

CONTROL AND TRUST IN THE STATE

Jack Goldstone



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■ *Social revolts are shaking Europe (Greece, Spain, France, and Britain), and now they are affecting Russia. Do these revolts and outbreaks have anything in common?*

These revolts are essentially protests against a breaking of the social compact – where the previous generation had benefitted from lower school fees, more generous pensions, steady wage increases, and secure jobs, **we, who are working and entering the university and job market today, are losing these advantages or will not receive them at all.** Moreover, this is not seen as an inevitable, impersonal social condition (as it increasingly is in the case of Japan, where a younger

generation has never known rising wages or economic growth). Rather, it is seen as the fault of a combination of greedy bankers and corrupt or weak government officials, who have taken the greatest share of the benefits of recent economic growth and have left behind a weakened system that will no longer support the claims and expectations of today's workers and students. The protests are as much against these perceived abuses as they are against the conditions of austerity, for instance.

Austerity measures, unfortunately, are unavoidable, as the global economy has become overextended with debts and promises to workers that were based on impossible growth scenarios, and those debts cannot all be repaid nor can those promises all be kept. Some will have to be written off, but others will have to be repaid, and new capital for the future needs to be generated by working harder. **Yet the protests will cease if people believe they have governments they can trust, that are working to resolve these problems in an open and fair-handed way.** I predict that the protests will become worse, however, if people see that their governments continue to be weak and corrupt or remain self-interested, and if they see the burdens of change being placed most heavily on those

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with the fewest resources to cope with those burdens.

■ *The expansion of the field of social diversity inevitably results in an increase in tensions between various social groups. The more complicated a society is, the more contradictions there tend to be. What state policies seem to be the most effective in such cases?*

Well, to begin with, this statement is not precisely true. The existence of more groups creates more opportunities for tensions, but also more opportunities for cooperation or the possibility to isolate problems unique to specific groups. But when 80% of society feels hurt due to the fact that it faces more work, less pay, or less government support, and it views government missteps as being responsible for such changes, many groups will be involved in protests.

■ *In all social revolts, we are talking about the initiative being ascribed to one particular social group, while in fact, it is another group that ends up revolting. This means that many people are ready to pretend that they represent a social group that is not their own (whether it is football fans, students, etc.). Does this social mimicry mean that the demand for violence is on the rise, and that demand for politics is decreasing?*

When many groups have grievances and wish to protest against what they feel is an injustice or outrage, most will respect the line that exists between peaceful protest and violent expression of rage. However, once one group crosses that line – it may be anarchists, or students, or even the police who

shoot first – other groups will feel that the line has been broken and that all can cross it. So initial outbreaks of violence involving one group can spread **until the authorities make clear that they can still control protestors through arrests and containment.** ■

Jack Goldstone was speaking with Yulia Netesova