

Speaking Truth about Power in a Globalized World

By Donna Kennedy-Glans¹

'Power' is a loaded word. In the hundreds of management and leadership texts published every year, and in the thousands of speeches delivered by corporate CEOs, heads of academic institutions and government leaders, the word 'power' is rarely used. Why? Because top-down power holds the potential for abuse. Conversely, bottom-up power is seen as an authentic, inherently positive force for good.

When we do talk about *power*, we are prone to speaking of two (often competing) sources of power: macro and micro; institutional and grassroots; top-down and bottom-up. On the macro-level, we speak of big institutions with lots of bricks and mortar— the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank; global for profit companies— Shell, Google and McDonalds; economic heavy-weights —the G-8 and the G-20; established religion and the Vatican. At the grassroots, we share stories of individual citizens coming together to *speak truth to power*—the people of Plachimada, India staring down Coca-Cola²; the citizens of a rural community a few kilometers east of Mexico City barricading government survey and demolition crews wanting to build an airport in their village³; indigenous communities in Fort McKay, Alberta demanding answers from energy companies and the Alberta government about water and air quality impacts of oilsands development.

Our Power Story

This is the power story we embraced with the Industrial Revolution at the launch of the 20th century, and we've been honing it ever since. Power vs. powerless; haves vs. have-nots; the voices vs. the silenced. This narrative has endured, even into the 21st century. One of my favourite images is drawn by Arundhati Roy: "*It's as though the people ...have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and tiny little one) that have set off in resolutely opposite directions...The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness.*"⁴ Against this narrative backdrop—'them vs. us'—we cheer for the underdog, the proverbial David, using his sling-shot to slay Goliath. Rarely do we envision these two powers—top-down authority and bottom-up influence— coming together, or converging, in a

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² "Building Water Democracy: People's Victory against Coca-Cola in Plachimada" by Vandana Shiva. *ZNet Commentary*, May 13, 2004.

³ "Small is Beautiful: Airports, McDonald's, and Hypermarkets in Mexico" by Claudio Albertaini, *ZNet Commentary*, September 17, 2002.

⁴ Arundhati Roy, "Shall We Leave it to the Experts?", *The Nation*, February 18, 2002

collaborative way. In our myth, power is usually something to be acquired or seized. We have winners and losers.

Quite recently, our world order was shaken by ‘unstoppable populist movements’ in Tunisia and then Egypt, and this momentum is raging through the Middle East and North African region. Not surprisingly, this movement is being framed as a social justice power story; citizens at the grassroots finding their voices and toppling established institutions and privileged, elite and oppressive regimes. Yet, as we’re discovering in places like Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, this speaking truth to power story isn’t always guaranteed to work. Structural power can be an intimidating force to be reckoned with— *citizens don’t just override institutional power by sheer force of will*. The same is true for employees working in large blue-chip corporations. Admittedly though, it’s a very tempting narrative. At points of utter frustration, I’ve been seduced myself: Two years ago, I launched a grassroots campaign in the federal riding of Calgary West asking for a Conservative nomination to challenge the 14-year legacy of sitting MP, Rob Anders⁵.

Changing our Power Story

What I am inviting you to consider is the possibility of re-writing, or at least seriously editing, this power narrative as we move into the 21st century. As global citizens, what is our shared power story? Can we adapt this storyline to move beyond the dichotomy of bottom-up facing off against top-down? Can we see this remarkable explosion of change in the Middle East and North Africa as the dynamic interplay of bottom-up influence and top-down authority? I’m not denying the tension between macro and micro—the tension is real. What I’m asking is if we can transform our thinking to see this tension as something that is positive, as an energy capable of transcending the ‘either/or’ duality of macro vs. micro; institutional vs. grassroots; top-down vs. bottom-up.

Of course, we are prone to dualistic thinking. Right now I’m working on a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo and I’m shocked at how readily conservationists who care about Mountain Gorillas are able to partition ecological priorities from the needs of indigenous populations... as if an ‘either/or’ solution was even possible.⁶ And, I’d say the same about attempts to build a divide between top-down and bottom-up forces for change. In a globalized world, change happens in a dynamic way, influenced by catalysts and change agents both inside large institutions and within civil society. Let’s try to unpack the peaceful liberation of Egypt and Tunisia to see what I’m envisioning here.

Anatomy of a Revolution

If you Google ‘*anatomy of a revolution*’, you’ll be amazed by the number of pundits dissecting these recent revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, attempting to reconstruct what happened. Theories zing around cyberspace. Here is my take on the various explanations:

Theory A: The peoples’ revolution in Egypt and Tunisia was successful because social media—*Facebook, Twitter, Youtube*—connected youth on the ground in Egypt and Tunisia to one another. And, social

⁵ See www.ourcalgarywest.com for details.

⁶ For an excellent article on this topic, see Challenge to Conservationists by Mac Chapin, *Excerpted from the November/December 2004 WORLDWATCH magazine*.

media allowed youth on the ground in Egypt and Tunisia to connect with social media users across the globe, as witnesses to State-sanctioned torture and abuse. Social media removed the isolation factor, and fostered solidarity, best exemplified in Egyptian Wael Ghonim's "*We are all Khaled Said*" campaign.

Theory B: Social media, on its own, would not have created the conditions for a peaceful revolution. It was the linking of social media to mainstream media that made the difference. Amplified by CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera, citizens of the world had a ring-side seat to the revolution. And, global citizens were also listening hard to understand Western governments' response: Did President Obama, for example, support President Mubarak or the people of Egypt? The combination of social media, amplified by mainstream media, meant that macro-level decision-makers—everywhere—knew their choices were being scrutinized.

Theory C: Yes, social and mainstream media were needed to amplify the messages. But none of this change would have been possible without extreme environmental and social conditions: a bulging youth population in the Middle East with very limited hope for gainful employment further irritated by rising food prices, even fears of food scarcity. The young entrepreneur in Tunisia—Mohamed Bouazizi⁷--perfectly profiled this despair. After his failed attempt to sell fruits and vegetables without a permit, Bouazizi doused himself in petrol and set himself alight in December 2010 triggering protests that ultimately led to the downfall of Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

*As we reconstruct these peaceful populist movements in Tunisia and Egypt, what exactly are we looking for?*⁸ Some believe we are trying to identify the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. This means our focus is likely on the grassroots, asking: what triggered these populist reactions to the oppression and suffering? Yet, I'd argue, this can be a constrained view. We also need to be on the lookout for openings in top-down power that make peaceful change possible. In Egypt, for example, people on the streets very astutely surmised that the army, a well-established institution, was sympathetic. How would the outcomes have differed if the army had fired back on the crowds? The ongoing violence in Libya offers clues. As well, global citizens around the world were well positioned to appreciate the social and political implications of the youth bulge in the Middle East: think-tanks have been warning us of these risks for nearly a decade. When Al Jazeera picked up, and amplified, the grassroots messages of social media, the world was educated on the facts and able to respond.

Admittedly, these openings—the *chinks in the old armour*, so to speak—aren't always obvious to the casual observer. Change can feel like it's happening all of the sudden, and may even feel unilateral or one-way. Yet we all know the story of Rosa Parks. She didn't just sit in the 'whites-only' section of the bus one day and successfully demand her rights. She, and many others, spent years to create the conditions for that triggering event; and that conditioning included stretching open even the tiniest chinks in the armour of institutionalized racism in America. Creating the conditions for change to happen in Egypt and Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, involves the dynamic

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12241082>: January 22 2011; *Mohamed Bouazizi: memories of a Tunisian martyr*

⁸ For a useful graphic, check out the Economist's Arab League map: http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/02/arab_league_map.

interplay of many powers. For example, in a recent Economist magazine, one article asks why the Egyptian army chose not to use lethal force against the crowds in Tahrir Square.⁹ Their conclusion: “...the close ties between America’s and Egypt’s armed forces played a critical role in helping the new military council become a force for social cohesion rather than repression.” The training of Egyptian army captains and generals in the United States helped to change the power narrative for these individual soldiers, and ultimately these individuals influenced choices made within the entire Egyptian army.

Feedback Loops

Feedback loops help us to understand the dynamic interplay of top-down and bottom-up catalysts for change.¹⁰ In military dictatorships, we often see formal, sanctioned communication channels largely moving decisions from the top-down....there isn’t much of an obvious looping back of ideas. Democracies, on the other hand, are in theory designed to be chock full of transparent feedback loops capable of carrying ideas and priorities back and forth between citizens to governments, on a continuous and iterative basis. In any governing structure, informal and unofficial feedback loops emerge to supplement the formal communication and engagement pathways endorsed by governments and large institutions.

Facebook groups are one example of an informal feedback loop connecting top-down and bottom-up power. In February, I partnered with others to set up a Facebook group to support Yemeni protestors. Knowing some of the protestors personally,¹¹ I wanted to make sure that the events on the ground in Yemen were transparently communicated within Yemen, and beyond Yemen’s borders. And, I wanted people in Yemen to know that outsiders were observing their behaviours. To protect individuals in Yemen, we encouraged everyone participating in the Facebook group to create a fictitious name and email address. Surprisingly, this Yemen Human Rights Facebook group¹² not only provides an informal communication channel for like-minded people...it has also become relevant for Yemenis who oppose the citizen protests. For example, government security officials in Yemen monitor this Facebook group (even cyber-bullying members from time to time). What we are learning—again, via informal channels—is that officials in formal positions of power in Yemen are influenced by what they are learning through social media. They have a clearer understanding of what is happening within individual communities, and the reaction of individual citizens. These understandings influence the choices they make.

⁹ Military-to-military relationships: The ties that bind, from the February 26th to March 4th edition, *The Economist*

¹⁰ For an excellent review of feedback loops, see David Peat’s book, *Gentle Action: Bringing Creative Change to a Turbulent World* (Pari Publishing)

¹¹ Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni journalist, is one of the leaders of the citizen protests. For details of Tawakkol’s journey, see my blog at: <http://integritybridges.com/blog/the-voices-of-women-in-yemen/>

¹² In mid February 2011, I partnered with others to host a human rights Facebook page to allow citizens in the country of Yemen to transparently and publicly share their on-the-ground experiences as they press the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen’s ruler for the last 33 years, for change. Yemen Rights Watch: yemenrightswatch@groups.facebook.com

Balancing Power

In January, a friend somewhat prophetically handed me a book titled *Blessed Unrest*— Paul Hawken’s 2007 analysis of the evolution of the environmental and social justice movement, which he sees organically emerging from the bottom-up. At first, I was concerned that Hawken was reinforcing a dualistic, parallel path approach to power—his enthusiastic endorsement of power *rising* is clear. Ultimately though, I was assured by Hawken’s approach to the power narrative. In his opinion, the goal of this yet unnamed environmental and social justice movement is not to seek dominance, but instead, to disperse concentrations of power: “Its clout resides in its ideas, not in force.” Hawken is excited by the power of societal and inter-societal organizations (‘civil society organizations’), and their capacity to transcend barriers set up by conventional government and corporate allegiances. Yet his goal is not to have bottom-up civil society organizations conquer; his advice is to find a sense of balance...”knowing what is too much wealth, what is too much power, what constitutes license instead of freedom...”¹³ Finding balance in the interaction of top-down and bottom-up power; that’s a critical revision of our power story in a globalized world.

As I observe the protests across North Africa and the Middle East, Hawken’s image of balancing power is stuck in my mind. In Bahrain, I’m horrified seeing riot police fire shots into protesting crowds. Then, in an obvious attempt to restore some sense of balance of power, and undoubtedly in response to global pressures¹⁴, the monarchy in Bahrain decides to pull their military.¹⁵ Informal feedback loops connecting institutional power and the citizens on the ground in Bahrain seem to be working. And, part of that feedback circuitry loops like spaghetti through global citizenry—*energized and informed by people like you and I*—citizens who are watching what is happening in Bahrain via social and mainstream media, and speak out to endorse our own political leaders’ calls for peaceful negotiations. The spaghetti analogy is important –we’re not talking about straight-line and predictable reporting here; what we’re envisioning are ideas and people connecting and intersecting like strands of spaghetti in a pot.

Global Citizenship

So what does it mean to be a global citizen in a world where power moves beyond a top-down and bottom-up duality? In this classroom, you have been studying global economics—last week you looked at economics from a top-down perspective: you explored neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism; the development of World Bank, the IMF and their role in shaping health policies; the force of globalization. This week, in Global Economics Part II, you are looking at economics from the grassroots, looking up. After that? You’ll explore social justice issues, and how to be a global citizen. Your professor, Deborah Smillie, kindly invited me to share some ideas with you about how the grassroots connects to macro-economics, and vice versa. I’ve worked in both places—as VP of a large international energy company, and as founder and executive director of a voluntary organization building capacity at the community

¹³ Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*, Viking, 2007, p. 183

¹⁴ The Canadian and U.S. governments called for peaceful negotiations in Bahrain.

¹⁵ Bahrain protestors flood into capital, *CBC News*, February 19, 2011.

level. What I've learned, within the macro and the micro, is how out-dated our power narrative is for citizens in a globalized world.

We've looked at the role of global citizens in balancing top-down and bottom-up power, using the populist uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia to illustrate this new power narrative. Let me introduce another example to show how the formal lines that divide macro and micro are being erased for global citizens living here in Calgary, or anywhere. Hands up: have you heard of social entrepreneurialism? Are you a social entrepreneur? Do you want to be a social entrepreneur? Let's find out. First, some background.

Blurring the For Profit and For Purpose Divide

The line dividing for profit companies and for purpose charities used to be firm. People worked in companies to make money. If you were fortunate, you were able to put aside some of your hard-earned cash (either wages or corporate profits). Then, you could donate some of your personal savings or corporate profits to charities who in turn used your money to support causes you cared about (e.g. feeding the hungry, caring for orphans, providing safe shelter to battered women, buying equipment for hospitals and clinics).

The line dividing *for profit and for purpose* is now smudged. In the space between, there has been an explosion of for profit-for purpose hybrids. Individuals and companies don't donate to charity. Creative capitalists—social entrepreneurs—*invest* in social venture projects and social funds.

How did this new landscape emerge?

After the two World Wars, the role of the private sector was clear-cut. Corporations existed to generate the jobs and wealth needed to rebuild a war-torn economy. Maintaining this single focus wasn't easy—by the time Communism imploded in the late 1980s, the notion that companies had *social accountabilities* to citizens and the environment became impossible to ignore. In the large public energy company where I was working at that time, we started to talk more openly about how to manage 'above ground' or non-technical risks in a way that considered the social implications of investment—how to manage the expectations of employees, host governments and citizens in local communities; how to manage our reputation and integrity; how to be a good corporate citizen and steward of the planet. Our lofty *beyond profit* ambitions eventually morphed into the slick language of '*corporate social responsibility*' and '*triple bottom line reporting*'. At the time, it felt like a quantum leap: *For profit* companies talking openly about *for purpose* outcomes.

Likewise, at the other end of the *for profit-for purpose* spectrum,¹⁶ humanitarians started to borrow ideas from the world of business to deal with some of their challenges in development projects. The compassionate have always asked tough questions about the root causes of social issues that just don't go away:

¹⁶ In the earlier part of this talk, we spoke of top-down and bottom-up: a vertical continuum. When we talk of for profit and for purpose, this can likewise be seen as a vertical continuum or as a lateral horizon. To 'flatten' the image of hierarchy, many people in the field of social entrepreneurialism approach this discussion from a lateral horizon.

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar;
it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his book, *White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, William Easterly openly challenges some of the restructuring tactics of Western governments. Easterly rails against *tied aid* (contributions to charity tied to use of consultants and technology of a donor) and *flavor of the month* philanthropy (e.g. Africa, then the tsunami, more recently Haiti and maternal care). Cynicism aside, there are compassionate people who genuinely care; they just want to know *how* to do this work better. Business gurus like Bill Gates aren't asking us to keep *donating* to charitable causes...they are telling us to *invest* in global needs. To build capacity that is sustainable, at-risk communities need a *hand-up* not a *hand-out*. A quick primer on some of this new lingo may help:

Social Entrepreneurialism: All business schools teach entrepreneurialism, including MRU: a business entrepreneur is someone who innovates a new solution or idea and makes money doing so. A social entrepreneur is someone who recognizes a social problem and uses business entrepreneurial principles to create social change. A business entrepreneur measures success primarily in financial terms; a social entrepreneur measures success primarily in terms of the positive impact on society. A modern-day social entrepreneur is Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank –Yunus created new ways to loan money to the poor. Social entrepreneurs do care about profit (but they care about positive social change more). Financial sustainability is often part of a social entrepreneur's plan: Grameen Bank generates enough profit to continue loaning money to the poor. For a great book on how to be a social entrepreneur, check out *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies*. Dr. Mark Durieux, co-author of this Dummies book, is an inspiring colleague living in Calgary, Canada. Mark is emphatic: social entrepreneurialism is not just for the elite or the rich!¹⁷ This leads us into the next definition.

Philanthrocapitalism: These are the super rich and/or influential (think Bono, Bill Clinton, and Oprah Winfrey) who want to build a new model for partnership between government and philanthropy. Frustrated by how hard it is for government to be innovative, these philanthrocapitalists want to use private donations to test pilots of experimental initiatives too risky or controversial to sell to taxpayers (e.g. a leadership academy for school principals, paying poor parents to get their children vaccinated). Once a pilot works, they can be scaled up using public funds.¹⁸ Not everyone is excited about this new celebrity culture. For some, parachuting movie stars into Haiti for photo-ops isn't philanthropy...it's marketing. Some see the rich and wealthy as too fickle to rely on for this critical work. People like Mark

¹⁷ For ideas on social entrepreneurial projects for youth, check out these open-source materials from the Unveiling Youth Potential initiative www.unveilingyouthpotential.com based here in Calgary. Another source of social entrepreneurial projects championed by quite ordinary people can be found at www.dowser.org

¹⁸ For more on philanthrocapitalism, a recent book by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green is a must-read: *Philanthrocapitalism: How the rich can save the world*

Durieux are also keen to distinguish philanthrocapitalism from *humanitourism*...wealthy tourists holidaying in developing countries to see how the poor people live. I believe you are talking about this issue in your next class.

Venture Philanthropy: Venture philanthropists are people who borrow concepts from private equity/venture capital finance and apply them to the non-profit and charitable sectors. Instead of having philanthropic foundations handing over money to fund qualified projects of charities, venture philanthropy encourages:

- The active partnership, or engagement, of donors, volunteers and/or experts with charities to achieve agreed outcomes such as organizational effectiveness, capacity building or other important change;
- The use of a variety of financing techniques in addition to grants, such as multi-year financing, loans or other financial instruments most appropriate for a charity's needs;
- The capability to provide skills and/or hands-on resources with the objective of adding value to the development of a charity (e.g. direct involvement of donors...even sitting on the boards of non-profits they fund);
- The desire to enable donors to maximize the social return on their investment whether that be as a financial donor or as a volunteer of time and expertise.

Smudging the Lines between For Profit and For Purpose

Hybrid ways of doing charity and doing business along the ever expanding *for profit-for purpose continuum* are flattening the vertical horizon between macro and micro views of economics. And, working from either end of the *for profit-for purpose* continuum, we can smudge the lines even more.

In the business world, corporate legal structures are evolving to better accommodate for purpose outcomes. In 2010, Maryland became the first state in the U.S. to create *benefit corporations*—for profit businesses allowed to incorporate social good and environmental principles into their charters. Why are corporate directors choosing to become Benefit Corporations? “B Corporations” address two critical problems which hinder the creation of social and environmental impact through business:

- The existence of shareholder primacy which makes it difficult for corporations to take employee, community, and environmental interests into consideration when making decisions; and
- The absence of transparent standards which makes it difficult for all of us to tell the difference between a ‘good company’ and just good marketing.

And inside large companies, individuals are finding ways to balance power. Of course, whistle-blower legislation is still needed to protect employees who speak out when organizations act illegally. More importantly, individuals are exploring how to reconcile organizational values and personal values, asking critically important questions and finding ways to balance individual and organizational power. In a

recent feature article on BP titled “How bad is BP?”¹⁹ Economist magazine included this statement: “A company’s job is to make money for its shareholders legally. Morality is the province of private individuals and of governments.” I found one reader’s response quite heartening²⁰: “How do you justify that? We are required to be moral as individuals and when acting collectively as communities. *By what precept are we excused from morality when acting collectively for business?* There is no theoretical justification for giving companies a complete opt out from our duty to behave morally.”

And, beyond individual organizational boundaries, leading minds in neuroscience, applied economics, philosophy, contemplative science and anthropology are meeting to discuss moral and ethical dimensions of our economic systems. Last April, leaders met with the Dalai Lama, in Zurich, to ask some mind-bending questions: Is it possible to develop an economic system which rewards a whole society as opposed to only one individual? Can we conceive of a system that not only recognizes competitive success, but also recognizes cooperation and compassion?

Conclusions

The coming together of for profit and for purpose is happening, in ways that blend and balance powers from macro and micro, institutional and grassroots, top-down and bottom-up. Perpetuating the old narrative of two competing sources of power is slowing us down. Yes, it’s still tempting to divide the world into dualities. But, it’s impossible to maintain this narrative in a globalized 21st century world. Social entrepreneurs are found within the largest of companies and institutions and the most bureaucratic of charitable foundations. Impactful global citizens, I would argue, are innovative and ruthlessly compassionate individuals who find ways to bridge these divides.

How will you recognize these global citizens? Here are a few clues:

1. Global citizens think about ‘we’ not ‘me’. Their sense of responsibility is deep and wide; not bounded by the constraints of individual organizations, institutions, companies or communities. They are the ones who ask: *How could I not do this?*
2. Global citizens don’t deny the reality of power. And, they accept that relative power accrues to those in dominant groups. Yet they act differently with power.
3. Global citizens accept that change is influenced by power from a variety of sources. They know how to live in the midst of change without needing to control all the drivers and influencers of change.

As global citizens on Planet Earth in the 21st century, we’re in the process of re-learning how to deal with power. Our reaction to protestors in the Middle East and North Africa—our reaction to social entrepreneurs and change leaders anywhere—help redefine our power story. In the past century, we spent a lot of time talking about leadership and management, skirting warily round the edges of ‘power’. And we often idealize the potential of bottom-up power as a unilateral force. It’s time for us to approach

¹⁹ January 22nd 2011 Economist magazine

²⁰ February 5th 2011 Economist magazine, Letter to the Editor re: Moral dissuasion

power with fresh eyes. Let me conclude with a powerful and encouraging insight shared by Australian leadership expert, Amanda Sinclair²¹:

“These situations induce a healthy respect for institutional power and the many ways individuals are coerced and disciplined into silence and obedience. Yet the learning for me was not to wallow in powerlessness, but rather to work with the tension built into these more complex understandings of power: to not expect unfettered agency and resist illusions of grandiosity while also seeing that one can be powerful towards meaningful and liberating ends, often in surprising ways.”

²¹ Amanda Sinclair, *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (Allen & Unwin, 2007), p. 79.