

'From the sources consulted to the quotes used, Counterpower presents a refreshing version of history, for a change told from the perspective of the people on the frontline of making change happen.'

Cindy Sheehan, anti-war activist

'As the inspiring examples in this book show, its not only vital for people to oppose injustice and oppression but also to empower ourselves and each other to seek control over our lives and the decision-making in our society. By developing grass-roots counterpower to the rule of governments and corporations we can begin to create an alternative, collective way of running our communities, our workplaces and our world ourselves.'

Helen Steel and Dave Morris (The McLibel 2)

'Tim Gee demonstrates a truth that I have long believed: real progressive change does not come from above, but from ordinary people struggling for their rights.'

Peter Tatchell, human rights campaigner

'Everyone working for a better world would do well to read this book. Social change from below does not happen by accident. It is always the result of hard and constructive work. Counterpower, full of encouraging past examples, is an inspiration for the future.'

Bruce Kent, political activist

'This is a wonderful, inspiring book. Tim Gee breathes new life into the protest movements of past and present so that we can draw strength from our many victories. There is much to learn here, and much to galvanise us in the struggle for social justice. Now, more than ever, another world is possible.'

John Hilary, Executive Director, War on Want

'The economics and social system that rules this planet cannot be wished away but must be systematically transformed through focussed strategic action based on effective resistance. The system of capitalism that rules are lifes is destroying the basic life support systems of our planet and transferring wealth from the majority to an ever smaller elite. I recommend Counterpower as a powerful contribution to the debate about how we achieve change.'

Derek Wall, green activist, writer and economist

'We find ourselves in one of those historical moments in which time seems to accelerate, things fall apart and everything is up for grabs. Learning from history is essential in times like these, and Counterpower will give you a number of valuable and memorable lessons.'

Paul Kingsnorth, writer and campaigner

'This book reframes the language of power in order to tear it apart. Essential reading for young activists.'

Laurie Penny, journalist and activist

COUNTER POWER

Making Change Happen

About the author

Tim Gee works with campaigning organizations to deliver training sessions for activists. He has a degree in Politics from Edinburgh University where he was also active in the student movement. Tim has contributed to several campaigning guides and manuals and is involved in numerous grassroots campaigns. To contact the author, email: counterpowerbook@gmail.com

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Helen who was involved in the earlier days of so many of the movements that I am involved in now. I hope that you would have been proud.

Acknowledgements

The ideas in this book are the product of hundreds of discussions and debates, followed by countless drafts and redrafts. People who have contributed through conversations, comments or criticism include Glen, Anna, Annette, Yvonne, Clive, Mark, Neil, Glyn, Jim, Liam, Adam, Roger, Jesse, Kevin, Danny, Jess, Juliette, Joanna, Sarah-Jayne, John S, John C, Jonny, Jonathan, JJ, Gi, Anthony, Bill, Claire, Colin, Matt, Chris, Phil, Amy, Brittany, Nadia, and Claire's friend Ollie.

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Any mistakes are of course my own. If there are any I hope they do not undermine my argument.

Credit is also due to all the people at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford who keep that important place going. I recommend a visit. I also recommend a visit to Cafe Pogo and Gorki House in Hackney, London, which, as well as being lovely places, put up with me for hours on end.

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TIM GEE

COUNTER POWER

Making Change Happen



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Introduction

'Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.'

Oscar Wilde

From my vantage-point in the gallery, the man on the stage is a mere dot in a vast hall filled with people. He opens his mouth to speak:

'I wish you Egypt!'

His voice is almost a whisper but the audience is drawn in. 'I wish you Egypt so you can decolonize your minds, for only then can you envision real liberty, real justice, real equality.'

There is a murmur of agreement.

'I wish you Egypt so you can tear apart the sheet with the multiple-choice question, "what do you want?", for all the answers you are given are dead wrong. Your only choice seems to be between evil and a lesser one.'

He raises his voice in a gentle crescendo.

'I wish you Egypt so you can, like the Tunisians, the

Egyptians, the Libyans, the Bahrainis, the Yemenis, and certainly the Palestinians, shout “No! We do not want to select the least wrong answer. We want another choice altogether that is not on your damned list”.

The hall erupts with applause.

The man is Omar Barghouti: a former resident of Egypt, a leader in the nonviolent struggle for justice in Palestine and a man whose cause is cited by the Egyptian revolutionary who shares the platform as a major source of inspiration. The occasion is a rally in the wake of the resignation of (former) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, providing the climax of a day of seminars and debates on people power.¹ It is hopeful, it is buzzing and it is packed.

Following the Arab Spring, revolution is on the tip of everybody’s tongue. And it isn’t just the usual suspects singing its praises. Even the US academic Francis Fukuyama – famous for having once proclaimed ‘The End of History’ – has been on television praising the Egyptian Revolution.

This book began as an enquiry into how campaigning might be more effective. But the more I read, the more convinced I became that a successful campaign is an unfinished revolution and that a revolution is the result of a series of successful campaigns.

The project began in April 2009, not long after the leaders of some of the most powerful countries in the world met in London at the G20 Summit. The protests that accompanied their visit were significant. First, 35,000 people from 20 different countries took to the streets under the banner *Put People First*, calling for the democratization of the financial institutions that had caused the most recent global economic crisis. Then, on the eve of the summit itself, a number of different networks took to the streets again, occupying the financial district. The *Put People First* march passed without incident. The day of civil disobedience prompted one of the most brutal police responses in recent memory.

After the G20 had passed, I took a week off work. Spurred on

by events, I determined that I should use the time to delve into the archives of history and try to learn from movements past to understand better what makes a campaign successful. My first stop was the Working Class Movement Library in Salford – a monument to the struggles of those who have gone before. It is a stunning collection of badges, t-shirts, pamphlets, books, leaflets, hand-written records and radical newspapers from the 1790s to the present day. Each tells their own story. The building is familiar to me – as a child, I spent many summer days there when my stepfather was the librarian.

The entrance hall was smaller than I remembered but no less impressive. Hung from every banister of the central staircase were beautifully crafted banners. To the left, an early trade union banner, to the right, one from the women’s movement. On the next landing up was a banner from a coal miners’ strike. To my surprise, dead center was a slightly smudged banner which I had helped to make: a huge bed sheet with the message ‘Killing people is wrong – in the USA *and* Afghanistan’. We had used it for a vigil every evening for three months in late 2001.

I pointed out the banner, then explained my mission to the new library manager. She asked how long I had.

‘A week.’

She laughed and replied: ‘It will take you much longer than that’.

She was right.

It was the beginning of a project that, on and off, would take another two years, leafing through autobiographies, histories, newspapers and pamphlets, all the time cross-checking against textbooks and articles about the nature of power.

What struck me was how almost every major campaigning movement of the past seemed to have the same debates that we are still having today: Do demonstrations make a difference? How important is the sympathy of the mainstream media? Does law-breaking help or hinder campaigning? Is violence ever justified? It even filters right through to the most procedural

issues about the appropriate balance between vegetarian and non-vegetarian food at campaigning conferences.

Also ever-present is the discordant refrain: 'But you'll never actually change anything.' This has been proven wrong many times over. Familiar, too, are the frustrating and frankly bizarre arguments made by governing élites against campaigns for the most basic human freedoms. So too the way that the law has consistently been used to repress radical activists and the way that the mainstream media has often cast them as subversive and dangerous criminals, even when they were advocating ideas that in years to come would be widely accepted as common sense.

There are plenty of other similarities – the blurry interplay between personalities and politics, the intrigues about who might be sleeping with whom and the ongoing tensions between established campaigning institutions and more radical grassroots networks. But most familiar of all is the passion, the energy and the sense of purpose awarded by a life committed to a cause, the oscillation between hope and despair, and the strength of relationships of the kind that can only be forged in struggle against adversity. This is the essence of campaigning, from the depths of history to the present day.

What struck me most was that the historical campaigns didn't only chime with contemporary movements but with one another too. All the successful campaigns appeared to have followed a fairly similar path, which I call in the book the stages of 'Consciousness', 'Co-ordination', 'Confrontation' and 'Consolidation'. They also seemed to resonate with the various theoretical works I studied – at least in part. The trouble was that most of the academic contributions viewed social change either from the perspective of the already powerful or from the supposedly objective sidelines. Only a few focused on the potential power of the have-nots. Nevertheless, even a cursory look at the past shows that the resistance of the oppressed is a major driver of history. That is what in this book is called Counterpower.

Counterpower is not a new term.² For example, in 1949 Martin Buber wrote that 'Power abdicates only under counter-power.'³ In a 2003 edition of *New Internationalist*, social-movement theorist Graeme Chesters describes Counterpower as 'the shadow realm of alternatives, a hall of mirrors held up to the dominant logic of capitalism'.⁴ In his book *Reflections on Empire*, Antonio Negri calls Counterpower 'an excessive overflowing force' and predicts that 'one day it will be unmeasurable'.⁵ Yet he reflects that, beyond insurrection, the concept remains underdeveloped. But Counterpower means much more than insurrection and does not need to be violent to be effective. Indeed, in many cases armed 'revolutions' turn out not to be revolutions at all, but simply transitions of power from one élite to another.

This book seeks to develop the concept of Counterpower by looking at the different types of Counterpower people can use. The first is Idea Counterpower, which can be exercised by challenging accepted truths, refusing to obey and finding new channels of communication. The second is Economic Counterpower – exercised through strikes, boycotts, democratic regulation and ethical consumption. The third is Physical Counterpower – which can occasionally mean literally fighting back, or, alternatively, nonviolently placing our bodies in the way of injustice. Many of the most successful movements for transformational change have used all three kinds of Counterpower, while many of those that have fallen by the wayside have used only one or two.

One way of thinking about Counterpower is to use the analogy of political struggle taking place on a set of rudimentary scales, made of a plank of wood placed over a log, like a see-saw. On one side is the target and on the other is the movement. The target uses its economic power to pay or fire people; its idea power to use notions of natural authority to isolate campaigners; and its physical power to use security guards, police and military to intimidate, arrest or kill. The role of the movement is to exercise enough Counterpower to undermine these aspects of power and tip the balance in its favor. Again and again movements have

shown that this can happen.

At first my research led to a sense of history repeating itself. But a closer reading revealed a steady evolution of strategy and tactics showing, for example, how the sophisticated methods of the Arab Spring are based on ideas that have been adapted and honed by revolutionaries across centuries. In preparation for the Egyptian Revolution, activists from the youth-led April 6 movement traveled to Serbia to learn from Srdga Popovic, who had been one of the leaders of the *Otpor* youth movement there which had been so successful in bringing down Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. Popovic was in turn heavily influenced by the work of Gene Sharp – a US scholar whose life has been dedicated to analyzing the methods of (amongst others) Lech Walesa, Martin Luther King Jr and Mohandas Gandhi.⁶ One of the influences on Gandhi's outlook was the Russian Revolution of 1905 which was led by – amongst others – Leon Trotsky. Trotsky was of course a follower of Karl Marx, who was himself a keen student of the revolutions in France.⁷ And so the lineage extends back through time.

The events of the Arab Spring are also giving renewed impetus to the social movements of today. Not long after Mubarak's resignation, Egyptian trade unions sent a solidarity delegation to the US, which was experiencing its most significant trade union movement struggle for a generation. In protest at repressive laws that would prevent public-sector workers from going on strike, thousands of activists occupied the Wisconsin Capitol building for 17 days, with hundreds sleeping there each night. Meanwhile, in Britain, protesters opposed to the restructuring of the welfare state along neoliberal lines adopted a new chant: 'London, Cairo, Wisconsin: We will fight and we will win'.

Only time will tell whether the Wisconsin protests were an important step towards something bigger or a brief peak of resistance. Similarly, whether the British anti-cuts movement will win its fight is so far unknown. So too the outcomes of events in North Africa and the Middle East. What is known,

however, is that change *can* happen and *does* happen. But it rarely happens without Counterpower.

This book is written for anyone who is involved in movements for justice today – or who might be interested in becoming involved in the future. My aim is to get inside those campaigns of the past which are constantly referred to in the rhetoric of campaign rallies.⁸ I hope to get to the root of *how* change happens, with the intention of providing a way for campaigners today to learn from the movements that constitute our heritage.

Friedrich Hegel is often credited with having said that 'The only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history'. It is up to us to prove him wrong.

1 6 Billion Ways, 5 March 2011, organized by Friends of the Earth, War on Want, Jubilee Debt Campaign, World Development Movement, City Circle and People & Planet. **2** See, for example, Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age*, Polity, 2005, and Hisham Nazer, *Power of a Third Kind*, Praeger, 1999. **3** Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, 1949, reprinted 1996 by Syracuse University Press. **4** *New Internationalist*, Sep 2003. **5** Antonio Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, Polity, 2008. **6** A journalist at the time of Serbia's 'Bulldozer Revolution' depicted Popovic 'scurrying around Belgrade with a heavily underlined copy of Sharp's tract stuffed in his pocket'. See Matthew Collins, *Time of the Rebels*, Serpents Tail, London, 2007. **7** Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852. Available at nin.tl/IQE8oi **8** In a speech for the TUC March for the Alternative demonstration in London on 28 March 2011, UK Labour Party leader Ed Miliband said: 'We come in the tradition of movements that have marched in peaceful but powerful protest for justice, fairness and political change. The suffragettes who fought for votes for women and won. The civil-rights movement in America that fought against racism and won. The anti-apartheid movement that fought the horror of that system and won.'