

Feature

From the highway to the streets

The internet has “a formidable potential” for political organising

→ continued from page 1

The future of Flemish activism

Brussels-based social scientist **Philippe Van Parijs** teaches philosophy at the universities of Leuven (KUL), Louvain-la-Neuve and Harvard, and he was at the SHAME protest march last month in Brussels.

Do you see Facebook or other social networking sites playing a significant role in the kind of real-world action that we saw last month?

The demonstration of 23 January was the most spectacular local illustration so far of a phenomenon that is bound to grow in importance throughout the world. The internet is revolutionising power relations. By lowering dramatically the cost of communicating, coordinating and mobilising, it makes it increasingly possible to organise without an organisation. Before the internet, only large organisations such as trade unions, churches or political parties could get a crowd into the streets. Now even poor and dispersed people can manage that. For example, the protesters in Tunis and Cairo. But also, more peacefully, the five students who gathered close to 40,000 people in the streets of Brussels less than two weeks after meeting for the first time.

Is this the first instance in Europe of a Facebook page turning into such a large political protest?

I am sure Facebook and other internet tools played a role in other recent large protests – in Athens and London, for example. But they worked there in combination with more conventional forms of communication and mobilisation. This was also the case in Brussels. I was struck by the contrast between the front of the [Brussels] march and its tail. The tail seemed to consist largely of French speakers, not exactly young, and alerted by the traditional media – essentially the same sort of crowd as in the pro-Belgium demo of November 2007.

“It is because of the Facebook generation that Flemish participants were at least four times more numerous than they were in the demonstration of three years ago”

At the front, by contrast, Dutch and French speakers seemed in about equal numbers, and the average age was much lower. This is where the Facebook generation was concentrated. And it is because of their share in this group that Flemish participants were at least four or five times more numerous than they were in the mostly francophone demonstration of three years ago. The composition of this group also helps explain another Belgian première at the very end of the demonstration.

What do you mean?

When the front of the demonstration reached Jubelpark, the organisers gave speeches in the three national languages. But the longest and most eloquent speech, and the one that triggered the most cheers, was in English. This must be the very first large political event organised by Belgians for Belgians in which the crowd is being addressed in English. Ironically, part of the audience that was cheering the English speech was perched, at the bottom of the arcades on statues representing three of the Flemish provinces, the inscriptions of which are in French only.

It was a stunning juxtaposition of the 19th century and the 21st, of the self-evident hegemony of French and the emergence of English as a language in which many young



Philippe Van Parijs

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Belgians are now more competent than in either French or Dutch. The Facebook generation is also the Globish generation. Remember that the action was given an English name [SHAME: No Government, Great Country] and note that the Belgian chapter of HackDemocracy, which gathers hackers from all three regions, functions exclusively in English.

Young people don't organise protests like they used to in the 1960s and '70s. Do you think social network sites are ushering in a new era of youth organising political actions?

I do, but as this youth grows older, there is no reason why it should abandon the tools it grew up with. Our institutions will have to keep adjusting to this re-allocation of power. This may not all be positive. The internet not only empowers people with generous intentions, such as these five students who call for a government based on mutual understanding and intelligent compromise. It also provides a powerful tool to those who want to mobilise for selfish purposes, or even to organise pogroms.

Do you think Belgian politicians are themselves using the internet as effectively as the protesters?

I am sure most of them suspect that the new tools have a formidable potential, but they are still at a loss about how to use them – as we all are. I doubt that anyone knows how best to exploit for more or less narrowly political purposes the unprecedented possibilities offered by the internet, and even less how effective they will remain once everyone is using them.

Can this sort of action have a real impact on the political climate in the country?

I think so. It cannot have a direct effect on the negotiations, as it is asking for solutions without offering any. The aim of the action was to “move away from a political climate subordinated to the interests of just one community” and to call for “a government that would govern in the interest of everyone”. Initiatives of this sort, if amplified and deepened and taken up by academics, journalists, etc., can certainly alter the climate in a way that would make for easier and better compromises. Concessions are much harder when one fails to understand why the other side truly believes its demands are legitimate. And such understanding is

impossible in the absence of initiatives that bring people from both sides together.

Is such a movement too heterogeneous to come up with real proposals?

There were some proposals on the banners, such as “1 land, 4 regions”. That is a simplified territorial federalism based on the three existing regions and German-speaking Belgium. However, even at the level of symbols, the demonstration lacked a clear message. The old Belgian flag may have been what best matched the nostalgic aspirations of some older participants, but it badly failed to capture the resolutely forward-looking tone of the young organisers and their Facebook generation followers. ♦

Record breaking

On **17 February**, Belgium will break the record – currently held by Iraq – for the longest time a democratic nation has taken to form a government. Over in Ghent, they're doing what they do best: throwing a great big party to which everyone is invited. (With more than 10,000 “likes” on Facebook.)

Still, there has been some confusion about the date, and you'll find many Flemish looking ahead to **30 March** instead. It seems that in 2009 Iraq reached their agreements after 249 days, but it took an additional 41 days to get approval from parliament. So, while De Wever and Di Rupo only have a week to avoid a record altogether, they still have more than a month to avoid two.

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