who are not afraid of their own societies, but rather seem to empower their citizens. The UK is in many ways at the forefront of this movement. Geoff Mulgan, former adviser to Tony Blair, published a book entitled Connyex back in 1997 in which he argued that governments should be guided by the principle of reciprocity, requiring them to eschew “blueprints and plans, and top-down command and control”, in favour of leaving “space for people to organ- isate themselves in flatter, more reciprocal structures”. Mulgan is now head of Nesta (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), a British charity dedicated to fostering innovation through investment, grants and connecting idea-generators with support networks. Think Silicon Valley-style ecosystem, but for social entrepreneurs.

As resources for government as vending-machine dwindled and the speed of change makes government as control tower ever more difficult, government as platform will become ever more attractive. It is in the very nature of platforms that it is impossible to prescribe or predict how and where citizens will decide to use their newfound powers of participation and innovation. But the many Cassandras currently predicting the permanent decline of the west in favour of Asian efficiency and emerging-market energy would do well to take heed.

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LAUGHTIVISM

THE NEW ACTIVISTS WILL SPREAD DEMOCRACY – WITH A CHEEKY SMILE ON THEIR FACES. BY SRĐJA POPOVIĆ

The internet age has brought about new types of protest, such as “hactivism”, “click- tivism” – even “slacktivism”. The latest-ism: “laughtivism”. Fuelled by the internet and the ease and speed with which pictures and videos are shared all around the world, laughtivism itself does not take place on a computer screen, but in the streets. It uses humour in social mobilisation and nonviolent action.

Social scientists focus on conditions such as age, income and education when explaining how nonviolent revolutions occur. They exclude emotional varia- bles, such as enthusiasm and humour.

In the 70s and 80s they thought revolutions were a serious business and that revolutionaries must be equally serious. Today’s revolutions do not fit that mould. Over the past two years, mass move- ments have popped up in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States, Que- bec, Russia and Mexico, led by smiling students and educated young people.

Laughtivism is a type of “dilemma action”, designed to put the authorities in such a position so that, no matter how they respond, they cannot win. Mem- bers of the Serbian resistance movement OTPOR were expert at this when they helped overthrow Slobodan Milošević in 2000. They once placed Milošević’s face on an oil drum and left it in a crowded shopping street with a hat, for passers-by to abuse. The activists left and, when the police showed up, they had to arrest the barrel itself. The image was seen globally.

Laughtivism is now emerging across the globe – from Egypt, where the revolu- tion was boosted by Rassem Youssef, “the Arab-Jon Stewart”, through Russia, where a group of boys held a protest against Vladimir Putin, to The Yes Men, who literally “tamed the bull” of Wall Street. Most recently, student activists in one of the world’s most oppressive countries, Sudan, have called “elbow-licking” protests, after the phrase President Omar al- Bashir used to describe their apparently impossible attempts to challenge his rule. 2013 will bring more such grassroots movements. But they will need to be cre- ative if they want to avoid falling out of the media spotlight. Of course, no one is certain where the next wave of nonvio- lent revolution will occur, but whether it is in Sudan or Burma, we can be confident about what it will look like: cheerful par- ties, with humour cleverly used to mock and undermine the authority of autocrats.

In 2013, activists will be laughing all the way to democracy and social justice. Srđja Popović is executive director of the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies in Serbia, and visiting scholar at the School for International Public Affairs, Columbia University.