

[Transcript] The Realignment / 411 | Vincent Bevins: Why Didn't a Decade of Global Mass Protests Lead to Revolutionary Change?

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

Today's guest is the author Vincent Vavens. He has a new book out. It's called *If We Burn*. It's actually about one of my favorite topics, a topic I want to explore more on the Realignment, basically, what does and does it work when it comes to the objective and task of achieving systemic change? Vincent's work looks at why the mass protests in the 2010s error from Tunisia to Egypt to Brazil, Ukraine, etc. initially appeared to succeed but then led to failure.

Looking at these lessons and how we could apply them to our own time is obviously incredibly important. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and definitely let me know if there are other ways I could explore this topic in an interesting manner. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast.

Vincent Vavens, welcome to the Realignment.

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

Yeah, great to chat with you. So let's just start with a meta question that either is deeply revealing at an intellectual level or just reflects the publishing calendar. There are a bunch of books that are coming out in the genre that you're focused on. So you obviously had Fredy DeBauer with how elites ate the social justice movement. Yasha Munk had the identity trap, had him on the show last week. And of course, your book is *If We Burn*. And these are really focused on successes, failures, challenges of social justice and protest movements over the past decade or so. So why in late stage 2023 are we seeing a bunch of books in this category? Oh, yeah, I can't speak to why anyone else wrote one. But what I can say is that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that if you look back on what happened since 2010 around the world, there was great hope invested in a few things, a confluence of developments.

First, the arrival of social media. The second, the arrival of the eruption of mass protest explosions all around the world. And those two elements, as much as they revealed, I think, on the one hand, the limitations indeed of the media structure that came before it, and a sincere desire to change the global system in which we inhabit, did not do so, certainly not in the way that was expected or planned by the people who put together the mass protest movements that I look at. Now, one way that I think that my book might be different than the other works you just mentioned, I haven't read them, is that my book does not take place primarily in the United States. Indeed, probably the only real protagonist in the book is me. And to the extent that I'm in the book, it's a way for me to be very critical of US media, of the way that English language media covered events in the rest of the world. And so I think that taking a look at what happened globally is something that is quite valuable and something that I think we don't do enough of in English, English language media. So I think maybe that's an answer as to why people are concerned, and maybe that's an answer as to why that I thought that I had a right to write my own contribution to this, to this literature. That's really helpful. And you actually noted on your substack that you started thinking about this book in 2019, which means that I think, unlike the other two books I mentioned, you're obviously not, aside from the international focus as opposed to the US, if you're thinking about this in 2019, you're not just thinking about this topic in response to BLM in summer 2020, you're not really thinking about the COVID era, you're really focused on the actual 2010s decade itself. So let's take us back to 2019.

What were you thinking of when you were thinking about this topic in this book then?

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I think we go all the way back to 2013. Indeed, I've been looking, I've been confounded by the strange outcome of a mass explosion in the country that I was living in, that I was living in, in Brazil in 2013, since 2013. So in 2014, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, every time around the world, there was another unexpectedly large street protest of the particular type that I analyze in this book. I was paying close attention, and I, and like many, many people that I know that lived through the Brazilian mass revolt in 2013, would look, would watch very carefully and think, oh, is that going to go the way that ours did? Oh, I hope it doesn't. Oh, it looks like it might do the same thing that it did here. Oh, oh, I hope I'm wrong. But it seems like the ingredients are in place for this to lead to an outcome, which is similar to the one here. And sometimes that was more right than, than in other cases. But in, but in that sense, this has been a concern of mine for a decade. And by 2019, I was already putting together the proposal for this book, I'd already come up with the cases that I wanted to look at. So I was already, I already had a general approach to this topic, the unexpectedly large, apparently spontaneous, leaderless, digitally coordinated, horizontally organized mass protest, when the George Floyd uprising began. And so I watched it with, with those eyes, I watched it with the experience that I had my own very particular experiences in Brazil. And I was in contact with people in the United States, you know, and that was the sort of conversation was happening with people, my friends here in the US that were, that were involved in very, very deeply touched by the possibilities. And I would have these kinds of conversations like, well, this is what happened in the United in Brazil. This is what I hope does not happen. I hope I'm wrong here. I'm hope, you know, I hope that this goes this way. Not that I, I'm saying that I sort of predicted the outcome or anything. But this was something that I, and many, many other Brazilians have been paying close attention to for indeed a whole decade. And then I put this proposal together in the end of 2019, early 2020, and then decided to spend four years full time working on trying to make this global narrative as coherent as possible, in a way which, while not including the George Floyd uprising, I hoped would still rhyme with or make sense to people that did live through that moment in 2020.

Here's something I'm fascinated by, given what you just said. How would you define the difference between mass protest politics and populism? Anti-establishment populism, let's say. So for example, you could say very clearly, obviously in the Brazilian situation, you're going to have Bolsonaro, like him, dislike him, he's clearly a populist, you're going to have Duterte in the Philippines, also a populist, you're going to have the Brexit movement, more populism, Donald Trump, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. What is the difference between the two of those? Because if we're discussing success and failure, obviously populism, maybe not the ends, but at least the starting point of overthrowing the status quo, you could argue as a successful means of engaging in politics during the 2010. So is there a difference? And there obviously is between those two different sets of ideas. There's a difference, but the overlap, the point in the Venn diagram where I think that they often meet is anti-politics, which is a theme which emerges in the book. Ironically, paradoxically, populism, which is a very, you know, it is a term that sort of everyone agrees is important and it's something that everyone sort of points to as existing somehow, but different definitions vary quite widely, especially in the last 10 or

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20 years. Populism is something that even as incoherent and amorphous and hard to pin down as it is, I think is actually more coherent than what arose out of the things like the Brazilian uprising in June 2013. Populism in its most basic, the most basic version pits a putative people against elites. It says the people, often the true people are being repressed or held down by some small group at the top. The discourse that comes out of a particular populist movement can be correct about the existence of those elites or it can try to pin, it can try to blame outsiders, foreigners, immigrants, or other sort of dark and fictional conspiratorial forces for the actual structural inequalities in a given society. But at the very, it is at that basic level coherent enough that it identifies some set of elites and identifies as the people, some group within society as the real heart of the body politic. Paradoxically, June 2013 what comes out of the apparently spontaneous mass eruption of the type that you experienced in June 2013 is even less coherent than that. Literally everybody is invited to the streets in the final moment for whatever reason they want to bring to the streets. So by the end of the June 2013 uprising, you have the people that can be considered as elites and privileged as any other subject in Brazilian history entering the streets for their own reasons. There's no kind of pre-existing discourse, at least no discourse, which is dominant enough to prevent this that would prohibit that kind of bid for a bid to resignify what is happening on the streets. Of course, populism can also be used cynically where very obvious elites can pretend to be on the side of the people, but it is even more coherent than what we got in many cases in the 2010s. But what you do see as the overlap, as I said, and I want to go into this too long because it's a good question and I'm rambling at trying to answer it in many different ways at once, is that anti-politics, the sort of full rejection of politics as a practice, as a human activity, is often at the heart of what gets us to the type of mass explosion that I just described and to populist movements in the first and second decades of the 20th century. People are rightfully feel that the representative structures that exist in their societies don't actually represent them. And so what you get is a wholesale rejection of politics as such, which can be very dangerous and can lead to a populist response or even a more dangerous response in the final analysis. But I think that's the glue that holds them together. And in this book, I trace the way that the original organizers of the Brazil 2013 movement watch horrified as there we are non-party, we are non-partisan staff's position, which is fundamental to the organization at the very beginning, gets transformed, transformed, translated by forces outside of their control into anti-parties, also like the actual violent attack on people that are in any kind of a political party. And then the ultimate rejection of representative democracy as such, which is the Bolsonaro movement, which is in some ways also born in June 2013, ultimately just rejects democracy. I'd love to kind of get a little casually therapeutic or at least a bit of psychiatry here to understand the mentality behind who is drawn to protest movements and who isn't.

Because at the core of my self-conception, I'm just like a deeply establishment person or a structural person. So I work at think tanks. I work at the University of Texas. Let's say I wanted to upend the status quo in the most Occupy Wall Street in the most Arab spring and just put aside ideology for a second. My natural inclination would be towards, okay, who's in charge? What's the structure? How does this look? Who are the power structures? How specifically are we doing this? What are the events? I just wouldn't be attracted to mass

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protests as a specific means of implementation. I remember during Occupy Wall Street, I was at Portland State when it happened. And I remember a professor in the sociology department going on and

on about how look at this thing. It's like leaderless. There's like no one person. And I think at a constitutional level, this wasn't me thinking, well, I'd be the leader. I'm just sort of like, oh, that seems weird. So can you kind of just like talk about the dichotomy I'm trying to kind of articulate here? Because I think it's a real thing that plays out in these movements in different societies that are going to cross borders there maybe. Yeah, I think one point that I tried to make in this book is that by the 2010s, for many, many people, this particular type of mass protest movement, the one of the very specific configuration that I described, apparently leaderless, horizontally organized, digitally coordinated mass protest in public spaces in the streets, becomes hegemonic for a while, and seems to be for some people, the natural or indeed the only real way to respond to injustice. And what without trying to argue this is right or wrong, I do want to make clear that like any other particular type of response to political injustice, it didn't spring from nowhere, it wasn't handed down to us by God, it was the result of very particular ideological and historical circumstances. And it can be right, it can work great in some places, and it can work less well in other places. And in the case of the sort of eruption that begins in Tunisia, and then sort of explodes around the world like a sort of tsunami that sets off many other earthquakes around the planet, a lot of the original organizers did not believe that their movement would explode to the extent that it did. They had not planned, for example, in Egypt to call for the overthrow of Mubarak. In Brazil, they hoped to get a lot of other people on the streets, and that they hoped that that would be good for their ultimate goal of lowering the cost of public transportation in the country. But they never expected that many people to pour into public squares and to public streets. But all along, they had always assumed, well, if that were to happen, if a huge eruption, if we were actually able to cause a popular revolt behind, or as a result of these concerns that we put forward quite consciously, that would be a good thing. Turns out it's not. It turns out that it's not necessarily true. Spoiler alert.

It turns out that it's not necessarily true that if everybody comes out to the streets as a result of something you did last week, that they're necessarily going to agree with you, that it's necessarily going to go the way that you think, often an unexpected dilemma, this sort of horrifying tragedy that arises is that these movements are far more successful than they expected at putting people on the streets, but yet incapable of dealing with opportunities presented by that explosion. And so you're right in a sense that after a while, my generation, people around the world who were active in the 20th century, either intentionally putting these together or joining these kind of movements along the way, yeah, rediscovered the fact that, yeah, there's many, many other ways to put pressure upon the state. There's many, many others types of ways that you can build organizations that can shape the future. Indeed, the more organizations that you have before the eruption comes, the more likely you are to get what you want out of the eruption and that you should indeed think very, very carefully about when the right time is to use a particular tactic. Now, I think I personally think that any of these tactics, any tactic, basically, even if you think of the most extreme ones, can always be justified if in a given

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circumstance, there is sometimes a time for just like absolute destabilization of the government, no matter in any ways that you can do so. But that doesn't mean that every tactic is always right at every given moment. And I think that there was a understandable but misplaced utopian optimism that arose with the rise, as I said, the rise of social media and the ability to put huge amounts of people on the street all at once, that sort of burst onto the world stage in 2010, 2011. I really like your usage of tactics, tools, or does this a tactic about initiatives or a tactic, elections, referendums, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, obviously if your strikes, all these things, there's a set of options you have. And obviously, if it's Egypt and it's 2011, for good or for error, you do not have the option that Brexit presented itself. That's the underlying dynamic and the issue there if you're looking at the Mubarak government. So I guess the next question I'd really ask you is, I'd love for you to focus on social media and mass protests, the explosion of mass protests as the catalyst for change. Take us back to 2011, 2013. Give us just your best faith, you're doing a totally different version of this book, articulation of why those two phenomenon, mass protest and the existence of social media, are going to produce these revolutionary changes or at least present the opportunity for doing so. What were people thinking at the time? Then we'll move into what actually happened. Yeah. So I think that to explain how so many people pour onto the streets in Tunisia initially and then in Egypt in 2011, in order for that to happen, in order for so many people to join a mass revolt that it ends up dislodging the existing government, many, many things have to come together. Many, many reasons must be accounted for. And I don't think that social media is what these movements are about. I don't think it's the only thing that gets them over the line. I don't think it's the main thing that gets them over the line, but probably without the existence of a particular type of media representation, including television, Al Jazeera, you wouldn't have gotten these movements as big, as quickly as they were. I mean, again, in the case of Tunisia, a dedicated left-wing party is important at getting things off the ground at the very beginning. A large union is very important in getting things off the ground, but I think social media, and I also want to make it clear that although we had great dreams in social media, in the abstract, in the social media that we believed that the internet would create, especially those of us that grew up thinking that the internet was a fundamentally progressive and transparent tool for human civilization, we didn't get just social media full stop. We got a particular type of social media that was created by California firms for profit, incredibly powerful entities that restructured what we see based on what is most likely to create engagement, what is most likely to keep us on the platform for as long as possible, and most likely to allow them to sell advertising and convince people to buy things. The dream that we had in social media may not have been misplaced if it was in social media in the abstract, but the dream of social media was taken away from us, I think, by oligarchs. So if you think back to 2010 and 2011, it was often seen not only by left anarchist groups that were behind sites like indie media, but mainstream commenters in the New York Times and the Atlantic that necessarily social media would be progressive and that to the extent that social media was involved in making protests bigger than they would have been, that would be a good thing. I think we kind of are at the opposite. We've almost inverted that entirely. I mean, now in 2023, if you can imagine sort of a Washington

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Post article that begins that, you know, describing that a large group of angry men are storming the capital of some country because of something they saw on the internet, that might cause red flags to go off rather than inspiration or a belief that this is going to be a fantastic thing. You might start to think, oh, what weird corner of the internet got these guys fired up and this could be dangerous, right? We pause. That is such a fascinating way to frame it because the second, and I'm sure the listeners and viewers are going to experience this, the second you described that, even if it was international context, that automatically flagged me as right wing versus if we'd recorded this in 2012, I would have, even if you'd said men, I would have said, okay, like it's that's left wing. These are, I would have thought of a bunch of WTO, 1999, Seattle, like, you know, hippie-dippy dudes, but it's still men and it's still left. So that's such an interesting way of framing how in 10 years that shifted. Yeah, it's almost a complete reversal. And it's not, you know, I say men to make that sort of effect more immediate. But I mean, it is the case that there's more men in top of your square than women. I mean, it wasn't all men, but it was a, you know, like any sort of movement that consists of street battles, it's often, it's going to be led by young men. And that was the case in the so-called Arab Spring. And I said, it's not because we were wrong about what the internet can do. It's because all the guards took the internet away from us. They, they allowed it to be so distorted by the profit incentive and this very strange business model, which I claim is very clearly not the only one that was possible. And I think it's, it's one that we should set aside as a society because of how much it distorts the way that we see reality. But yeah, 10 years later, we, we come to the exact opposite conclusion. And again, this was something that people that thinkers like Evgeny Morozov made, a point that people like him made in 2011 that like, hey, it's not just the good guys that can use the internet. You know, by 2015, 2016, if you think about actors on the internet, liberals in the United States are going to start thinking about Vladimir Putin. Whereas six years earlier, they thought, you know, the sort of Hillary Clinton wing of the Democratic Party believed the exact opposite. They thought that the United States, that the internet could be a tool for furthering the interests of the United States. And that necessarily would be. And so when you do get this, the uprising in Tunisia and in Egypt, the commentators like me, people in the English speaking North American press, like to see the role of social media, they like to talk about it, even though it was far from the only dynamic that made these uprisings possible, because that seemed to be confirming some deeply held suspicions about the nature of US led technological development and about the nature of historical, the unfolding of history, history with the capital of H, you know, history that was supposed to have ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fact that all of the world was just going to naturally and inevitably fall into something like America light. And all of that turned out to be quite incorrect. And I think many of the people, I mean, as I know if I've mentioned, yeah, but I mean, this book is built through hundreds of interviews that I do with people around the world. And a lot of people came to the conclusion that one weakness of this particular type of political contention of the apparently spontaneous horizontally organized mass protest is that it relies on somebody from the outside to explain what it's all about, because it ends up not being able to speak for itself in a clear voice. So relies on people like, you know, people from from on CNN that don't speak Arabic,

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don't understand politics, at least whatsoever, and they see what they want to see. And that comes to sort of represent the uprising to the world over the heads of the actual people that have, you know, risked their lives to organize for years and years and years. They watch in horror as just like the global media shows up and pick some person, because he or she is particularly telegenic and articulate and says in English what CNN wants to hear. And now that person is the leader. Oh, there is no more leaderlessness. The leaders just been picked by the CNN. But that was a dynamic that, you know, I think that like younger readers, I hope very young people do pick this book up, would be shocked to even hear about like the idea that social media like was supposed to be obviously a good thing. Whereas it's obviously McChrovin has given us all insane. So I'd love and neither of us are, you know, technologists, so you don't have to get too technical with this explanation. But I would just like to understand how the fact that the dominant social media platforms of this period, obviously, we're talking about, you know, Facebook, Elon Musk hasn't entered into the picture yet in this kind of talking about Facebook, we're talking about Instagram, maybe we're talking about Snapchat, actually, we're definitely talking about Snapchat, if it's the mid 2010s, not not RIP, but you know, not quite the same dynamic. I guess what was happening, where that oligarchic control mattered, because I guess what I'm kind of confused about is, so yes, there's like an advertising business model, but protests are going to go viral, there's going to be engagement, like what actually happened at like a level that limited it, where that ownership truly mattered.

Where the ownership truly mattered?

Well, yeah, explain just explain to me, I guess I'm not seeing why the fact that, you know, why does the fact that Mark Zuckerberg played a dominant role in the ownership of social media companies in the 2010s, why did that oligarchic model end up mattering when it came to limiting the effectiveness of social media when it came to protest?

That's what I'm trying to understand.

The algorithm. So, what did it do?

It's interesting, you know, it's interesting because like it seemed, you know, I don't want to, you know, speak at a turn here, but it seems just actually just embedded in your question is the idea, which I think is quite common now that this was the inevitable and natural form that social media would take. It's been around for long enough that we've all indeed rewired our brains to understand that certain types of posts will go viral and certain types of posts won't go viral and journalists have learned and content producers have learned that if I say this, this is going to get more of a reaction than this.

And that is all because of a model which was not inevitable at all, that chose to, as I said, power social media through advertising revenue, and then create computer programs, we call them the algorithms, that will elevate the particular type of posts that are most likely to keep people glued to the platform.

So, it is not actually really the user through the selection of people that they follow or that they're friends that decides what kind of content will be shown to people.

This is some part of it, but really what drives the entire business model is these platforms these platforms will show to you, will represent the world, indeed represent your friends and your family and your mother and people that you've grown up with based on what is most likely according to this computer program to keep you glued for your screen for as long as possible so that you

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can be convinced to buy other things. Now, this is like, as I said, my brain has been rewired according to this logic. I discovered deep down 10 years ago that I was starting to be pulled in my own journalistic practice towards the particular types of things that would interact with that algorithm and move away from things that wouldn't, and I think that leads to a lot of mistakes for a lot of journalists. Because what you're describing is a little different than clickbait, right? What were you drawn to via the process you're describing here? Well, yeah, there's a scene in the book, right? So, there's a scene in the book where I first understand what it is to go viral and how much power that it can have, right? And this happens in 2013 as I come back to my house after being tear gassed and I see, for some reason, this particular post, unlike all the other posts, has gone viral. It's gotten, you know, by today's standards, it's not a huge post, but by the standards of the time, this is getting orders of magnitude more attention than the things that I was posting just previously. And whether or not I understood at the moment, whether or not I even could really read into what it was about this particular post that was doing so well, I was scared by the incentives that appeared before me, that if you can sort of start to guess what is going to do better than other things, there's going to be a deep pull on people in my industry, you know, one which is, you know, facing less and less, which has been starved of resources and especially in the international front and then has been starved of resources and has been being just shut down at the local level over a decade, journalists will, whether or not they can resist this and hopefully they can, hopefully I have to some extent, start to understand that they're going to get more, much, much more attention if they can see the thing that's going to get picked up by this particular program and shown to hundreds of millions of people instead of a few people. And in my case, it was probably in back in 2013, the overlap with a protest that was happening in a Muslim country, which made it click for people to the extent that that was a helpful comparison. I go into that in the book to the extent to which we sort of ended up flattening space and time to treat every protest movement as if they were the same because they all have the center of like, as long as they look the same, that often was enough to convince people that they were the same type of thing, even though these were placed in very different national political and economic circumstances. And then, you know, over the decade afterwards, a lot of people, especially corporations, but a lot of people, Max Fisher's book describes how this works, you know, Max Fisher's book describes not only the ways that the algorithms push people to what we would consider often quite unhealthy content, but what it is exactly that is most likely to to interact productively with this particular type of algorithm. He points to posts that cause moral outrage as the most effective way to get people glued to their screens. This is probably one of the reasons why across the world, political movements in almost every country I can think of consist of accusing everybody that they're on the other team of being pedophiles, like, like this huge and often entirely fictitious movement of trying to uncover some conspiracy to abuse children is like transnational. Now, of course, child abuse exists, and this is a it's not entirely without basis, but this kind of thing really works on social media. This is why you get something like a subculture like QAnon. This is why you get a movement in Brazil that I spent the summer working on something for the New York Times magazine about the Bolsonaro movement and how they're sort of learning that firing up the base on

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what they claim to be grooming at the heart of the trans rights movement. It just does really, really well on social media. And again, this is this is a particular type of social media that was not the only type that was possible. And you kind of said something which it's not contradictory, but I think it gets to why this is a fascinating topic and why folks should check out the book. You pointed out there was this urge to flatten every protest movement into this clean, tight narrative, social forces, etc. But at the start of this conversation, you pointed out that when you'd be speaking with activists and there'd be some for a new protest movement, they would say to you specifically, oh, it's unfortunate, you know, I'm hopeful, but it's following this specific path that we've seen before. So how do you explain the fact that clearly, we shouldn't treat Egypt and Tunisia and Brazil or even the United States as being at all similar from a frightening perspective with the fact that these protests often follow the same path, like explain the somewhat contradictory nature of that reality? Yeah, absolutely. So the apparent contradiction is exact in reality, it's two sides of one coin, and it's a very difficult, it's a very important line needle to thread. But as I put in the introduction, I think it's essential to what I try to do in the book, in order to look at this decade with one lens as I do, we have to pay very close attention to what was different in each case and to what was the same in each case, because often, as you said, there was a tendency to flatten across space and time because of social media, because everything happens at the same time, everything is on the same timeline, you often just get an image, the tendency. And there is also clearly a causative thing, like if Tunisia leads to Egypt leads to X, yeah, so that's true. So there is a real life contagion, there is a real life effect of the idea that these are the same things. And so you can trace the way so in, you know, in this book, in the decade, you can see that there was the adoption of tactics from one country to the other. There is the adoption of tactics that not only were developed in very different national political and economic circumstances, there was the adoption of tactics after the original employment of those tactics had been proven to be a failure. So there was a real life tendency to view everything as the same. So the real life tendency to view everything as the same, and to some extent, caused actual material reconfiguration of what we saw in the streets. And to explain why it worked out differently in different ways, we have to pay very, very close attention to the ways in which things were different in Ukraine in 2014, than they were in Egypt in 2011, things were different in in Hong Kong in 2014, than they were in Occupy Wall Street. I mean, Hong Kong 2014 was a copy of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, which was a copy of Egypt, which was inspired by Tunisia. So you in order to tell the story, you have to pay very close attention to what was shared across the world. And this was often because of the ways that these environment these movements inspired each other, and very close and careful attention to the ways that they were taken into context, where a tactic would be more or less efficient, effective than where it was originally employed. And, you know, the key part of the book's title is the mass protest decade. And obviously, we've had a conversation about the specific social media dynamics and the specific protests and contagion dynamics that forced events in that protest direction. But I'm curious if you have broader thoughts on, you know, why weren't the 1990s the protest decade? Obviously, you had the big WTO protests, the close of the decade, why weren't the 2000s on the mass protest decade? Was there just a material and like physical reality that got particularly bad and

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intolerable in 2011 to 2014, 15, 16? Or is this just a reality that could have happened if you say we take social media and input it into 1995, where we take mass protest discourse and replace it in 2004? How should we understand the 2010s, given the story you're telling?

Yeah, so the story I'm telling, as I said, that you can only really be fully coherent if you identify multiple causation, overlapping causation for the explosion that begins in 2010. And as it actually happened in the real world, the long tail, the effects of the 2008 financial crisis are another big part of the story. So a lot of what happens not only in, of course, the United States, but in North Africa have to do with the fallout from 2008. Now, what would have happened if you, you know, move the acceleration of the internet at up 20 years, throw Facebook into the world of 1995? I'm not sure. But as it actually happened in the real world, the existence of Facebook, the existence of Al Jazeera, were part of the story as was the implosion of what seemed to be a relatively stable global neoliberal order in 2008 and the ways that it caused material suffering for quite a lot of people, especially younger people around the world. And I guess the, you know, in this last section, I want to both respect the nature of the story you're telling, but I want to also at the same time tie this into listeners perspectives like what we're supposed to our relationship is in the United States.

What are the lessons for anyone focused on social justice, uprising, upending the status quo from this period? Yeah, absolutely. And so just to be clear, this book is really structured as a book. The first 85, 90% of the book is really the story of this decade. And so I think the answer as to how this went wrong, how what happened in each particular case will be in the story itself.

And I think that different readers will come to different conclusions as to what happened and sort of what the answer, quote unquote, to the central question of the book is, which is, you know, how is it that somebody mass protests led to the opposite of what they asked for? But the lessons looking forward across 225 interviews that I did with people in 12 countries can be sort of summarized quickly, if you're asking me to. So I'll try to do so.

Take your time. I just, I want to give something concrete. We'll also respond to this story. I hate everyone hates like the, you know, got the last two pages of your book and you're like, okay, and three bullet points as we sum up this in two seconds. So don't do that. But give me give me a substantive aversion. No, no, I think that you can separate out. I think you can separate the question of what happened, which is really sort of in the narrative itself. And then I can, you know, I can point to a few things that are quite common across lots of people's answers. When they looked back on the 2010s and, you know, the interviews that I spent four years doing, the first lesson, which is really obvious that we really that we already covered is that each country really is different. That you have to pay very, very close attention to the configurations of power in any given place, and and act upon what is really there rather than acting upon what you think would like to be there. That is sort of too obvious to even really go into and we already sort of like, we already sort of reflected around in a bit, but it is quite important. And if I try to summarize the the forward looking lessons that came up that were common across so many interviews, one really simple is organized. The as a rule, a very general rule, the people that were most organized, the people that were most effective at acting collectively with people that agreed with them on some things, did the best when the explosion came. So the more powerful an organization was before the mass protest explosion, the more likely that group was to do to do well in the

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chaos that ensued. So, you know, one lesson is sort of, you know, you got to build in the off season when it seems like nothing's happening. That's the time to get together with people like you and form links and bonds and get together to build a better future and to get prepared to act upon the forces of history as they exist, you know, in the short, medium and long term. Another lesson that comes up is, you know, we can pause so quick. Absolutely. I love like the, you know, preseason organized beforehand. Can you kind of separate that into cities, sorry, countries that are repressive versus in oppressive. So say what you want about various issues in the United States, like if it's 2009 and you're dissatisfied with the response to the 2008 financial crisis, you really can spend two years freely, fairly, prepping for an Occupy Wall Street thing. If by contrast, it's Egypt in 2009, you're not going to have the same freedom. So what kind of distribution those two situations? No, that's a very good point. And this is again, the fact that this general rubric is can be applied does not is should not be, in any way, inserted as a way to sort of pass dispersions on the groups that were unable to put this together.

Because like Tunisia, you just like compared to Tunisia, Egypt, Tunisia is more successful in the short term, you know, in the long term, things become complicated. But one of the reasons for that is just for whatever the particular configuration of the, the dictatorship in Tunisia, you did still have a coherent labor organization with radical elements that was able to act as a civil society organization. You did have some parties that were quite active. You did have some professional associations in Egypt. You cannot fault sort of youth for like ideological errors that led to ultimate concrete horizontality. It was the fact that civil society had been decimated to an extent by the Mubarak regime, that there wasn't really strong organizations, except for the Muslim Brotherhood, that could take advantage of what happened in Egypt. So you're absolutely right. The opportunities for creating organizations, for building in the off season, as I said, very widely from country to country. And if you're in a situation where that's much more difficult to do, that is, that that means you have a more difficult path ahead of you, a more steeper mountain to climb, that is the unfortunate reality of the inequality of the global system that we live in. But when it comes to that lesson of how to organize, how to get some other, how to actually act collectively with other people that believe in building a better world in the same way that you do, don't be afraid of doing the things in organizations that have tended to work historically in the past. That means some kind of delegation, coordination, indeed hierarchy, some process for selecting representatives, ideally, as democratically as possible, has tended to work historically. That's just a lesson that comes out of the interviews that I discussed at the end of the book. Not everyone agrees, but this is a lesson that comes up quite often. Another lesson is pay careful attention to elites that are waiting in the wings. So tragically, if you dislodge the existing elites, but you are not willing or capable to take their place, you have to be ready to watch sort of the B team, the people that are waiting on deck to rush into that power vacuum that tends to be what happens. So if you think the people that are waiting on deck are worse than the people on stage, then you should think very carefully about the best way and time to throw the people that are on stage off stage, because someone's going to take advantage of that power vacuum. If it's not you, it's going to be those people in the wings. And then this goes back to something we talked about, I think, already quite a bit, but also it makes a lot of sense to pay careful attention to the

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people who are being in a position to represent the meaning of a protest to the world, and that's the media, whether that's social media, whether it's traditional media structures. The better that you are at getting your message out in your words, the better that the more that you have some control over the reproduction of your own narrative, the more coherent and successful your movement

is going to be in the long term. So that's like a three and a half quick and easy lessons that come out of hundreds of interviews done over four years. Yeah, no, and those are those are all great. So last couple, let's do some good cleanup in these last few minutes. So one, I'm really curious what you think about the the rise of alternative media when it comes to these dynamics, because once again,

if you're telling this story, you're going to focus as you did very coherently on 2011. I'm really, for example, I was in DC, and I first learned about the Arab Spring because I was like, CNN was on in the GW student cafeteria. And that's literally like the first thing I saw like that really very 2011 statement, but that actually really matters in terms of that storyline. I do not think let's put some sort of GW people are still listening to CNN. That's a very specific ecosystem. But I'd say most people at a generational level are probably not going to learn about protesters in the same way. At the same time, I'm just a little skeptical of like incentives that exist within alternative media that don't necessarily are going to be an inherent improvement. What would you think about that dynamic? I think that dynamic is conveniently analogous to the dynamic that works at the political level. If you are looking at a state which is demonstrably imperfect, sometimes deeply unjust, there's no there's no guarantee that whatever comes after that, or if that you just blow it up that whatever rushes into the power vacuum will be better. So you cannot just say, oh, I mean, this is not my claim, but let's say you cannot just say, oh, mainstream corporate media, it has a tendency to reproduce the interest to reproduce a narrative

which serves the interests of a certain class. The mainstream corporate media has a tendency to align itself with the perceived interests of the United States government. Both of those things, I think, are more or less right. But that doesn't mean that if you just blow up mainstream media, whatever else that comes into take its place is going to be necessarily better, which is why the lesson of the book, I think, when it comes to both states and media structures, is that if you want to build a better world, you have to do precisely that. You have to think very carefully about what we can build, how we can improve upon the things that already exist, and think very carefully about how we can make them better. Again, I've worked my entire career in legacy mainstream for-profit media. I do not cheer for its destruction. I think that the disappearance of media, especially at the local level across the United States is really a problem. It's going to make it very difficult to maintain democracy, I think, in the long term if we don't have the type of journalism that we had in the 20th century. And I say that at the same time that I have a very vehement critique of traditional media, the way that it acted in the 20th century, in the Cold War, my first book includes this critique. So it seems all quite commonsensical, but we did forget these lessons, I think, for a while in the early tens. They're like, okay, imperfect thing, make it better, rather than take imperfect thing, light it on fire, and wait for somebody to just hand you utopia. Because as you say, not every media, I don't know who you're talking about. I think we can both think of examples of-

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Everyone has their own example of this.

Everyone has their own examples, but the perverse incentives do not only exist in mainstream corporate media. You can find them all over. And so again, it's sort of like an easier said than done, so obvious it's stupid type of takeaway, but you have to just pay very careful attention to what exists and try to build something better. Or maintain, indeed, that which is necessary, even if it's imperfect, if for the moment, the best you can do is to hold on as you organize and get together with people that can build something better in the future. Yeah, and actually, this lets me bring up again, you be careful who's waiting in the wings critique when it comes to media, because obviously, you have a lot of folks who I think justifiably left, right, and center have beef with CNN, the big three media networks, etc., etc. Well, what comes charging in after they suffer generational declines is just the algorithm, right? The YouTube algorithm, the Twitter algorithm.

Billionaires with their own, you know, Elon Musk and Twitter is like some, I think some hint, some sort of like a some very light foreshadowing of the dark future that is possible if we just allow for billionaires to rush in, because the longer we the longer that time goes on, the more likely it is that people like Elon Musk are really going to just seize control over the means of communication and just repurpose them for their own ideological purposes. I think he's doing this in a small way now, but in in the long term, we could see this just be the only the the only thing that's left is different different outlets purporting to be journalism, but really serving the interest of this or that billionaire. And again, it's only we're only a little bit in that direction, but to stop from going down and we have to pay very, very close attention to what it is and try to try to build a bridge, try to build a build a bridge out of that burden building. Well, that was a successful way to land the metaphor. I saw you kind of you know what, I saw you and you landed the metaphor successfully. So let's just close with this. I want to just close with kind of like my biased reaction concerns. So as I said, at the start of this episode, put my ideology aside, that's complicated. I'm just an organization person. I'm an organization kid, I emerged in that sort of world. So I'm always going to have a disposition against mass protest as a means of achieving what I want. At the same time, with that bias, a concern that I have is we're kind of seeing this phenomenon, especially given how like NGO and like nonprofit foundation driven activism spaces tend to be. I think we're seeing a lot of folks missing the point that protest and organization and activism is a specific tool. Like you said, like there's a set of tools, one can use to effect change. And I get concerned when you have books saying, okay, Gen Z, you're the activism generation, you're the generation that protests, you do this, this, this or that thing. Because actually, I would actually wager across a set of policy issues, whether you disagree, agree with a set of activism, I've just been incredibly skeptical of 2020s America as being a space where when you introduce once again, just the fact that you have foundations with their fingers on the pulses. But again, I'm founded by the Hewlett Foundation. So I'm saying that as someone who's getting money from these spaces, I just I'm just concerned that we are elevating activism and protest above just a set of tools for accomplishing goals. And by saying this is how Gen Z acts, this is how our millennial generation acts, I get concerned that we push it away from, let's just say the fact that like, you know, lbj is not an activism guy, like him or hate him,

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I think he has skill sets that I don't think are being taught to people who are up and coming and looking at like systemic change throughout the world. So you kind of just like respond to my concern there, you could agree or disagree, but that's just my concern. And it's the first thing I thought when I saw your book. So I think that I have the privilege in this book, but also my work in general of being able to sides that sidestep a lot of these debates, which are really at the heart of like, US politics in in 2023, I haven't lived in the United States 2000, since 2006. All of my work has been done professionally, basically outside of the United States. But I think a hint at an answer to your question is that in this book, I present no reason to believe automatically, that the youth of the United States for the hope of the world, I there's nothing about this book, I don't I don't center. I don't center the US as a as a as a site of political contention, and I don't present any movements in the US as is what I think that will be necessarily progressive or I don't I don't I don't I don't have any reason to believe it may be the case. I hope I'm wrong. But I don't have any reason to believe necessarily. And I think this is overlaps with your your critique or what you know, the parts of this discourse that annoy you. I don't think there's any reason to believe that necessarily the next generation of Americans are going to be necessarily good for the world. They could be, you know, it's 50. It's like you go either way, like, you know, change is good or it's bad. I for my own professional reasons have focused on movements elsewhere. I again, I really, I'm operating in US media, I really hope that, you know, to the extent that there are any lessons in this book that US readers will engage with them. But I also I think share a skepticism at the evidence free assertion that necessarily the bet in the next generation is going to be better than last. I mean, according to who like what you know, that's sort of, you know, that I think that seems to be sort of magical thinking, anything is possible. If you believe that automatically Gen Z is going to be better, you know, and better how like better according to whose values, right, like, then the one that's previous, then you're not going to actually get what you want because you actually have to get together and do it. Because doing it only happens if you understand that a bad outcome is possible. So yeah, I think to the extent that I don't make any US movement the center of this book, I think that's evidence that I think I agree with what you're saying, that it's a mistake to automatically believe that the next generation is going to be more progressive or whatever it is that you believe in the note, the one that's right here, it could go anything can happen really. Yeah, and I'll just close with this, I don't think that's a cop out at all, because I think what's so interesting about this story is that, especially relative to your prior work, like this is not a story of it ultimately has to center in the United States, right, like we're not turning. There's a reason why I'm not asking you. So how did the 1960s and the civil rights movement and the Vietnam protests, how did that influence the way activists thought about this? This isn't that because once again, I think this is a story where like the global aspect is going to be important. I think in many ways, if a listener, viewer, reader is trying to bring this back to an American context, I think actually like looking outside America in and of itself would be inherently valuable. In contrast, I think a lot of the topics that we focus on on this show. So Vincent, this has been great for the audio version. I guess the video version too. Can you just shout out the full title of the book? Of course, it's available in our bookshop store link along with his prior book, The Jakarta Method, which I really, really, really enjoyed. I sent this to him before the podcast started. Obviously,

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listeners are going to know that Vincent and I probably disagree on some pretty big U.S. foreign policy questions, but I think this is very good faith and I think it's important to keep ourselves intellectually honest. Yeah, of course. Thank you so much for having me. I don't even know what it is we disagree about, but I don't care. We're not talking about U.S.-China policy for a reason. I don't even know what my opinion on that appears to be, but what I will say is that I'm very grateful for the conversation and that I hopefully, if I was successful, wrote this book, that it is a narrative that is coherent for people with all kinds of national and political backgrounds. The idea is really just to make it a story that has its own lessons for people that come to it from different places. Yeah, the name of that book is *If We Burn, The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution*. My name is Vincent Bevins and I'm really grateful for the interest in this work and I hope that somehow it can connect with people. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like the sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.