



Citizen action and the perverse confluence of opposing agendas

Lisa Veneklasen, 10th November 2011

When opposing political interests are using the same terms and tactics in diametrically opposed agendas, Lisa Veneklasen asks how we can transform the power of citizen action into sustained change for justice and equality

About the author

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What with claims of “Facebook revolutions” in the Arab Spring and “leaderless movements” in Occupy-Wall-Street protests across the world, the media is abuzz with commentary on the changing nature of citizen action. But – aside from new gadgets and unexpected locations – are people really organizing against injustice in ways that differ fundamentally from those of recent decades? Or, when you look closely and compare today’s uprisings and mobilizations for equality and freedom to their predecessors, do you find more continuity than difference? And then, setting aside old vs. new, can we say that present-day strategies are in fact advancing the cause of justice?

Occupy Wall Street had not been born when a diverse international collection of scholars and activists [met](#) over two days in The Hague in September 2011 to consider how citizen action is changing. Nonetheless, the [Arab Spring](#), worldwide digital activism, [Slut Walks](#), [Indignados](#), and multiplying mobilizations against austerity packages around the world seemed to signal new energy and, at the very least, a fresh round of youth activism and political ingenuity.

Not surprisingly, perceptions of what’s new, what’s old and what’s better are shaped largely by age and place. Young Egyptian activists – still optimistic about the future despite the military’s hold on state power and the reversals of women’s rights and roles – see their country and their fellow citizens in a fresh new light. Leila, a young Spanish-Syrian activist and social media journalist with *Al Jazeera* exclaimed that the Arab uprisings and Spanish *Indignados* felt like “the day the people woke up!”

It’s the younger generation of [netizens](#) who fully own the possibilities of technology. From the instantaneous blast of images of injustices to the text messaging to protect activists from riot police and military, virtual citizen action has exponential reach, as many digital activists in their twenties described to the gathering in The Hague. A Brazilian hack-tivist working with many social justice groups, Pedro declared that the new technology has made old-fashioned hierarchical and formalized communication and organization irrelevant. With new technologies, anyone can be a journalist and an activist. “NGOs are dead. Journalism is dead.... Being a citizen with no power is

boring, but technology makes it possible for anyone to be in the middle of the action.” At the same time, he flatly dismissed the notion that the technology drives the revolution. “There’s no Facebook revolution. There’s just Facebook and then there’s people organizing.” Does the Internet limit the depth and staying power of citizen action, as many people fear, reducing it to an isolated click of a mouse by disconnected individuals? Sure, Pedro admitted, there are a handful of lazy pseudo-activists, “slactivists” or “clicktivists.” It’s about how you use the technology. “It’s the interaction and connection between the street action and the digital action that matters.”

Older activists and scholars at the meeting – with experience ranging from revolutions of the 1960s and 70s to the anti-globalisation and feminist movements – viewed these new developments with a mix of excited interest and scepticism. Their questions boiled down to the issues of vision, ideology and strategy: “What are we building?” Puzzled by some of the dynamics in the Arab Spring, one long-time Dutch activist, Kees Stad, asked about Libya, “How is it that NATO is bombing a country and we call this a revolution? What ever happened to the idea of imperialism?”

People’s mobilizations against injustice are always shaped by context and history – an apparently obvious but easily overlooked basic truth. As the world both changes and stays the same, so too does citizen action. To decipher the confusing dynamics shaping citizen action today, Evelina Dagnino, a Brazilian political scientist, introduced a conceptual gem: *perverse confluence*. Drawing on the last three decades of Brazil’s engagement with the notion of citizenship, she pointed out that opposing political interests – social movements, the state, and the drivers of neoliberalism – all use and promote the notion of active citizens as if united harmoniously in a shared vision of democracy and inclusion. But, in reality, social movements claim and redefine citizenship to recognize and build inclusion across race, class, gender, sexuality and other barriers; the state uses the legalities of citizenship to control who counts, has access, and decides; and neoliberalism equates citizens with consumers and embraces the idea of active citizen engagement as a way to expand markets. Three diametrically opposed agendas snuggled into the same political terminology – an example of perverse confluence, and of the messy contradictions of the moment.

This is a world in which Facebook, the activist’s new weapon of choice, is also a powerful instrument for the promotion of consumer capitalism. This is a world in which some of the strongest movements using left-inspired tactics are in fact right wing (behold the US Tea Party); a world in which so-called progressive and left governments – especially in the Americas – turn out to be the most effective at dismantling reproductive rights and marginalizing feminist agendas. From the Sandinista government’s total ban on abortion and Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff’s back pedalling on reproductive rights, to President Obama’s last-minute trade away of funding for abortions in Washington DC in the high stakes budget battles of 2011, the former unity between left and feminist agendas, tenuous at best, has given way to the a perverse confluence. As one person in the gathering put it, “What do we do about citizen action mobilizing against freedom?”

With these odd paradoxes of the moment naturally comes the crisis of discourse. The meaning of vital words in an activist’s lexicon – from “empower” to “movement” – fail to provide a single potent political meaning. Take “citizen action” or “citizen participation” for example. Surely mobilizing citizen participation in Occupy Wall Street is fundamentally different from the citizen participation promoted by the World Bank – but how is it we’re all one happy family using the same words? Then, we have the word “citizen” itself. Contested for sure. It’s not universally embraced as synonymous with claiming justice, particularly by the immigrants who are marginalized and denied their rights on the basis of citizenship. Can the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street both call themselves a movement where one is about consolidating current inequalities and the other is about overthrowing them?

Words are important for political activists for many reasons, most of all to get on the same page and to communicate something compelling. But in the fast-paced world of global information

capitalism, cooptation of citizen justice struggles by powerful actors is a certainty. With the emerging battle over who owns the trademark for “We are the 99%”, how long before Gap has an Occupy fashion trend, and Walmart has its own Arab Spring?

Speaking of perverse confluences and aspects of citizen action that do not change, let’s go back to the woman question. How is it that the whole world is seemingly mobilizing against inequality and injustice at the same time that the global consensus about women’s equality is cracking and a steady rollback of women’s rights is underway? Behold the Arab Spring: despite their role as organizers and activists on the frontlines, women are now struggling for basic legal rights let alone a voice in the transition. Beyond the excitement of digital activism, one can’t fail to notice the scarcity of women and dominance of dudes among the techies, or the alarming statistics that demonstrate how women are the losers in the digital divide. What are the implications of this gender breakdown for the future of citizen mobilization? It’s not as if women and feminists aren’t organizing and mobilizing – they’re lending their support to all justice issues while fighting women’s rights issues all by themselves, and often against extraordinary levels of normalized and sexual violence.

Being left for last on the lists of the revolutionary agendas, invisible on the inequality headlines, and still unprotected: this is definitely not a new scenario for women. But in the wake of two decades of advances on women’s rights internationally, it reminds us of how power operates and of the certainty of backlash. That’s an old lesson that women’s movements can offer new mobilizations: it takes deep levels of organization, shared visions, strong alliances and staying power to survive inevitable backlash. The other old lesson is that there is no revolution without the other 51%. The good news is that some of the women Occupying are optimistic about the movement’s desire and potential for dealing with what one occupier called the “[manarchist](#)” problem by openly confronting misogyny, racism, and gender oppression.

Despite the media fascination with it, the slow process of consciousness-raising and dialogue that the Occupy movement has rediscovered is also not new. Consciousness-raising about the structural and internalised forms of oppression – one heart and mind at a time – has been a critical component of feminist movements and LGBT organizing for generations. The alter-globalisation movement of the 1990s was described by an activist in the gathering as an exciting *unidiomatic experiment* – a decisive move away from the hierarchical and sectarian left that preceded it.

So, while consciousness-raising is not new, maybe it’s been neglected. And maybe the impression that citizen action is changing is because today’s mobilizations are compared to the NGO advocacy and campaigning rather than to real social-movement organizing. The usual NGO approach to policy advocacy may masquerade as citizen action, but is more likely to combine a handful of sharp professionals and policy talking points, a wonkish celebrity and clever slogans, but forget about the people’s organizing and mobilizing part. Which is to say that there is no consciousness-raising, only sound bites.

More importantly, in neglecting the consciousness-raising, they forgot about the need for alternatives. Not just a couple of policy tweaks but a real alternative. And thus, the world finds itself facing a total collapse, with the grand failure of neoliberalism and global financial capitalism, but despite all the fighting against poverty and injustice by the great NGOs over the last 15 years, we have nothing to offer as an alternative.

Which is why Occupy Wall Street and its recent precursors are so refreshing to many activists of all generations. Although the absence of a big alternative is sorely felt, there is a yearning for a world that refuses greed and a “get yours and save yourself” ethos. Although in a slightly different form from past movement work, a big alternative is taking shape each day in the small discussion circles, amplified by social media. Visions of transforming culture (not just policy) have

made a welcome return, along with slow, patient, face-to-face organizing. And guess what? They're as popular as they ever were.

Despite the endless hand-wringing by media commentators about the need for “concrete demands” (read “policy talking points”), protesters refuse to boil down their simple call for an end to greed, inequality, and corruption into policy speak. With “WE ARE THE 99%” as their slogan and the powerful symbol of Wall Street as their target, they have managed to communicate worldwide to many people who've joined citizen action for the first time.

The resonance of hope, amplified by social media, can be illustrated by this message the Tunisians sent to the Occupy movement: “So [we stand with you](#) not just in your attempts to bring down the old but to experiment with the new. We are not protesting. Who is there to protest to? What could we ask them for that they could grant? We are occupying. We are reclaiming those same spaces of public practice that have been commodified, privatised and locked into the hands of faceless bureaucracy, real estate portfolios and police ‘protection.’ Hold on to these spaces, nurture them and let the boundaries of your occupations grow.”

From fiery debate at The Hague to the latest Occupations, the answers are resoundingly affirmative. Yes, citizen action is changing. Yes, citizen action is, at its core, the same. And yes, some of today's actions are advancing the cause of justice, with the groundswell of youth mobilization holding real promise. The message from the Tunisians, however, leaves us with the larger and very old question: “How do we transform citizen action into sustained change for justice and equality?” We're still working on the answer to that one.

The conference ['The Changing Face of Citizen Action: A Knowledge Exploration](#) [11] was organised by [Hivos](#) [19], [The Centre for Internet and Society](#) [20], [The Institute of Development Studies](#) [21] and [International Institute of Social Studies](#) [22]

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