Leading from the Periphery and Network Collective Action

Political revolutions, economic meltdowns, mass ideological conversions and collective innovation adoptions occur often; nevertheless, when they happen, they tend to be the least expected. Based on the paradigm of “leading from the periphery”, this groundbreaking analysis offers an explanation for such spontaneity and apparent lack of leadership in contentious collective action. Contrary to existing theories, the author argues that network effects in collective action originating from marginal leaders can benefit from a total lack of communication. Such network effects persist in isolated islands of contention instead of overarching action cascades, and are shown to escalate in globally dispersed, but locally concentrated networks of contention. This is a trait that can empower marginal leaders and set forth social dynamics distinct from those originating in the limelight. Leading from the Periphery and Network Collective Action provides evidence from two Middle Eastern uprisings, as well as behavioral experiments of collective risk taking in social networks.

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Leading from the Periphery and Network Collective Action

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The initial idea of this project occurred to me early during my stay at Yale. At a seminar James Scott pondered if the French Revolution was called a “revolution” in 1789 and if not, he asked when and how that event came to be known as a revolution to its instigators as well as the global audience. That curious point led me into a phase of archival research on revolutions and similar historical turning points. During my time in the archives I noticed how much the narrative of the momentous events I was studying had been transformed in the prism of time, and felt motivated to pursue a more careful exploration of their origins. As I was researching the candid media reflections of the Iranian and Russian Revolutions I became aware of occasional gaps in media activity during the events, an observation that later, combined with the predictions of a number of network stylizations I was simultaneously developing in Fall 2010, became the starting point and a major building block of this book. The protest wave of 2011 unfolded right in time, providing an opportunity to see similar historical processes as they happened in real time. Hence, my research strategy shifted from exploring the archives to surveying live processes of collective contestation, mainly taking place in the theaters of Middle Eastern capitals, and later led into a final phase of controlled experimentation with the dynamics of collective risk taking in a laboratory setting.

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