The necessity of strategy

Vincent Bevins, *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (London: Wildfire, 2023). 352pp., £25.00 hb, 978 1 03541 227 3

Vincent Bevins is quick to point out that he's neither a philosopher, nor a historian, nor a revolutionary. Instead, as he repeatedly reminds us, with more than a whiff of Socratic ignorance, he's 'just a journalist'. It is true that a real strength of this book comes from its journalistic inflection. *If We Burn* is rich with sympathetic and exhilarating vignettes of the experiences of the activists who took part in the 'mass protest explosions' of the second decade of the twenty-first century: in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Turkey, Ukraine, Hong Kong, South Korea, Chile, and especially Brazil. Yet, this is not solely a work of journalism. In *If We Burn* Bevins makes a clear and provocative *argument* that is highly pertinent for contemporary social and political theorists and for political philosophers. The argument is both implicit in his rich narrative presentation of the uprisings and then explicit in the final two, more theoretical, chapters. He convincingly submits that the dominant strategy adopted by the large protest movements in the period 2010-2019 was ill-conceived and self-limiting. He rejects their ideological commitment to horizontalism, consensus decision-making, and the strategy of spontaneous mass demonstrations and occupations. Instead, Bevins argues that left-activists engaged in future protests should return to appointing democratic representatives and should adopt a clear organisational structure. Perhaps most significantly, he calls for a recalibration of priorities: more energy and time should allocated to strategising how to achieve desired 'ends', rather than obsessing over 'means'. There is a warning writ large throughout the book too: that the past lack of a long-term strategy and the weaknesses of the tactics deployed by these movements led not merely to their failure to achieve their objectives, but worse, it led to a world being fashioned which was diametrically opposed to the values of the left-leaning protestors. Millions of activists getting 'fucked up on revolutionary *élan*' failed to enable progressive social transformation. As Bevins argues, many of 'these countries experienced something worse than failure. Things went backward'. Crucially, the mass protests movements discussed are understood as part of a story which ends in more repression, more neoliberalism, more inequality.

The title, *If We Burn*, is a nod to Finn Lau, a democracy campaigner in Hong Kong, and a user of the LIHKG forum, who advocated 'Lam Chau', which translates literally as 'embrace fry', or mutually assured destruction. This was rapidly converted to a more popular Western rendering, linked to a line from *The Hunger Games*: 'If we burn, you burn with us'. Bevins commences his analysis with a tragic fire, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a market trader in Tunisia, in December 2010. This marked the start of the 'Arab Spring' and the pattern of mass protest movements that swept the world throughout the decade. In 2010, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen could all be categorised as 'authoritarian-neoliberal' states (this is equally the case in 2024). Following brutal 'structural adjustment' programmes their populations struggled with stripped-back public services, political repression, poor employment prospects, corrupt officials and spectacular wealth inequalities. It is thereby highly symbolic that Bouazizi was driven to his desperate act by a illegitimate seizure of his goods by a police officer as he struggled to make a living.

While Bevins should be commended for his attention to detail across his portrayal of the various uprisings of the decade, the argumentative power of the book comes from Bevins implicitly showing what unites all of these revolutionary movements, rather than by his impressive knowledge of their particularities. His method is essentially to show, with delicacy and sensitivity to specifics, a common dynamic. His argument is presented at first through a delicate form of disclosing analysis, showing rather than telling. To this end, I want to draw a crude ideal-type of a movement in this period, abstracting the commonalities that Bevins discloses.

Across the ten mass protest movements Bevins details, one can see the following pattern recurring:

1. A heterogeneous mass of people who are dissatisfied with the status quo converge in public, in a leaderless,

horizontal movement.

2. At first this group constitutes a significant proportion of secular progressives, opposed to authoritarian-neoliberalism.
3. Well publicised instances of state-repression drive further people on to the streets to swell their numbers.
4. These protests are characterised by a commitment to 'no stage', to having no leaders, and they have no clearly articulated set of demands.
5. As they gain critical momentum, the protestors become more heterogeneous, their ranks swelled by organisations with more conservative, nationalist, religious and neoliberal orientations.
6. The protestors ultimately unite, or are read as uniting, behind a call to topple a 'corrupt' and authoritarian leader.
7. The leader is ultimately toppled, with the mass of people initially celebrating, expecting this to lead to improved conditions.
8. In the aftermath of the regime falling a coalition of organised reactionary elements cohere to reinforce neoliberalism and authoritarianism, outmanoeuvring horizontally organised left-wing activists.
9. These left-wing activist suffer burn-out and depression, or are arrested.
10. Interviewed with the benefit of hindsight, the left-leaning activists state they wished they had had a clearer long-term strategy and had been less obsessed with horizontalism.

I stress again, that this is obviously an ideal-type abstraction, not one presented by Bevins himself. However, the above abstraction is the story which is told, at its core, over and over in *If We Burn*: in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Turkey, Ukraine, South Korea. The implicit argument is simple: look at what happens when you try a leaderless approach devoid of long-term strategic thinking. Look at what happens over and over and over again. Failure, burn out, entrenched authoritarianism and neoliberalism.

I am not an international relations or a political science scholar, so I shall leave it to those more qualified than me to comment on whether Bevins' portrayal of each uprising is accurate, or whether any of the states discussed are actually closer to meaningful democracy than they were before 2010. With those caveats aside, I found Bevins' narrative convincing and I thus turn to the final, more theoretical chapters ('Reconstructing the Past' and 'Building the Future'), where he presents an explicit argument on strategy, impressed and receptive. In these final two chapters, I read Bevins as making three convincing arguments: a) a rejection of both horizontalism and of b) amorphous spontaneous protest, and instead, drawing out of this, c) an appeal for democratic, structured left-organising, with clear representatives, engaging in pre-meditated, long-term strategic thinking.

Bevins' rejection of horizontalism is not to be misinterpreted as a call for some Leninist vanguard. Instead, he urges left-activists to have clear structures of democratic representation so they are capable of articulating their demands and can fight back against co-optation. Bevins advances this argument delicately throughout the whole book, but it comes most clearly through the voice of the Egyptian human rights activist and investigative journalist Hossam Bahgat, who, in hindsight, laments: 'we thought representation was elitism, but actually it is the essence of democracy'. Through Bahgat, Bevins is pointing to a rejection of an ideological commitment shared by the protest movements of this period: to having no fixed representatives, to a rejection of hierarchy, to an ideological horizontalism. This was typified by the slogan 'no stage', which captured the sentiment that nobody should be in control of the movement, neither speaking on its behalf, nor controlling who has the capacity to speak for it. Across his analysis of the various movements, Bevins demonstrated how an aspiration for true horizontality left the uprisings without a coherent voice. This did not mean that plurality and ambiguity was communicated to the world and to those in power. Rather, both international journalists and those with institutional traction on the ground, served to create and shape a narrative, displacing the concerns of the initial left-leaning activists. International journalists framed the uprisings as part of a broader liberal teleology, 'toppling a brutal autocratic leader', and as part of the ushering in of liberal modernity in the form of human rights and a free market order. They were provided ample assistance in doing so by the various NGOs on the ground, who were funded to operate within a similar liberal-capitalist horizon. (As Bevins comments, the Eurocentricism of the media coverage is reflected in the name 'Arab Spring'

itself: 'spring' is not a cause for celebration in the Arab World, it means temperatures are about to soar). More problematically still, organised right-wing factions on the ground were able to articulate and communicate demands proficiently to local media outlets and to the executive, co-opting the movements' energy and displacing calls for economic justice.

It is not merely the case that these uprisings rejected having nominated representatives to articulate the peoples' demands; rather, on principle, many had no organisational structure whatsoever. Indeed, their amorphous fluidity was held as a virtue. Tahrir Square was famously presented as a carnivalesque of prefiguration, where a new world was swimming into view. To enforce structure would be sacrilege, reactionary, authoritarian. The problem is that across all the uprisings Bevins discusses, while left-activists refused on principal to organise and hierarchise, established right-leaning forces did so to great effect. In nearly every case, organisations with a clear hierarchical structure, whose existence predated the movement itself, were able to shape the protest and steer the uprising into a direction that suited their interests. Hossam Bhagat is again turned to here, for words of sage reflection. What should activists do today? 'Organise. Create an organised movement'. Bevins is also clear on the importance of premeditation here. Activists should not wait for a spark to organise. This is where he is perhaps most didactic and explicit, offering a clear injunction: do not wait for a mass uprising to form an organisation. Rather, 'it was the groups that were already there, prepared, that did the best when the explosion came – whether they were Hoxhaist Communists in Tunisia or the nationalist extremists in Ukraine, these groups punched above their weight'.

For Bevins, 'organizations are effective and representation is important'. Activists should acknowledge that leaders and 'vertical structures, and hierarchies tend to emerge in large groups of people', the solution is not to prevent this, but to 'construct a self-consciously democratic organisation that ensures this happens in the most

legitimate and transparent ways possible'. His rejection of horizontalism is therefore largely based on historical precedent (look: it fails) and efficacy (it fails because it is not as effective). But there is also an interesting further argument against horizontalism, which emerges briefly and that deserved further space in the book. Horizontalism is also poor because it is *too individualistic*, and in this it reflects a pathological neoliberal subjectivity. Everybody wants to be the leader, everyone wants to have their own understanding of why they are protesting, nobody will sacrifice a portion of their autonomy to be part of a broader, organised movement. It becomes an impotent cult of collective individuality. I would have been interested to have seen this argument fleshed out further.

Personally, I am convinced by Bevins that what is required, learning from the 2010s, is democratically structured organisations, with clear representatives, who are committed to strategic thinking. Thinking about what happens the day after the regime falls matters. When the power vacuum emerges: how are progressive groups going to ensure their values and policy aspirations win the day? For too many groups there was a naïve belief in the glorious victory following the fall of the dictator. As Egyptian activist Mahmoud Salem described it, there was a sense that everything would melt away when Mubarak had gone. Salem compared his innocent belief to a view that all evil would instantly be purged from the kingdom, akin to the destructions of the forces of Sauron when the ring is thrown into Mount Doom in *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Bevins is obviously correct: history shows that is not what happens. Left-activists must strategise how to take control of the political vacuum, merely creating one does not guarantee a progressive future. As Bevins argues, you cannot just burn your car and just hope a better one will come along and replace it. Detailed, situation-specific, dynamic and adaptive strategising is required. In light of insurgent neo-fascisms and the impending existential threat of climate change, and the total failure of neoliberal parties to engage with either meaningfully, the questions Bevins poses are only going to become more relevant for left activism in the years ahead.

Neal Harris

Streaming hammers

Paul Rekret, *Take This Hammer: Work, Song, Crisis* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2024). 200pp., £36.00 hb., 978 1 91338 016 8

The headphones come off. Sore ears. The promise of lively distraction wears thin, and playlists lose their already limited lustre. The troubled relation between labour and leisure spirals, unresolved, forever onward. In *Take This Hammer: Work, Song, Crisis* Paul Rekret mines this familiar tension, tracing the unease with which we encounter music both as circulating commodity and as aesthetic experience which *might* move us against the near-universal drudgery of waged and unwaged labour.

Take This Hammer draws its title from the 'hammer songs' of primarily Black, predominantly forced, labourers across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each sung to 'animate and pace a hammer striking steel, an axe splitting wood, a hoe shaping soil'. In the titular variation a worker exclaims in rejection: 'This old hammer killed John Henry / But it won't kill me, Oh boys, won't kill me.' Rekret posits that in this chronicle of social life in flight from the brutality of segregation, there is no attempt at reconciliation with work, but instead only an insistence on escaping from labour altogether. In varied meditations on 'the song', moving from synthetic New Age experimentation to the equivocations of Vaporwave, Rekret sketches how any such oppositional culture may still be heard in the disorienting space-time of our post-financial crisis economy. As an 'unstable vessel', which bears that which is 'unallowed, insurgent and perverse', he attempts to make sense of how 'the song' may yet still continue to function as a site of struggle. With a commentary on the fragmentary paths of modernism as a background, this is above all suggested by Rekret, albeit at points elliptically, in how music may initiate a 'different experience of time' that in myriad ways opposes