

The Social Protest Ethical Challenges of the Political Leadership

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Abstract

Inspired by the Arab Spring, a series of transnational social movements, such as the Indignants and Occupy Wall Street, began gathering speed in 2011 in Europe, Turkey, the U.S., and South America, Ukraine. The protest, as a form of mass opportunism against political practices and behavior, questions the status-quo and evokes the need for revision of the moral and ethical values of the political leadership models. Moral values are not merely standards by which we measure our character, activities and social behavior. They also contain emotional and provocative ideas, for which men and women fight and die. An examination of the transforming forces, which translate ideas into activity, serves as a springboard both for explaining the leaders and followers understandings of the political moral standards, and the justification of this morality. The relationship leader-followers should be examined from the perspective of the influence and monitoring that followers have over the political decision-making process and practices. Independently that the political morality relies on different from the common understanding for right and wrong, it should not be viewed as self-sufficient closed system. The social movements came to illustrate that the Utilitarian principles of justifying the political behavior are only one side of the coin. The appeal for revision of the ethical standards in politics is an appeal for recognition of the moral values as a fundamental prerequisite for justifying the political morality.

Keywords: political morality, social movements, protest, leadership, moral values

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Introduction

The registered protests during the last couple years are more than five hundreds with different intensity, number of the participants, and the variety of grievances driving them. What makes the social movements so difficult for exploration is the uniqueness of every protest activity, caused by cultural, political, institutional, financial differences and the inability to be covered by a single criterion of examination. The protest, as a form of mass opportunism against political practices and behavior, questions the status-quo and evokes the need for revision of the moral and ethical values of the political leadership models. In a more general sense, the protest is a form of collective action and of social movement participation at the same time, demanding for political or social change.

In their study “The world protests 2006-2013” Sara Burke, Isabel Ortiz and collective (Burke, Ortiz, Berredá and Cortés, 2013), examined 843 protests in 87 countries, covering 90% of the world population. What the researchers found out was that the protest became one of the most preferable social movement, increasing its multiplicity from local (regional) to global, thanks to the simplified interindividual communication and organization in the social networks (Facebook, Twiter etc.), the transfer of legislative and political sovereignty from the Nation states to the International political and transnational nongovernmental organizations, and the lack of trust in the political representation system and morality. To cite the example of their empirical study, the number of registered protests during 2010 double in comparison to 2006, and the number of conducted protests during the first half of 2013 double the protest activities from 2006. The participation in only 15 of the largest protests during 2013 is more than 200 million. Record is placed from the protest in India (100 million protesters), which became the most massive social movement in the world history.

Many examples could be given to illustrate that the social protest became the “silent revolution” of 21st century. The revolution, as the most extreme form of social movement, always aims at recreating a community, establishing a new social order. On the other hand, social scientists have agreed that the social protest, in its contemporary dimensions, lead new ways of approaching social and political transformation. The term “silent revolution” became increasingly popularized in the study “The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics” by Ronald Inglehart (Inglehart, 1977), in which the author use a political-culturological approach to major the intergenerational shift in the values of the population in advanced industrial societies. The new technological and social changes has impacted and transformed the young generations, developing a new cultural, financial and moral standard. The transformation affects both private and public life, forming a new social and political identity. Viewed in this perspective, the increasing of the social protest activity and its intensity has been expected and predictable, and should not be examined as a phenomenon, but as a challenge in front of the political agenda. Following the same direction of thought, Alain Touraine, a French sociologist and social movements’ expert, indicates that the social protest movements today are completely different from in the past. Instead of labor and industrial conflicts, the contemporary dimensions of the social movements are engaged in social, cultural and political confrontation, forming a notion of social movement that “[...] does not describe part of “reality” but is an element of a specific mode of constructing social reality.” (Touraine, 1985). The social and political secularization created a new form

of social order, where the previous metasocial principles lost their functionality of transmitter between private and public life, social and political order, and individual and communitarian rights. An exploration of this question will provide us with a greater understanding of the factors that facilitate the social protest movements.

Why people protest?

A most profound analysis of the factors that serve to facilitate the social protest movements, would provide with a sound basis for understanding the nature of contemporary social conflicts and would clarify the direction, which the political leaders has to follow, in order to deal with the problem. Important for the purpose of this article is to find an answer of the questions as what makes people go out of their comfortable homes to protest for the common good and socially beneficial causes? What they protest for/or against? Why they choose the protest as a form for reaching their political goals?

Numerous factors have led to the protests in particular which I'd like to group in four categories: economic and financial factors, political factors and globalization, cultural identity and social rights of people, and emotional. With the proviso, that the classification presented and followed in this study does not claim to be complete or exhaustive, neither the criteria, used to group the factors pretends to comprise every particular case of social protest interaction. Furthermore, a variety of the social protests include grievances from more than one group, so the division of the factors is in greater sense conditionally.

Economic and financial factors include grievances such economic injustice (also named distributive social injustice, which refers to the fairness of outcomes), unemployment, labor conditions, inequality, increasing prices of commodities, increasing taxes, social and health welfare, low living standards, reform of public services, high fuel and energy prices, the increasing gap between rich and poor people and other. The greatest part of protest actions are driven by economic and financial causes. In Sara Burke and collective research they took 488 from all 843 examined. (Burke et al., 2013). Economic inequality and poverty alone does not lead to social unrest and protest activity. In many of the poorest countries, which are less affected by technological and commercial progress, social stratification and polarization of society remain unknown process, and they stay untouched for any social movement activity. What became a driving force for any social beneficial activity, according to James Chowning Davies (Davies, 1962) is the feeling of economic deprivation. In the fast developing and growing societies, the level of population dissatisfaction increases when periods of stagnation and recession occur and the social status of the individuals does not undergo the same pace of development as in the past. For example, the financial crisis of 2008 marked the industrial and capitalist societies with the scar of the mass uncertainty, distrust in the effectiveness of the financial and political institutions and doubt in moral principles, which had served primary as manipulation mechanism for control over the majority, rather than an ethical code for social common good and welfare. We know from previous studies, which examine the feeling of dissatisfaction and its relation to the common good and welfare that the driving force for individual and group unrest measures in qualitative comparative dimensions. To clarify I'll cite the example of the lower standard national states in the European Union, where the expected potentialities of social unrest at times exceed

those in the economically stable or developing countries. The unfavorable social when compared to other, better examples of individuals and groups, is the trigger that transform motivation into activity. Last but not least, the technological progress and the conversion of the society into consuming society, introduces a new set of metrics for evaluation of public welfare and common good. The new criteria of happiness are measured with the possession of commodities and the ability to sustain the consumerist appetite, rather in the relationship with the other.

Political factors and globalization group includes: political factors – nonfunctional institutional and bureaucratic system, lack of real democracy, corruption, lack of morality and responsibility in policy, failure to receive justice from the legal system, transparency and accountability in policy, war and military actions, immigration policies, global pollution and environmental problems, protectionism of imperialistic and transnational trade companies, double standards in policies, authoritarian and non-democratic governments. Most of the protests start from economical and financial grievances to turn into political. In globalized societies the border between politics and economics is very thin and in variety of dimensions both areas frequently overlap. Globalization processes have changed the role of the sovereign state from monopolist administrator of power, remisng its place on account of the transnational organizations. The Polish sociologist and social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, in his book “Liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), examines the process of deconstruction of the national state, and the separation of the power from the state. Globalization processes has turned the new modernity into “liquid modernity”. The symbols and ideals of identification do not exist anymore, not in the way we know them. “[...] Modernity creates a new and unpredicted setting for individual life, confronting individuals with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human action and long term plans. The individuals have to find other and different ways to organize their life.” (Dimitrov, n.d.). No longer are we to solve our problems collectively through Politics (with a capital P), but it is put upon the individual to look to themselves to solve their life-problems. In the period of liquid modernity people have lost their sense of home (in material and spiritual sense) and the sense of belonging to the political agenda. The state has lost its function as accumulator of identity and a circulator of power. The state in its contemporary dimensions became impotent to face the demands of its citizens – for protection, identification and welfare. Despite the fact that the nation states worldwide are experiencing a relative decline in their capacities to control the whereabouts of global corporations, to provide social welfare for their citizens, and to contain the post-Cold War world threats, from the other side, it’s too early to proclaim the death of nation states.

The gap between the individual and the state increases, giving rise to sceptical and pessimistic estimates of the futility of political institutions. The individual became an isolated nomad, looking for new forms of socialization. More and more people are organized in social networks, which explain why the largest social protest gathered speed and popularity through social networks, such as Facebook and Twiter. All these processes lead to crisis of authority and a growing lack of trust in the democratic institutions. From this perspective, the protest is a way to rebuild communities, forging connections between people in an attempt to create a new social reality.

Cultural identity and social rights, such as ethnic and racial rights, women's rights, rights to freedom of assembly, speech and media freedom; religious affiliation; all ethical issues as abortion, technological and genetic progress, rights of homosexual, bisexual and transgendered people and other, are related to the right of particular minority groups in the society for self-determination and cultural identification. The formation of identity is not anymore a priority of the authorities or institutions. Their role, as a regulator and guardians of the public order and welfare, is the recognition of the right for self-determination and the establishment of effective policies for its preservation.

Emotional factors as solidarity, distrust; feeling of anger, insecurity and uncertainty, desire of the individual for social significance, and other, are documented from the social and psychological researchers as the trigger that moves the individuals into activity. Not to be misunderstood, it's necessary to clarify that the emotional factors are not of paramount importance to drive the social unrest, but some social scientists seemed to ignore the force that the last has to turn motivation into activity. In a 2010 research on the social psychology of protests, Dutch psychologists Jacquelin van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2010) proposed a model for protest motivation that includes not just the grievances of the participants and their expectations about the political efficacy of the movement they're participating in, but also factors like emotional intensity and "social embeddedness." Klandermans and van Stekelenburg began to explore the role of collective identity in protest behavior. They argued that the generation of a collective identity is crucial for a movement to emerge. The identity in Klandermans' study has been seen in three layers: 1. *personal identity* (the identity as the understanding of who we're) and 2. *the identity as a place in the society* (who we're in a relation with the others), 3. *the collective identity or group identity* (cognitions shared by a group of individuals). In their study, Klandermans and van Stekelenburg focus over the question why group identification is such a powerful motivational push to protest. Human beings live socially, think socially, and grow up and develop in a society. The identification with others is accompanied by an awareness of similarity and shared fate with those who belong to the same category. It provides a security and certainty. When the level of collective identity increases at the expense of the individual identity, the individual get more dependent on the group approval and acceptance. Any threat from outside the group becomes a threat against the individual, who is identifying with the group. The relationship becomes emotional, because the individual feels that has to testify his loyalty and group solidarity. It is now generally agreed that the collective identity is not an invention of the late 20th and beginning of 21st century, while in the meantime, we're witnessing remarkable increasing of the social movements during the same period. In fact, what appears to be more convincing is the phenomenon of the invented "paralleled socialization". Using the contemporary channels for communication with the others, the individual engages in social activity. "Space opens up for the ethical imagination, for creating a difference in relation to ourselves which gives us the potential to imagine new possibilities for self-other relation, for sharing a world with others, for alternative forms of the political." (Moore, 2013) The political reality is not self-sufficient and independent system. The relations in the political reality are relations between institutions in a juridical sense, but also relations between individuals in social dimension. The utilitarian principle for differentiation of the political morality should not serve to justify the double standards in ethical behavior. In the same order of thought, differentiation should be placed between

justification (as an act of approval) and the moral judgment (as an act of ethical evaluation). Moral sense and not reason is what distinguishes man from all other entities in the universe. Moral sense, not reason, is also what drives people to interaction between each other and to active behavior. When protestors are claiming for “more morality in politics”, the demands are for moral equality, where moral relation is between individuals, but social relation is between leaders and followers. To sum up this discussion so far, at a very fundamental level the political morality and general morality overlap, in terms of a moral relation between individuals.

Criticism of the protests includes accusations of a political agenda rather than a social one with revelations of funding from specific organizations and parties in opposition. The media sources claimed that the spontaneous protests in Israel had actually been planned three months and orchestrated by left-wing organizations and The National Left. Many researches examine the organization, ways of funding and the organization of the social movements, and the interaction between social movement organizations. What is in particular important for the purpose of this article is the criticism that accused the 'protestors' of not publicizing specific goals, the lack of visibility of their goals, and the damaging impact of media focus being on a few activists. Similar was the situation with the student protest in Bulgaria, which started the spring of 2013 against corruption, the political protectionism of the oligarchy and the lack of morality of the political representatives. The protestors have been charged that their demands are too abstract and unclear. But this served primary as an excuse for the political leaders not to participate in a political debate with the protestors.

The challenges in front of the political leadership

According to Laza Kekic from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) “of particular importance in sparking unrest in recent times appears to have been an erosion of trust in governments and institutions: a crisis of democracy.” (Kekic, 2013). The crisis in the political system is a crisis of legitimacy. The protestors feel the alienation of the political institutions and leaders from the rest of the society. Because the decisions, made by the political leaders, are delivered to them, recipients should not identify with them. The political morality is a subservient to the same standards as the rest of the society. The utilitarian theory has been used a long time to justify unethical practices in the political processing, a tradition set firstly by Machiavelli.

The new ethical political challenges of the political leadership need an effective means to restore trust in the political system functionality. Based on this logic, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative rationality seems most appropriate for this purpose. (Habermas, 1992). Habermas' discourse ethics is his attempt to explain the implications of communicative rationality in the sphere of moral insight and normative validity. It is a complex theoretical effort to reformulate the fundamental insights of Kantian deontological ethics in terms of the analysis of communicative structures. This means that it is an attempt to explain the universal and obligatory nature of morality by evoking the universal obligations of communicative rationality. For Habermas, an action/decision can be morally approved and validated, only if all the subjects to whom the decision refers participate in the dialogue voluntary and with equal rights. At the same time, Habermas' model establishes the legitimacy and morality of pluralism. That is, a diversity of communities and participants, while following the same set of rules regarding discourse, may establish diverse sets of

norms as legitimate for given, but not all, communities. (This pluralism offsets especially postmodern critiques of modern rationality and technology as "totalizing" and thus totalitarian.)

The only issue I'm concerned with applying Habermas' discourse model in a political context is that the political institutional system could not be placed in relations of equality with the other social actors. The political institutions operate and act as contributors of power, from which position they serve the function as administrators of public powers. Therefore, the moral dialogue would be possible only between the leaders and followers as only capable of moral sense and evaluation.

Conclusion

Countries with long democratic experience are adapting easier with the increasing protest movements. India's anti-corruption protests did not lead to immediate change, but they raised graft up the national agenda, with the promise of gradual reform. Even the protest do not achieve the desirable goals, it's doing a pressure and monitoring over the decisions in the public sector, which needs a respond. Brazil's president, Dilma Rousseff, wanted a national debate on renewing politics, which would be neither easy nor quick. But protest could yet improve democracy in emerging countries, getting a control function not only in the political institutional system, but also in forming new social identity and moral standards, which are not politically delivered but politically shaping.

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