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ERIC L. NELSON

Subversion of Social Movements by Adversarial Agents

Social movements share a desire for structural change, and a willingness to do something about it.¹ This broad definition explains the actions of members of an Iron Workers local picketing a non-union construction site; Ukrainian Femen activists who, while visiting Turkey, stage a protest against sulfuric acid attacks on women and girls;² 15-M public gatherings in Spain that protest the political power of banks and cuts to social programs;³ and, the series of revolts which began in Tunisia in December 2010, that spread in some manner to seventeen other countries in the Middle East and north Africa. Evidently, the domain of social movements varies from local to trans-national. As used here, social movements can include matters of politics, religion, ethnicity, labor, economy, and justice, among others.

OPPOSING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Regardless of size, one fact about social movements is unchanging: their physical embodiment is always local. That is, social movements are the sum of the actions of individuals who are themselves in only one place—omnipresence is something that exists only in fantasy movies. Thus, efforts by opposing organizations to subvert social movements are

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themselves always local. National intelligence may perhaps, through the monitoring of social media and electronic communications, identify individuals who are planning a protest. Ultimately though, specific operators personally carry out lawful or sometimes unlawful acts of subversion, openly or covertly, in acting against targeted persons located in specific places.

The Occupy movement provides a case in point. On 27 September 2011 protesters occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City. Within three weeks, other dissidents were staging occupations in more than 900 cities in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States.⁴ What started as a local social movement in New York City morphed, within a month, into one with global status, coordinated through the use of social and electronic media. A survey of Occupy members showed that 66 percent regularly use Facebook, 29 percent regularly use Twitter,⁵ and that these tools were strategically used in real time to coordinate actions.⁶ One month after its inception, more than 400 Occupy Facebook pages had been created, with more than 172,000 Facebook users joining them.⁷

The axiom of the local predicts that acts of official subversion against the occupiers must be carried out at the local level. That happened over the course of a few days in the middle of November 2011 as local law enforcement officers dismantled local occupations. Police made a massive show of force in riot gear, arrested occupiers, and put up fences to prevent re-entry, usually conducting their operations at times when the media was least likely to be present.⁸ The fact that similar tactics were used in dozens of locales over a short period of time is not a coincidence. Strategic planning was worked out in advance via large-scale telephone conferences. The Police Executive Research Forum organized teleconferences for law enforcement leaders, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors organized telephone meetings for city leaders.⁹

One development illustrates the potential harm which can be inflicted upon a larger social movement by official saboteurs operating at the local level. In 2003, the hacker group Anonymous emerged, made up of members spread across the globe. Their stated goals were, and still are, to promote Internet freedom, protect freedom of speech,¹⁰ and oppose governments and corporations that they believe are oppressive.¹¹ Anonymous has since then hacked into and harassed a wide variety of governments (Algeria, Australia, Egypt, Iran, Tunisia), corporations (Sony, Fox, LinkedIn, Church of Scientology), and federal agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).¹²

One Anonymous member, "Sabu," believed to have been a hacker for more than a decade,¹³ was thought to be the mastermind behind many cyber attacks.¹⁴ A single mistake allowed the FBI to identify him: on one

occasion he logged into a chat room without first cloaking himself with an anonymizer.¹⁵ Taken into custody, Hector Monsegur agreed to return to hacking under FBI handling.¹⁶ Monsegur's cooperation led to the arrest of five important hackers.¹⁷ This resulted in an immediate panic among Anonymous members. As one member reported, "Everyone is really scared . . . people are freaking out . . . everyone's in shock."¹⁸ Although damage assessments are premature, experts predict that the induction of mistrust will have a chilling effect upon the group.¹⁹

Categories of Opposition

Social movement failure—the goal of all subversive effort directed towards them—can be divided into two categories. The first, *petit* failure, is situation specific. The New York FBI agents' handling of Hector Monsegur provides an example of this type of failure. Though Anonymous was not brought down by the Monsegur subversion, damage was inflicted on the group's morale. The second type, grand failure, is the point in time at which a specific social movement ceases to exist, its demise being against the wishes and intent of its leaders and constituency. Grand failure does not include voluntary dissolution, such as planned termination, mergers, and breakaways.

Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) provide an example of grand failure, their final demise being brought about by lawful overt subversion, operationalized by two divisions of the Sri Lankan army. The LTTE began an armed uprising in 1983, demanding a separate homeland for Tamil people. Their tactics included suicide bombings, and hit and run guerrilla attacks. They operated until 16 May 2009 when the entire LTTE leadership and many Tigers were killed in a conventional military battle.²⁰

Another example of grand failure can be found in the multiple efforts by activist attorneys who used litigation in an effort to stop various Reagan/Bush-era Latin American policies, which they viewed as unjust. One participant recalled: "Many of the lawyers who worked on these cases saw themselves as the legal arm of a broader political movement to oppose U.S. intervention abroad and to support Third World revolutions." All their actions were vigorously and lawfully subverted by U.S. government lawyers, who utilized legal proceedings to do so.²¹ If each lawsuit is considered an independent social movement—a reasonable view because attorneys, funding, venues, and issues were different in each case—then their loss in final appeals became the marker of the demise of the movement's effort; that is, the moment of each movement's grand failure.

The purpose here is to examine the intentional subversion of social movements by agents of the organization upon which the social movement

is trying to force change. Included are law enforcement and government intelligence and counterintelligence professionals, social scientists, as well as organizations in the private sector that are often targeted for protest, boycotts, cyber attacks, or other harmful actions. Not all social movements need urgent attention, or vigorous suppression. Some are less threatening, and may be targeted for subversion using less drastic methods. Thus, the potential subversive actions range from nugatory to substantial. Most can be operationalized either covertly or in the open.

THIRTEEN SUPPRESSIVE OR SUBVERSIVE METHODS

Academic studies of social movements generally focus on how they originate and organize, grow and adapt, succeed and fail. Some are primers on how movements adapt and overcome, even in the face of historical failure, limited resources, and a well-organized adversary.²² Others examine structure, or culture, or even the psychology which lays behind social movements.²³ Little attention has been paid to methods of subversion which can be gleaned from a study of the social movement literature, when analyzed from the perspective of an adversarial agent tasked with subverting real world groups.

(1) Suppress Information Flow

Use of the Internet, wireless devices, social media, and other forms of instant communication has grown exponentially in the last few years. Protests and crackdowns are now reported by the media in nearly real time, with participants perhaps believing that revelation—recorded with small digital devices, distributed via satellite phone to foreign news services—will serve to curtail atrocities, a hope which Evgeny Morozov has termed cyber-utopianism.²⁴ He countered such hopeful optimism, noting “Tweets, of course, don’t topple governments; people do.” Time will tell whether technology and the Internet eventually better serve social movements or the governments and organizations they are trying to change. Some evidence suggests the latter may benefit a bit more.

For example, Middle Eastern dictators have made extensive use of American and European technology to monitor and limit information exchange by their citizens. Shopping for devices and software is made easy by the yearly TeleStrategies conference in Dubai, a modern bazaar where dozens of vendors hawk their wares. As Andrew McLaughlin, former White House Deputy Chief Technology Officer, has noted, “The Arab Spring countries all had more sophisticated surveillance capabilities than I would have guessed.”²⁵ For example, Syria, the United Arab Emirates,

Bahrain, and Qatar are known to use the Sunnyvale, California, Blue Coat System's "Bluecoat" devices to block Websites and target Web traffic.²⁶

Of course, as soon as sites are blocked, activists find new routes to them, or develop other new resources. In China, where some blockages by the state are based upon forbidden words such as "Dalai Lama," activists have responded by developing a new lexicon, for example, "harmony" is used to describe censorship, and "getting soy sauce" to mark a topic too hot to talk about.²⁷

Suppression of information flow may prove to be impossible long term and large scale, but short term it may provide a tactical advantage for agents. For example, in San Francisco, on 13 August 2010, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) officials cut off power to cell phone towers in several metro stations targeted for protest, proving to be an effective temporary impairment to the ability of protesters to organize and coordinate activities. Suddenly unavailable were more than just voice and text: protesters also lost use of access to electronic maps, the ability to transmit photographs, the ability to blog and update activist Facebook pages, and so forth.²⁸

(2) Suppress Recruiting Efforts

Ziad Munson has described a method by which social movements can recruit from the social networks of members, such as the neighborhood where they live, sports or hobby teams to which they belong, or perhaps a religious or political assembly they attend.²⁹ Members are alert to spotting acquaintances who have recently experienced a "turning point" in life, events which upset the individual's routine and structure for a while. Turning points might be a divorce, expulsion from school, witnessing an atrocity and wanting revenge, or becoming unemployed. The recruiter first aligns with the target's social need. If the person is lonely, the approach emphasizes friendship. If angry, a shared anger approach may be more appropriate. Persuading or indoctrinating the target with group beliefs can be accomplished later, over time, once a relationship has been established. According to Munson, "Initial activism is important because it is not about abstract ideas...it is about social involvement..." adding that "[t]he mobilization process is first about doing things with others..."³⁰ Four subversive tactics can be directed towards this method of recruitment.

(3) Reduce Recruiting Opportunities

The goal of this effort is to reduce opportunities for recruitment within a member's social networks. This can be done by removing opportunities, perhaps by the use of house arrest, or the suppression or blocking of electronic communication. Overt and obvious physical or electronic

monitoring may have a dampening effect by intimidating the member and those he or she talks with. Punishment and penalties may serve to further demoralize and also to physically remove recruiting opportunities for recruitment by isolating the member. Displacement and relocation may also reduce contact and opportunity.

(4) Develop Attractive Alternatives

This technique involves developing attractive alternatives which compete for the time and commitment of individuals who are primed for activation. For example, an agent might be assigned to subvert Group X, who vandalize laboratories and set experimentation animals free. Covertly, the infiltrated agent might volunteer to create or update Webpages for a few lawful animal rescue groups. That would create the access needed for the agent to place invisible text on the main page of each site, perhaps using 2-point font of the same color as the Webpage background. The hidden text would contain key words that could cause Google to classify the pages as related to Group X, and thus they could be included in search results for Group X. The agent might also insert tiny/hidden hyperlinks so that all the lawful groups link to each other as well as to major animal rights organizations such as the Humane Society. Strategic use of hyperlinks may also increase a search ranking. The result of this type of “reverse honeypot” operation could be that when people Google “Group X,” most or all of the lawful rescue groups may be returned in the search result, placed higher than Group X, and thus they will be more likely viewed first.

(5) Tempt Members to Leave

Similar to the last tactic, this approach is targeted toward individuals who are already active in a social movement. Agents create attractive alternatives, tempting members to leave. Again using Group X as an example, a member might perhaps be drawn away by using an appeal to the emotions approach, wherein someone may be asked to help another (legal) animal rescue group care for a half-dozen orphaned puppies. The targeted individual might be further distracted by ongoing requests for his or her time, such as helping out at animal adoption fairs on the weekends, when the rescue group attempts to find new homes for the orphans under their care.

(6) Reverse Recruiting Using Demoralizing Information

Commitment ambiguity may be created by exposing social movement members and potential recruits to contradictory evidence and beliefs, or

through the use of believable disinformation, causing them to lose faith, momentum, or interest. This is a reverse recruiting effort in which subversive information is deployed with the intention of destabilizing the movement's recruiting efforts, and causing its members to leave the group.

A demoralizing information campaign may expose the hypocrisies and double standards of a movement's leaders, illuminate evidence which undermines the beliefs of the group, or even disseminate convincing misinformation—all of these being designed to weaken individual, even group, commitment and raise a sense of betrayal or personal risk. "Free riders" may be particularly vulnerable to this subversive technique; these individuals are sympathizers who hang around social movements saying the right words and wearing the right clothes,³¹ but whose commitment is shallow. A demoralization campaign may help drive them away from a cause before a turning point occurs in their life that might make them vulnerable to recruitment.

(7) Operationalize Secure/Faux Concessions

James Jasper and Jane Poulson provide an interesting set of examples of tactical suppression which involve the same social movement at two different locations, explained in the next two items.³²

In August 1987 Cornell University's medical school was faced with pressure from a large and vocal animal rights group which was protesting the implantation of electrodes in the brains of cats, who were then subjected to drug addiction experiments. After months of protests, phone calls, letters, harassment, and arrests the university did two things. First, the university president met with one of the protest leaders. Second, the university released a letter indicating that the experiments would end. In fact, the experiments were altered, but not ended. When the protesters found this out they resumed protests until the experiments were, in fact, finally ended.

The university had succeeded in inducing *petit* failure into the social movement—the protests at their campus did, in fact, stop. The resumption of protest did not reflect a weakness of the method but rather a security failure. Therefore, if and when a *faux* concession is employed, it should be located within a nest of convincing false data, such as the rigging of "inspections," or the statements of believable figures. Also, the truth of things must remain a carefully guarded secret.

(8) Expertly Directed, Incessant Proactive Manipulation of Media

In 1988, the same protesters moved to agitate against a project at New York University's medical school, which exposed macaques to toluene. This time the university did not meet with the protesters, but instead waged a media

blitz to reform its image from animal torture center to that of savior of sick little children. The *coup de grâce* was a short film which was released to the media, showing an eight-year-old boy and his mother talking about how animal research saved the lives of children, including him. This time, the school had nine people on its public relations team, specifically tasked with media warfare against the picketers. The protesters were not successful and the research continued.

Four specific tactics are evident in the successful response. First, control of the media must be taken away from the social movement pre-emptively, and it must be directed by experts. Second, the media must be manipulated in order to cast disparaging light upon the movement, so that its constructed public image becomes damaged and is replaced with something harmful. Concurrently, the organization must be portrayed as wholesome and worthwhile. Third, protesters must be denied the legitimization that naturally attends meetings with public or institutional officials. If meetings are held, they must be off-camera, unannounced, and, if suspected, be neither confirmed nor denied. Finally, subversion efforts must be both substantially proactive and rapidly reactive.

(9) *Resource Depletion*

Jules Boykoff has outlined four mechanisms for state repression of targeted social movements: resource depletion, stigmatization, divisive disruption, and intimidation. They are discussed in the next sections.³³

Resource depletion is, in essence, targeting the money, machines, and mobility of a designated group. An overt effort at grand subversion could include asset or property seizure, or the filing of civil litigation which incurs the need for an expensive and thus resource draining defense. Covert subversion could include introduction of computer viruses, or even simple acts such as “accidentally” blocking a car so that it cannot be used to transport activists to a planned event, thus inducing a *petit* failure.

(10) *Stigmatization*

Erving Goffman defined stigma as an attribute which is deeply discrediting. Tribal stigma describes the application of a stigma to a group, who then perpetuate it through their psychological lineage,³⁴ something Rogers Brubaker and his colleagues have exemplified in their description of how Transylvanian Romanians treat ethnic minority Hungarians. For example, Romanians stigmatize Hungarians by falsely referring to them as gypsies, a population who are generally despised across Europe.³⁶ In turn, this becomes a justification for multiple types of subversion by the Romanians,

such as the removal of historic Hungarian icons, and the suppression of Hungarian culture and language.³⁵ Stigma can be employed in demoralization operations.

A current incident of stigmatization can be seen in a 14 March 2012 *New York Times* Op-Ed article in which Greg Smith, a twelve-year employee of Goldman Sachs, resigned as head of overseas equity derivatives.³⁷ In the article, Smith stigmatized Goldman Sachs as having lost its moral fiber and also its clients' best interests, replacing them with a corporate culture that seeks one thing: making the most money possible off of its clients. Smith's stigma is quantifiable: Goldman Sachs lost 2.15 billion dollars in market value in the 48 hours following publication of Smith's resignation article.³⁸ Though its market share may rebound, Smith, acting as an agent of subversion, arguably inflicted a *petit* failure upon his former employer.

The subversive power of stigma is taken seriously by business organizations. Two examples can be seen in recent years. The first is the decision of Phillip Morris to rename itself Altria. Presumably this was because its old name had become synonymous with tobacco-related death, and resistance to government efforts to regulate smoking. Similarly, the company formerly called Blackwater, which had created a private, special forces army to supplement U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, became encumbered by stigma and had to change its name. In 2004, Blackwater operators killed fourteen Iraqi civilians, and wounded twenty more. As the *Washington Post* noted, "The incident, which badly strained U.S.–Iraqi relations . . . so badly stigmatized Blackwater that the company renamed itself Xe Services."³⁹

(11) *Divisive Disruption*

Jules Boykoff's third mechanism of state subversion is divisive disruption. As an example, Boykoff described how agents infiltrated into two black civil rights movements in the 1960s fomenting violent actions by the groups. The violence alarmed the public and harmed the reputation of those social movements and diminished public support for them.

Subversion could also involve an attack upon the trust among a group's leaders, perhaps through rumor, a planted letter (or e-mail), or even a photoshopped picture placing one or more in compromising circumstances. Leaders sometimes provide ammunition to be utilized against themselves. For example, more than a few religious and political leaders have denounced homosexual rights, even as they themselves have been secretly engaged in homosexual relationships. Discrediting information can be utilized to attack credibility, fund raising, as well as to foment disenchantment, mistrust, and anomie among followers.

(12) *Intimidation*

Boykoff's final category, intimidation, harmonizes with the other three. Intimidation can take the form of overt actions such as battling protesters with water cannon, chemical agents, and billy clubs, or less overt acts such as threats to sue, arrest, and evict. It can also be more subtle, with implications left to the target's imagination.

A classic example of drastic, overt intimidation was captured by the iconic picture seen around the world, showing a Chinese tank facing off against a lone protester in Tiananmen Square on 5 June 1989. That was the day after the Chinese Army slaughtered hundreds of children and adults, workers and students who had been occupying the square for the past seven weeks in an effort to seek economic reform and greater freedom.⁴⁰ In the photograph, the unidentified, unarmed young man blocks the path of the tank, bringing it to a halt. As the picture demonstrates, drastic acts of overt intimidation by the state do not always work.

A less robust form of intimidation, but one which can strike fear into the heart of a target, is overt surveillance. Vehicles with agents parked in front of a target's residence, or place of work, and publicly following that person can be unnerving. Analytically, many similarities are evident between lawful surveillance and unlawful stalking. Numerous studies document the psychological harm brought on by stalking.⁴¹ To generalize those findings upon the presumed psychological experience of an individual targeted for sustained overt surveillance is probably reasonable.⁴²

(13) *Intrapsychic Wounding*

In her 2002 book *Forging Gay Identities*, Elizabeth Armstrong examined multiple homosexual social movements in San Francisco from the 1950s to 1990s.⁴³ She argued, and her data seemed to suggest, that many groups sustained irreversible damage in response to the emergence of HIV in the early 1980s. Armstrong explained: "The AIDS epidemic challenged every aspect of the gay identity movement: the lives and bodies of gay men, beliefs about the healthfulness of gay sex, hard-won pride in gay identity, and the movement's political and cultural organizations."⁴⁴ Thus, the "hit" to morale and the fear of a new way to die tore at the structure and resourced capability of gay rights social movements to engage in public encounters, or in some cases even to continue functioning.

Examined through a different lens, Armstrong's data arguably demonstrates the subversive potential present in the intrapsychic wounding of the collective consciousness of a social movement. Emile Durkheim classically defined collective consciousness as the "...totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society..."⁴⁵ It is, in essence, the shared beliefs, hopes, values, and thought characteristics of a group.

Intrapsychic wounds derive from specific physical or emotional trauma. They may result from single events, such as witnessing an execution, being injured in a fight or in combat, or perhaps seeing a friend taken away by police. Wounding may also result from years of emotional abuse, repeated exposure to death in a war zone, or living in a dangerous neighborhood for a long period of time. Julie Vellacott has described intrapsychic wounds as an “internal oppressor.”⁴⁶ They are a blow to individual self-esteem and confidence, and, as Elizabeth Armstrong’s data seemed to suggest, possibly to the collective consciousness of a social movement as well. The possibility that intrapsychic wounding, sufficiently debilitating, may cause the momentum and morale of a social movement to collapse seems reasonable. Some evidence supports that suspicion.

The violent response of many dictators to the rise of the “Arab Spring” revolts in the Middle East and northern Africa could be seen through the lens of intrapsychic wounding. The killing, beating, and tear gassing of demonstrators could be deemed efforts to instill and increase a fear of death, fear of harm, and fear of punishment in the minds of demonstrators and rebels; in other words, to inculcate intrapsychic wounds.

But public butcheries are risky because they may fail to inculcate a debilitating intrapsychic wound. Instead, they may energize resistance, and even convert participants into hard core activists. A steadfast and certain resolution often develops in some people when they are under fire. Though movement members may, in fact, be psychologically traumatized, they may also adopt a “fight to the death” attitude in response to overt and brutal subversion efforts by a government. Another form of intrapsychic subversion may be less risky.

The Middle East countries roiled by the Arab Spring had been controlled, for decades, by dictators who stifled dissent through small scale, individualized actions. People were frequently arrested, beaten, falsely convicted, penalized and punished, fired from jobs, prohibited from attending school, or raped. Many of these abuses recurred, even increased, during the uprisings. Collective wounding may occur when stories of what happened to individuals circulate, the harm being inflicted through the sum of the fears these conversations produce, perhaps by aggravating already present post-traumatic stress disorder. Analytically, aggregate-induced wounding, rather than large scale/single massive event wounding, is probably the more efficient and less risky form of intrapsychic subversion.

THE PUBLIC’S RESPONSE

Thirteen tested and theoretical methods of subversion reviewed here were designed to induce *petit* or grand failure into targeted social movements. History demonstrates that in the laboratory of real life multiple methods

of subversion are generally deployed sequentially and concurrently, in accordance with the tactical strategy developed by adversarial agents specific to a targeted social movement.

Withheld so far has been a discourse about the morality of subversion. Of course, no definitive answers can be given to questions about the moral rightness of subversion. That is true because people may feel that some acts of subversion are warranted, particularly towards social movements that they believe are a threat to their community's way of life. Yet, many of those same people may also feel subversion is reprehensible when institutions to which they belong are targeted. After all, one person's terrorist group is, to someone else, freedom fighters waging war against oppression. Because issues of morality are both important and most frequently unanswerable, no attempt has been made to engage them here. Further, this analysis of efficiencies for specific subversive techniques should not be interpreted as sanction of, or support for their actual deployment.

When reverse engineering or counterfactual methods are relied upon to suggest techniques which can be operationalized, evaluating such claims against alternative explanations, and subjecting them to quantitative falsification, is important. Thus, governments and private sector organizations should exercise caution when employing these methods. Finally, organizational attorneys should be consulted before any subversive program is implemented.

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- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Armstrong presents eleven longitudinal growth charts. The time period for three is limited. Three others do not assess homosexual social movements (HSM). The five which do can be subjected to additional analysis not carried out by Armstrong. Each of the five growth charts demonstrates a point of inflection in or about 1982, which was the year HIV/AIDS became well known (see p. 15—HSM non-profits, p. 17—Three types of HSM organizations, p. 116—Gay identity organizations, p. 142—Lesbian/feminist organizations, p. 150—Radical gay organizations). Inflection is, in the case of positive growth, the point where the sign of the second derivative switches from positive to negative, the point at which the angle of the slope is most severe, and where positive growth (concave up) switches to negative growth (concave down). Inflection marks the point where the power of the sum of forces opposed to positive growth exceeds and therefore subverts it. Inflection leads, in the search for cause, to the period beforehand, prompting the question: What happened such that inflection was induced?.
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