

Taiwanese Spring in the making

Written by Peter Huang 黃彼得

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Several days ago, about 30 young people went into the compound in front of the Executive Yuan, spattered the building and gold name plaque with eggs and paint and began a sit-down protest.

They were protesting the broken promise, made three years ago by then-premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) and then-minister of the interior Jiang Yi-huah (江宜華) to the residents of Dapu Borough (大埔) in Miaoli County whose four homes were forcibly demolished last month.

The protesters were there to call Wu and Jiang — now vice president and premier, respectively — out on this promise, and have them eat their words.

The Executive Yuan's response to the assault on its building was have the police arrest the demonstrators, and to have the spokesperson repeat the hackneyed fallback that the Executive Yuan “complies with the law” and that young people need to learn they should express themselves in a “rational” manner.

Rational? Of course, the way that the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) governs “according to the law” is perfectly rational, and the behavior of these young demonstrators, who calmly sat down after their ambush in the full knowledge that they would be hauled over to the prosecutors' office for their non-violent protest, was completely irrational.

The whole country is in agreement that the forced demolitions in Dapu were both unjust and unfair, and media commentary on the issue is unlikely to be too partisan, either. However, if the outcome of the exchange between National Tsing Hua University student Chen Wei-ting (陳偉廷) and Minister of Education Chiang Wei-ling (江宜弘) late last year is anything to go by, with the exception of a few nods to young people's sense of justice, I doubt there will be much made of this apart from trying to teach these youngsters how to behave properly, or to tell them a thing or two about how to be polite and rational.

There are a few things that need to be clearly distinguished here.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell often reminded people of the importance of distinguishing between social morality and individual virtue. The easiest way to see what Russell meant by this is to imagine a country in which every single man, woman and child follows the customs and mores of that society, and obeys all the rules and regulations in which everyone is a good father, or a good mother, or a good student. Such a society would be something akin to Nazi Germany.

However, even though cases of individual virtue were to be seen throughout Nazi Germany, there was little to be seen of social morality. Of course, there were those who were unhappy with what the Nazis were doing, and yet the vast majority of people in the country went along with it and did as they were told, even when it came to being complicit in the Holocaust.

It would do us well to think carefully on this: Are there elements within our own culture that place importance on individual virtue over social morality that can be exploited by the powers-that-be to attain the latter's own objectives, even to the extent that they would go along unthinkingly and unquestioningly?

I fear that there is another aspect about these young people's actions that is entirely predictable. The media will talk of spattering with paint, of people making their voices heard, but nowhere will you hear the words "civil disobedience" uttered, or see them written.

The fact is that these young people's ambush on an organ of government is a classic example of civil disobedience, in the glorious tradition of the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, the Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi and John Rawls, the author of *A Theory of Justice*.

If you look carefully at the press release they prepared before embarking upon this protest, you will see that these young people were fully aware of what they were doing, that it was not just about negative criticism, but also about positive recommendations, and they had prepared the legal fines they knew their actions would incur.

The Executive Yuan should come forward and identify exactly on what level these young people were demonstrating irrational behavior: Was it on the individual, or the public level?

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This apathetic administration has to realize, at least in the wake of the recent mass white T-shirt vigil for army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘), that non-violent protest — whatever the scale, whether it be demonstrations or civil disobedience, non-cooperation or peaceful intervention — does have its logic, and does depend on whether the government is willing to set right what it is doing wrong.

The day this government eventually looks back fondly on the “irrational behavior” of these youngsters, the Taiwanese Spring will already have arrived.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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