Legacies of Contention: Revisiting the 2011 Protest Wave

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Legacies of Contention: Revisiting the 2011 Protest Wave.[1]

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Abstract: Ten years ago, a seemingly titanic wave of contention swept the globe. This article reflects on how the impact of a wave of contentious political action that is now a full decade old manifests today. These 'Legacies of Contention' - the historically contingent impact of contentious episodes- can variably re-enforce, undermine, or depart substantially from the original focus of a given contentious episode, a sign of how difficult it can be to extrapolate from the causal impact of contentious politics in the near-run. Herein we discuss the fates of some of the 2011 contentious episodes, including: Syria, Greece, Israel, England and the United States.

Keywords: Legacies of Contention, Civil War, Riots, Occupy, 2011

Ten years ago, a seemingly titanic wave of contention swept the globe. Beginning with an Arab Spring that fundamentally changed the political fates of nations such as Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, continuing with waves of political movements in Iberia, Greece, and elsewhere, featuring riots in England, Iraq and Western Sahara, and culminating in an Occupy movement so significant that it spread around the world. In the wake of this global protest wave an enormous volume of scholarly research followed. This research studied these various episodes of contention in detail, unveiling their dynamics, causes, short-run impact and other such facets. Yet, some of the patterns, processes, and historical trajectories initiated or punctuated by an

[1] Contributors to this article are listed in alphabetical order, and the article constitutes a joint effort, for which the authors wrote individual contributions.

episode, process or wave of contention can be difficult to capture in their short-run aftermath during which the most intense scholarly activity – from research to publication – tends to occur.

In this article, we reflect on how the impact of a wave of contentious political action that is now a full decade old manifests today. These manifestations have been occasionally termed 'Legacies of Contention' (Villalón 2007; Wolf 2018): the historically contingent impact of contentious episodes, situated amid a variety of other structural, cultural and political processes often well beyond the control or influence of those who initiated them. Importantly – as this article exemplifies- such legacies of contention can variably re-enforce, undermine, or depart substantially from the original focus of a given contentious episode, a sign of how difficult it can be to extrapolate from the causal impact of contentious politics in the near-run.

In what follows, we discuss *some* of the legacies of the 2011 wave, reconsidering the findings of our various past research articles on the topic and how they manifest (or not) today. In particular, we discuss the Syrian Civil War (Shawn Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad), the Movement of the Squares (George Sotiropoulos), the Israeli #J14 'Social Justice' movement (Callie Maidhof), the 2011 England Riots (Christian Garland, Tony Jefferson, Bob Jeffrey and Waqas Tufail), and the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Michael Boyle).

The Syrian Civil War (Teresa Flanigan and Mounah Abdel-Samad)

When the Arab Spring struck during the very earliest months of 2011, a huge amount of popular excitement was generated as to what potential futures it might yield. In Syria, protests against Bashar al-Assad spilled over into a crisis which has proven to be a complex and lasting conflict among a fluctuating collection of actors. To date, Syria has now spent a decade entangled in a civil war that has been all but won by the al-Assad regime (Hubbard, 2020). The conflict has displaced nearly half of the Syrian population, with one fourth internally displaced within Syria, and another fourth escaping the country in search of greater security. Conflict-displaced

Syrians now live in more than 100 countries, with most settling in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (Carlson and Williams, 2020). The Syrian civil war and the subsequent exodus from local communities has created significant humanitarian need within Syria and beyond. The United Nations estimates over 13 million people within Syria require humanitarian aid (UNHCR, n.d.). As of mid-2020 Syria faced a forty percent unemployment rate, and an eighty percent poverty rate. These astounding figures worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic as governments around the world, including in Syria, introduced restrictions to fight the spread of the virus (Hubbard, 2020).

Even for those Syrians who have left the country, circumstances generally remain challenging. This is particularly so for those in the neighboring countries where most refugees have settled (Wills 2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey face language barriers, challenges accessing education for their children, and difficulty participating in the formal labor market (Adah and Türkyılmaz, 2020; İçduygu 2015). In Jordan, Syrians' economic opportunity is hindered by limited freedom of movement when leaving refugee camps, and more than ninety percent of Syrian migrants in Jordan struggle to meet their basic human needs (Sieverding and Calderón-Mejía, 2020). Lebanon hosts the highest number of Syrian migrants per capita globally, and since 2019 has faced political upheaval, economic crisis, and currency devaluation that has created scarcity for all residents, be they Lebanese or Syrian (Hubbard, 2020; Mounzer, 2020). As of late, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious effect on many of the countries in which Syrian refugees have settled. In Lebanon, for example, the poverty rate increased to close to fifty percent by mid-2020 (Mounzer, 2020). The Syrian diaspora in wealthier countries continues to provide aid to their fellow diaspora members in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, but the process has been hampered by heightened need, donor fatigue, and decreased political efficacy and peacebuilding ability, all of which complicate their efforts (Abdel-Samad and Flanigan, 2019; Flanigan, 2018; Flanigan, 2021; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2016). Protest

and Civil War have given way to a process of radical displacement, and – for many – a state of desperate need.

The Movement of the Squares (George Sotiropoulos)

The term ‘movement of the squares’ is used variably to refer to an approach to contentious politics which arose during the 2011 wave. Perhaps its most emblematic cases were the various occupations in Syntagma Square, Athens; Rossio Square, Lisbon; and Puerta del Sol, Madrid. Even today, any assessment of the legacy of this international "squares-movement", either as a whole or of its individual instantiations, must be seen as tentative in some respect. Just like the square occupations themselves, our assessment is temporally and spatially situated at a fixed point, where certain things make far greater sense than others.

No matter how weak or vague it may have been in some of its practical aspects, the movement of the squares centrally incorporated a call for a “real democracy” – and in the more radical version of the Greek *Aganaktismenoi*, for “direct democracy,” (Simiti 2016). This demand was embodied in the movement’s adoption of a normative logic whose spatial and temporal coordinates were antagonistic to the dominant logic of neoliberalism and (more generally) capitalism. As Sotiropoulous (2017) notes: “the occupied squares experimented with practical alternatives, they tried to *reimagine* what it means to live in a democracy, and in the process they drew a link between such a democratic way of life and social justice”

The movement created horizontal spaces, underpinned by an egalitarian ethos in which such spaces were constituted by the very bodies and words that filled them – rather than owned structures in the formal sense . This approach negated - *in practice* - the deeply unequal and hierarchical spatial forms of organizations arising from neoliberal elites’ pursuit of capital-

accumulation and surplus value. Similarly, in terms of its temporality, "the squares" actualized a principle of civic time which challenged the reification of time as an economic resource.

So, ten years after numerous squares around the world were occupied under the common banner of democracy, what are we to make of these events? We are reflecting on the legacy of these contentious conjunctures at a time when authoritarianism is expanding, and democracy is increasingly understood as a luxury open for curtailment amid emergencies (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). In some respects, the current moment echoes a central observation in Sotiropoulos' (2017) article, which drew attention to the inability of square movements to either resist the forces of state repression or offer an effective alternative to existing forms of production and governmentality. From today's perspective- in face of a world that becomes consistently less democratic- it is hard to argue that we have seen much genuine progression toward 'real democracy'. Rather, it is the movement's normative challenges that constitute a particularly salient legacy of "the squares". In other words, the significance of the events that took place ten years ago lays in their untimely character. To paraphrase Nietzsche: this allows them to act as a testimony against their time and, hopefully, in favour of a time that is to come.

The Israeli #J14 / 'Social Justice' Protests (Callie Maidhof)

In the summer of 2011, amid an expansion in contentious political activity across the Mediterranean, a series of self-professed 'social justice' (*Mechaat Tzedek Hevrati*) protests arose in Israel, nicknamed – among other things – the #J14 movement. Utilizing tactics familiar to those who had witnessed the Arab Spring and movements of the squares, this episode played an important role in the reorientation of Israeli politics. Writing in 2016, Maidhof approached the protests from the vantage point of the settlements, asking what it meant for settlers to find themselves on same side of a protest movement anchored in or even reifying the Israeli "Secular Middle Class." Sandwiched between the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, from

afar these protests may have appeared vaguely leftwing; yet the claims of #J14 were made from the imaginary homogeneous Jewish national space that marked the borders of Israeli civil society. Civil society as a concept always relies on certain exclusions; here, we saw that Israeli civil society had room for debate among antagonistic but *always Jewish* actors such as leftwing activists and West Bank settlers, while excluding Palestinians and other non-Jewish citizens and residents of the state.

The 2011 protests in Israel animated the hegemonic concept of the secular middle class as a political body that may make claims on the state while remaining aloof from "politics" narrowly conceived. They laid out this kind of "apolitical" political agenda that became the platform of Yair Lapid just two years later, as he leveraged his television career for a rapid rise to power at the head of the Yesh Atid party. At that moment, he formed an alliance with another newcomer, religious nationalist Naftali Bennett, who had previously served as the head of the council of settlements in the West Bank. Many deemed this a cynical and otherwise unnoteworthy political move, the realpolitik coming together of a pair of opportunistic and charismatic new leaders. It would be an understatement to say that this strategic alliance has served them well, and today the two hold the reins of a rotating premiership that placed Bennett in the prime minister's seat this June, even as his New Right party holds only seven legislative seats.

The trajectory from the summer protests of 2011 to Bennett's ascendence to prime minister a decade later is not a simple chain reaction or a well-played game of cynical opportunism. Rather, the protests inaugurated a new imaginary of Israeli politics, one in which religious settlers and the secular middle class could be allies, not because they agreed on all the issues, but because they agree on *which issues matter*: taxes, military service, and the privileges associated with their contribution to both. #J14 worked to form an Israeli public in which other

hot-button issues *don't* matter, notably, Palestinian/Arab rights and the status of settlements themselves. It is this realignment of Israeli politics that makes the Bennett-Lapid alliance not just possible but successful, propelling the pair to the head of the Israeli state and bringing an end to Netanyahu's twelve years as prime minister.

The English Riots (Christian Garland, Tony Jefferson, Bob Jeffrey and Waqas Tufail)

By August of 2011, observers were sure that a global wave of contention was rolling across the world. Even England – often regarded as a quietous political context – reached fever pitch, with a dramatic series of riots that took political elites entirely by surprise. The August riots can be understood as five days of revolt (Garland 2014) which began with the response to the police execution of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, then rapidly combusted across London and England in the space of hours.

In comparison with past riots in the United Kingdom, Tony Jefferson (2014) noted that the 2011 riots suggested plenty of evidence of a(nother) moral panic about the criminality of the young as well as several novel features - the sheer vindictiveness of the State's post-riot response, the spread of rioting to new areas and the practice of communities 'fighting back'. Together these constituted - Jefferson argued- morbid symptoms of the multiple crises of the neoliberal conjuncture at that historical moment. Looking back on the legacies of all these features, old and new, from such a perspective, prompts us to consider the multiple struggles that continue to underpin them.

How might these be evaluated now, a decade on? Let us start where the riots did: a young black man is gunned down by the police and there were no resulting sanctions; the familiar story that Black lives don't matter to the state. Now, with the emergence of Black Lives Matter (BLM), its global spread in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and the successful conviction of a state employee for the crime, there has been a shift in the ideological balance of forces, especially

among the young for whom Black lives have indeed begun to seriously matter. A greater awareness of colonial atrocities and the pulling down of statues of slavery's apologists and beneficiaries is also part of this shift in the UK.

What then does this auger for the future? The impact of unprecedented state repression that flowed in the wake of the 2011 riots should not be underestimated (Lightowlers and Quirk, 2015). Repression that extended beyond policing and the courts to encompass social housing evictions (Young, 2017) and other more-or-less subtle/insidious forms of social control has given future would-be rioters pause for thought. The new vindictiveness of the state and reciprocal community resistance evidenced in the riots have become examples of the 'exceptional' state at work: one that has become all the more willing to impose extreme sanctions in defence of public order. This kind of state was emboldened by communities readily accepting the state's framing of the events of 2011 as criminality, 'pure and simple'. Thus, the link between riots and crime in the public consciousness has been strengthened, and far right activists in some areas have taken on the mantle of 'community guardians'.

However, the English have exhibited a tediously predictable cyclical approach to rioting these last four decades (with major riot waves occurring in 1981, 1991/92, 2001 and 2011 – see Jeffery et al, 2015), which perhaps suggests that eventually the subcultural memory of such repression fades. It is also worth noting that the spread of 2011's rioting to new areas was indicative of both sides of a developing struggle between the disaffected young and the state. On the one hand, it was an example of just how widespread youthful un- and under-employment, poverty and disaffection had spread: the general precaritisation of young lives; on the other, of the importance of social media in sharing news of the when and where of rioting among the young.

Adopting a more microscopic lens on the riots' legacy invites us to revisit the arguments Jeffery and Tufail (2015) set out in their article on the events that took place in Salford, Greater Manchester (the 'Pendleton Riot'). Jeffery and Tuafil's point of departure was a critique of mainstream political and media narratives, and some academic commentary, which sought to discern a novel and unprecedented level of consumerism, individualism, and de- politicisation (see for example, Treadwell et al, 2013) in the 2011 riots, largely on the basis of endlessly recycled images of looting in the media. Against such claims, they used the example of Salford, where rioters were more likely to be drawn from the local area (rather than travel longer distances to loot more enticing retail targets) and where the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police attested to the fact that rioters focused their attentions upon attacking his officers. In seeking to explore this antagonism towards the police and the state, Jeffrey and Tufail foregrounded public sector cuts and increasing poverty, historically poor police-community relations, and repressive policing in the contemporary era, which they particularly linked to processes of gentrification (see also Jeffery and Jackson, 2012).

A decade on, this analysis of the sources of discontent in Salford not only retains explanatory power, but depicts a situation which has arguably been exacerbated, not lessened by the passage of time. Long-standing concentrations of poverty have been deepened by a decade of austerity and punitive welfare reform (Beatty and Forthergill, 2013; Jeffery et al, 2018). Gentrification in the Manchester/Salford urban core has accelerated in the aftermath of the riots, with house price growth in recent years outstripping that of London (Pickford, 2018). Indeed, the prescribed (sociological) medicine to the riot was a Private Finance Initiative to redevelop Pendleton. Furthermore, working class concerns regarding policing will not have been lessened by the ultimate failure -for example- to take any action against the police officers responsible for the death of the unarmed Anthony Grainger in 2012. In the years since the publication of

Jeffrey and Tufail's (2015) article, other scholars have substantiated their arguments as to the causal role of poor police-community relations (Newburn et al, 2018).

This is – as Christian Garland reminds us – reflective of a broader trend across the United Kingdom. Many if not most of the grievances of August 2011 remain, and in many cases have worsened that much more: especially the state's ramping up of the police's use of Stop and Search disproportionately and cynically used against Black youths. Stop and Search is itself very similar to the SUS laws which led to the 1981 Brixton Uprisings, and which contributed directly and indirectly to the whole UK igniting three months later in the riots of that July.

What has changed in the last ten years is the re-emergence of social democratic discourses (manifested by some of Salford's new generation of politicians) and upswings in various protest movements. This perhaps implies a shift from 'street politics' to more formal methods of engagement. At the same time, while class-based resistance to the stigmatising offensives in the public sphere (which accompanied the politics of austerity) are evident in Salford, such resistance exists primarily at a discursive level (Jeffery et al, 2020) and the mechanisms by which working class people may engage in politics remain limited. Moreover, possibilities for political solutions to the causes of urban riots have in part been circumscribed by a polity increasingly cleaved on the basis of re-emerging and newly emerging divisions of nation and cultural identity.

With many of its underlying problems unresolved, and developing contentious forces in our midst, the riots in some regard offer a 'glimpse of the future' – as Christian Garland's contribution to this section would contend. For Garland, the riots were an imperfect response to social injustice 'from below'. An all-too brief expression by those cast off by a society which demands their compliance without giving them either its promises or a shred of recognition.

Many of those who controlled the streets and took what they wanted for five days have been referred to as the underclass, lumpen proletariat and precariat. Depending on the source, they have also been referred to as a section of what was once easily understood as the working class or proletariat. A definition of the social subject who gave a glimpse of the future in August 2011 could be formed from all five: all of them being accurate, and none of them being absolutely without flaws.

The memory of the 2011 Riots in a year that was compared to 1968 no less, viewed from August 2021 evokes their legacy as a glimpse of the future. Riots can form an authentic example of class struggle, and those of August 2011 were likewise one such authentic and uneven expression. A decade later, the uneven and imperfect glimpse of the future which they gave is a reminder of 'unknown' events to come, which can be expected sooner or later, the catalyst or trigger as unknown as their time and place.

Occupy Wall Street (Michael Boyle)

By September, it was the United States' turn to experience a profound upsurge in novel contentious political activity. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) burst into the public consciousness in September of 2011, starting in Zuccotti Park—located in the financial district in New York City—before spawning Occupy sites across the globe. The movement emerged from the anger that followed the Great Recession, and OWS activists focused on bringing attention to extreme wealth and income inequality using slogans such as "We are the 99%," that pitted most of the world against the wealthiest 1%. Although OWS was able to capture the anger and frustration felt by many in the wake of the financial crisis, the movement was also noted for lacking a clear organizational structure, adopting a decentralized leadership approach, and for the presence of activists representing a wide array of loosely connected goals.

As Michal Boyle's (2015) work on journalistic coverage of the movement has noted, these characteristics often became the primary ways that news coverage would describe the movement. Instead of providing discussion of the movement's broad goals of income and wealth inequality, news coverage often focused on the disorganization and confusion that marred some Occupy sites. As a result, the view that many people watching or reading at home got of OWS didn't always capture a true picture of the movement and what it was trying to achieve.

Of course, the legacy of any social movement is complicated by the media coverage it receives. This is particularly true of movements that attempt more radical change. Indeed, the Occupy movement was, for many of its participants, interested in the radical goal of a fundamental restructuring of the financial system. However, if we look past the mainstream news coverage, we see the important influence OWS had on key political conversations and how that legacy continues to this day. For instance, the seeds of Bernie Sanders' rise from an ndependent U.S. Senator from the small state of Vermont to the cusp of winning the Democratic Presidential nomination were first sown with the Occupy movement (Sanders, 2020). Further, numerous states and localities across the United States have pushed for increases in the minimum wage. Finally, the Occupy Madison (Wisconsin) site evolved into a tiny home encampment. As of June 2021, there were 28 tiny huts located at the site that now provide housing for formerly homeless residents (OccupyMadisonInc.com). This location also includes a shower and laundry facility (Mosiman, 2020). Although most of the public learns about protest and social movements through the media, a closer look beyond the news coverage can reveal intriguing and impactful legacies of social movements like Occupy Wall Street.

Reconsidering the Past

For all the legacies of contention discussed herein, there are plenty more we have not covered. For example, the body of research on contention in the MENA region – the initiating element of the 2011 wave – remains highly pertinent to the study of protest today. As we have seen in the case of Syria's refugee crisis, many of the complications, processes, and dynamics found in these cases not only present readily today, but continue to have complex effects. Further research on this first element of the 2011 wave is exemplified in these pages in: Ziad Adawn's (2017) work on Syrian 'flying' protests; Jillian Schwedler's (2020) study of material obstacles to protest in Jordan; or Ayman El-Desouky's (2017) study of connective agency in the Egyptian revolution. Conversely, work on why pro-democracy activity was *avoided* in many Gulf nations is also instructive in understanding how certain sources of regime stability have since been replicated elsewhere (Mitchell, Dinkha and Abdulhamid 2018).

The spatial dynamics of the 2011 wave are also ripe for reconsideration – as we saw in the case of the movement of the squares. Further reflections on the role of space in the 2011 wave can be found in Sophie Toupin's (2013) work on physical and virtual occupations during the Occupy movement and Samantha Fletcher's (2016) study of how the dynamics of these physical spaces interacted with the movement's brokerage mechanisms. Alternatively, we can examine temporal factors, such as the role of 'flashpoints' in triggering events such as the 2011 England Riots (Moran and Waddington 2015).

Above all, the 10th anniversary of the 2011 wave presents an excellent opportunity to begin thinking about it - and its various constituent cases – in the *longue durée*, considering their origins, episodic characteristics, legacies today and roles in the future. We hope these brief reflections will assist others in such a task.

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