The Bengal Army Mutiny, the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street

In 1857, 142 regiments of the East India Company's Bengal Native Army in India mutinied against their commanders, leading to one of the most serious military confrontations between Indians and the British colonial rule until its dissolution. In 1989, demonstrations occurred throughout East Germany, including weekly demonstration marches from the Nikolai Church to the Karl Marx Square in Leipzig. Starting at the end of 2010, the Arab Spring has in many nations revolved around a weekly cycle of protests that culminate after Friday prayer.

What do these events have in common? Hayagreeva Rao and Sunasir Dutta have published an article in Administrative Science Quarterly showing that religious festivals were the key trigger of the Bengal Army mutiny. This was because mutiny, which is a collective act of disobedience, involves enormous risk for every participant. It will only be attempted if each one is certain that the others also want to join. That creates a coordination problem. Under normal circumstances, army discipline will make a mutiny impossible, but the religious festivals allowed a "free space" for the soldiers to mix with each other and locals. They could also express opinions and hear others, and could understand that their own resentment was shared. For the Bengal Army, the resentment was around cultural and religious threats from British rule. In addition, there was a specific rumor that they would be supplied with a new rifle that used ammunition that was greased with fat from pigs and beef, a gross violation of religious norms. By itself, the rumor did not start the mutiny, but when combined with religious festivals it did.

And that brings us to the Berlin Wall and the Arab Spring. Just as the soldiers of the Bengal army lived in an army that was organized to maintain discipline and prevent mutinies – it even employed informants and spies – so did East German and Arab activists live inside states organized to prevent uprisings. East Germans had reason to protest for a long time, but organized repression made it difficult. In order to protest, it was necessary to solve the coordination problem of learning whether others also shared the same resentments and were also willing to risk protesting. The marches in Leipzig were astutely organized as peace prayers, which were then allowed to morph into nonviolent protests. Similarly, in many nations, Arab Spring protests took advantage of the Mosques as a natural assembly points and the Friday prayer as the most important prayer of the week.

In other nations with stronger secular anti-government movements, the "free space" was created differently. Instead of using a specific day and time, the protesters captured a specific place, like the Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. This is the same strategy used by the "Occupy Wall Street" movement. An interesting feature of this strategy is that constant occupation of a specific location fits the staffing patterns of the government much better because it pits the usual full-time security force against full-time (and presumably scarce) activists. The protest peaks generated by religious free spaces overwhelm security forces by a mass of full- and part-time activists in a short time window. The difference in the unemployment rates of Cairo and Manhattan gives a clue to why the Egyptian movement had more staying power than Occupy Wall Street: there were more full-time activists available in Cairo.

Rao and Dutta's key point is that insurgencies are ultimately about the ability to organize and coordinate, just like normal organizations are. The special feature of movements like the ones mentioned here is that they are "Organizational Weapons of the Weak," used against those who are usually better organized and with greater control of resources. That makes them rare and interesting examples of creating organized behaviour out of nearly nothing.

Hayagreeva Rao and Sunasir Dutta. 2012. Free Spaces as Organizational Weapons of the Weak: Religious Festivals and Regimental Mutinies in the 1857 Bengal Native Army. AdministrativeScience Quarterly. 57: 625-668

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