what we have seen before. If the newspaper was absolutely critical in revolutions of the past, I think that computers and cell phones are going to be critical in the political changes of the future.

An Italian version of this interview was published in Italian on the magazine Il Contesto . For a pdf of the Italian version, see here

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