

BOOK REVIEW

*UPRISING: HOW WISCONSIN RENEWED THE POLITICS OF PROTEST,
FROM MADISON TO WALL STREET*

BY JOHN NICHOLS

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Nichols, as a recognized media critic who identifies himself as a progressive, does not pretend to be objective and value free in his analysis. He states in the forward that he is proud of the fact that he was born and raised in Wisconsin, a state known for its progressive labor history and for its pioneering lead in enacting laws and regulations protecting the rights of its working citizens. He makes it a point to emphasize the fact that, after completing his graduate studies, he rejected an offer for employment with a nonunion newspaper to accept a position as a reporter for a union newspaper, stating: “I was ‘union’ then, and I’m ‘union’ now” (x). Thus, we know from the outset where his sympathies lie and should not be surprised to find that he takes great pride in what the Wisconsin uprising has managed to accomplish. It is his intent to have the reader “consider what an uprising and its aftermath may mean for labor, for popular organizing, for media reform, for politics, for democracy. And, perhaps most important, how one uprising inspires the next” (xi).

Nichols bases his analysis on participant observation fieldwork research in which he attended the daily rallies and gatherings in the cold winter weather in February and March of 2011 in Madison, the state capital of Wisconsin. He wrote about what he experienced during those two months on the ground in various publications such as the *Nation*, *Capital Times*, *Guardian*, and the *Progressive* magazine. He also appeared on a number of radio programs to talk about the uprising taking place in Wisconsin and was invited to speak to various audiences about what was happening in Wisconsin during that epic moment in labor history.

In Chapter One, Nichols briefly introduces the background that led to the mass mobilization of a wide spectrum of concerned citizens that “would make a single word, ‘Wisconsin,’ not just the name of a state but the reference point for a renewal of labor militancy, mass protest, and radical politics” (3). He points out how the mainstream media echoed the arguments being presented by the recently elected reactionary governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, of the need to enact drastic measures to overcome the supposed budget deficits facing the state by taking away the bargaining rights and the union representation of what he claimed were “overpaid” public sector workers, from state, county, and municipal employees to teachers in public schools, technical colleges, and universities.

On the very day that Governor Walker announced his intent to pass a bill to take away the

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collective bargaining rights of public sector workers, “fifty members of the Teaching Assistants’ Association at the University of Wisconsin — the oldest union of graduate [school] employees in the world — gathered in front of the Memorial Union on the Madison campus and raised hand-made signs and teeth-chattering voices in protest” (4). Two days later, they were joined by more than one thousand protesters in a protest march from the campus to the state capitol building several blocks away. Nichols emphasizes the fact that a broad coalition was being formed for within just one week, more than one hundred thousand turned out to protest, and the participants in the protest were not only public sector unionists but private sector unionists as well as high school and university students, retirees, farmers, and small-business owners.

In Chapter Two, Nichols gives a brief account of how the founding fathers, in particular James Madison, realized the need to put a check on the possibility of the abuse of power by elected officials and how they successfully struggled to pass the First Amendment to the Constitution which put in place specific tools for challenging the abuses and excesses of a “elected despotism” by an informed citizenry who could call for the impeachment and swift removal of elected officials who betrayed the public trust. Nichols asserts, “Democracy does not end on election day. That’s when it begins” (38). He goes on to state “the truest accomplishment of the protests in Madison [and cities across Wisconsin] was that they renewed an understanding of citizens not merely as voters in elections but as active censors of an elected despotism that can never be allowed to go unchallenged” (39). He points out that the purpose of the First Amendment was to provide citizens with the right to object to dangerous policies proposed by their elected officials, and applauds the action taken by the fourteen state senators, emboldened by the huge mass mobilization of citizens, to serve in their role as elected representatives of the people to leave the state in order to deny Governor Walker and the Republican senators supporting him the quorum needed to pass the anti-union legislation.

In Chapter Three, Nichols points to the importance of remembering and embracing the all too often neglected radical and progressive history of citizens’ involvement in politics in each state and locality. He states, “Maintaining an understanding of progressive roots, of where we come from — not for purposes of nostalgia but for renewal and revitalization — is a powerful tool” (64) and “making these historical and emotional connections is essential to building popular movements” (61). In regard to progressive history in Wisconsin, Nichols notes that pioneering labor laws were enacted and the forerunner to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was founded in Wisconsin in 1932 and that Wisconsin passed the first state law giving the right to local government workers and teachers to engage in collective bargaining in 1959 (51), precisely the law that Walker was seeking to remove. Nichols emphasizes the power of broad coalitions to influence the building of ever more powerful coalitions, noting that key organizers in the Wisconsin Uprising who had been involved in the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington in 1999 brought with them some of the tactics and strategies that had been used so effectively to shut down the WTO Ministerial meetings. Slogans such as “This is What Democracy Looks Like!” and “The Whole World is Watching!” that gained media attention at the WTO protests in 1999 were again seen on placards held by protesters in Wisconsin in 2011. The tens of thousands of protesters on the streets of Madison in 2011 chanted slogans such as “Tax the Rich!” “An Injury to One is an Injury to All” “People Power, not Corporate Power!” (53), and Nichols notes that “one of the most popular signs on the streets of Wisconsin, distributed by National Nurses United, declared “BLAME WALL STREET!” He then goes on to assert how

the militancy of the Wisconsin protests had a snowball effect that led to inspiring major protests by broad coalitions of concerned citizens in other states such as Florida, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, and Ohio standing up to the attempts by conservative Republican governors and state legislators to weaken workers' rights and enact legislation detrimental to the public interest. He points out that "the inspiration was certainly seen in the fall of 2011, as the Occupy Wall Street movement went to the belly of the beast, Manhattan's financial district, with a message and tactics borrowed from and extended upon the Wisconsin model. Dozens of Wisconsinites were among the initial protesters on Wall Street. They brought ideas, values, but not a tight template. That's a critical lesson" (56). Nichols ends this chapter by noting how the mass mobilizations in cities throughout Wisconsin inspired national labor leaders to take action and how the Steelworkers Union became one of the first major unions to embrace 'Occupy Wall Street' but he points out that "it's not just the labor leaders who, after so many decades of trying to build mass movements on behalf of worker rights, were inspired. It was also people who had never aspired to be labor leaders; people whose connections with the labor movement had until February of 2011 been maintained by threads of personal history rather than contemporary experience. This is more than Wisconsin. Wisconsin merely provided a sense of the possible. This is about what matters far beyond the borders of one state. Indeed, this is about an arc-of-history movement that has the potential to transform America by pulling in all the disparate and previously disconnected individuals and communities that can form a grand coalition for economic and social justice" (66).

Nichols in Chapter Four acknowledges the energizing presence of famous people who joined in the Wisconsin protests, including the AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka, Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello, Rev. Jesse Jackson, actress Susan Sarandon, and, in particular, filmmaker Michael Moore. He also briefly outlines the deception and fabrication of facts used by Governor Walker to claim that Wisconsin's budget "crisis" (even though the state had a budget surplus of \$121 million through the remainder of the fiscal year) had forced him to attack the unions representing public employees.

In Chapter Five, Nichols deals with what he refers to as "the next media system." He begins the chapter by observing how the mainstream media bias in reporting was clearly revealed in their extensive coverage of small Tea Party events and their neglect to offer coverage of mass mobilizations of concerned citizens addressing pressing social issues such as deficits, austerity, and attacks on labor, education, and social/political/economic inequality. He cites Media Matters' Eric Boehlert who wrote, "I'm convinced that if the Tea Party had brought a state capital to a month-long standstill the way union supporters did in Wisconsin, CNN, for instance, would have built an on-site studio and provided constant, around-the-clock coverage of the political drama" (96). He also cites Laura Flanders, host of an Air Media radio show and GRITtv, who observed, "In Cairo, as the crowds grew, the media coverage increased. In Madison, as the crowds grew, it decreased" (98). He points out that "when the largest of the Wisconsin demonstrations took place on March 12, with an estimated 180,000 people ... most major print, broadcast, and cable media had no reporters on the scene and neglected to report the breathtaking events ..." (98). Nichols also offers a quote from filmmaker Michael Moore who explained, "The media has done a poor job covering this. Imagine a takeover of the government headquarters in any other country, free or totalitarian — our media would be all over it. But this one scares them and their masters — as it should" (99).

Nichols then turns in this chapter to the extensive coverage of events in Madison offered

by alternative media such as Madison's community supported radio station WORT and by indymedia pioneers such as the host of Democracy Now! Amy Goodman and MSNBC hosts such as Rachel Maddow, and offers a brief discussion of how radical journalism may be produced and distributed in the future in what he identifies as the next media system. By this, he includes groundbreaking contributions to gaining a broadened perspective and fuller understanding of political events by the efforts of individuals and groups creating and editing fact-based blogs and the innovative use of new social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, texting, and flip-cam videos that has spread throughout the world in recent years. He states that with the use of these tools by activists in Wisconsin, "This was a new construct, a Next Media with unprecedented capacity to spread information, to inspire activism, to make real the promise of democracy" (113). He ends this chapter by pointing to the vital link between journalism and democracy and the potential of developing a true democracy with the advance of a grassroots-based participatory journalism: "The Next Media system has not been fully realized, nor even fully imagined. There is so much yet to be done to develop the models for funding serious journalism in a post-advertising age, to teach new generations of online journalists, to defend the network neutrality that is essential to realize the digital promise, to challenge the prevalence of spin, public relations, and propaganda. But we've got a sense now that a Next Media system is possible; a system that could be more journalistically sound, more democratic, and more radical in its potential than anything we have known since the rise of consolidated and dumbed-down corporate media" (116).

Nichols begins Chapter Six by stating, "Labor did not win or lose the Wisconsin struggle. Not yet" (120). He notes that one of the lessons learned from the Wisconsin uprising, in order for the labor unions to revive and redefine themselves, is to broaden the concerns of unions to address the pressing issues affecting all workers, including farmers, small business owners, and the large segment of the working population who are non-union, contingent laborers as well as those who are unemployed. Nichols asserts that a "a growing number of labor leaders are coming to recognize that simply electing Democrats is not enough" (132) and quotes AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka who stated in a May 2011 National Press Club address, "Our role is not to build the power of a political party or a candidate. It is to improve the lives of working families and strengthen our country. If leaders aren't blocking the wrecking ball [moves to weaken or destroy organized labor] and advancing working families' interests, working people will not support them. This is where our focus will be — now, and in 2012 and beyond" (136-137). Nichols argues that labor must work at the grassroots level with emphasis on coalition building, neighborhood organizing, and demonstrations; recognize and support independent and third party candidates offering progressive policy proposals; and move beyond the traditional mobilization of labor to support Democratic Party candidates in election campaigns to "year-round organizing that is more oriented toward issues and immediate struggles" (137). Nichols in this concluding chapter briefly describes the campaign to recall Governor Walker and the recalls involving six Republican incumbents and three Democratic incumbents. Although the move to recall the Republican Governor did not succeed due to the influx of huge amounts of campaign funding by conservative individuals and organizations and to the use of negative campaign tactics by both sides, two Republican senators were defeated while all the Democrats targeted for recall won by comfortable margins. He points out, "That meant that Democrats narrowed the Republican advantage in the Wisconsin senate from a daunting 19-14 divide to a narrow 17-16 split, which put a moderate Republican senator who opposed Walker's assault on

collective bargaining rights in a position to work with Democrats to temper the extremes of the governor and his allies” (141). He quotes a statement made by the labor-backed group We Are Wisconsin following the recall votes, “Scott Walker’s working majority in the Wisconsin state Senate is over. The chamber now boasts a pro-worker majority that would not have passed the budget repair bill that touched off this entire fight” (142). Nichols points out that the fight is far from over but is just beginning with Republican governors in other states facing recalls, referendums, and revolts. He cites the successful example of Ohio where “labor led and Democrats followed, [and] the results were spectacular — a 61–39 landslide for labor rights in the November 2011 referendum vote” (143).

In the Afterword, Nichols returns to the initial thesis of the importance of citizens making productive use of the constitutional right to assemble and petition for the redress of grievances and notes how the Wisconsin uprising inspired people in other states and localities to assemble and petition for the redress of grievances, leading to the Occupy Wall Street movement which then expanded to the Occupy Together movement representing the grievances of the disenfranchised 99%. Reflecting on what he felt when he participated in the Occupy Wall Street protests in the fall of 2011 at Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, he writes, “As I surveyed the occupying masses on a mild fall evening, I felt the same sense as I had on those cold winter nights in Madison. The spirit of resistance not just to political power but to the corporations that pull the puppet strings of our politicians, the reoccupation of public space that had been co-opted by the elites, the reassertion of rights that had languished for so long: all of this and more provided an outline for a new politics of protest” (163).

I found this book to be well organized and clearly written, offering the reader a pro-labor, critical media activist’s analysis and interpretation of the events that transpired in Wisconsin based on his own experience of participating in the “uprising”. Since Nichols is not limiting his analysis to what happened in the streets of Wisconsin, but is emphasizing the importance of how the mass mobilizations in Wisconsin have led to the inspiration of concerned citizens to stand up to abuses of power and neglect of the interests of the general public not only in the United States but throughout the world, I highly recommend this book to the Japanese reading public interested in gaining insights into the importance of, and the tactics that may be used, for concerned citizens in Japan to make productive use of the constitutional right to assemble and petition for the redress of grievances.

In the aftermath following the nuclear meltdown disaster that occurred at the Fukushima nuclear power plant complex on March 11, 2011, Japan saw mass mobilizations of concerned citizens taking to the streets to protest against the abuse of power, making productive use of the constitutional right to assemble and petition for the redress of grievances. Similar to what Nichols saw transpire in Wisconsin and later during the Occupy Wall Street mobilizations, Japanese activists made innovative use of new social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, texting, and flip-cam videos to mobilize tens to hundreds of thousands of concerned citizens to gather in front of the Prime Minister’s residence every Friday to demand a total departure from reliance on nuclear power plants to provide electricity. An increasing number of Japanese were turning to alternative media and NGO websites to obtain critical analyses regarding the history of nuclear power development in Japan and the abuse of power inherent in the nuclear energy establishment (referred to in Japan as the “nuclear village”). This enabled an informed citizenry to overcome the so-called “nuclear safety myth” and force the government to agree to their demands to start serious discussions to shut down the nuclear

power industry in Japan.

During the past year in Japan, we have also seen a broad coalition of concerned citizens engaging in mass mobilizations to protest Japan's entry into the negotiations for the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Farmers, health care professionals, educators, union as well as non-union workers, environmental activists, and organizations representing consumer interests have come together to oppose the move to enter into the free trade agreement. Here again, we can see the emergence of an informed citizenry making use of what Nichols terms the "next media system."

In short, Nichols' book can be used as a tool to recognize the transborder significance of what happened in Wisconsin — the spread of alternative media and new social media as well as the proliferation of grassroots-based groups and NGOs making use of the Internet to disseminate critical and dissident interpretations of social reality to help to create an informed citizenry willing and able to engage in mass mobilizations is not limited to one country but is a global phenomenon with great potential.

The only weakness I found in Nichols' book is the lack of analysis regarding the strength of the state to marginalize, vilify, and eventually overcome any attempts by an informed, engaged citizenry to question, let alone oppose, the dominant culture's claims to truth. It would have been instructive to point out that when, in the mid- to late-1960s and early 1970s, a huge amount of popular activism was taking place in Europe, Japan, and the United States, and an increasing number of people were taking to the streets to oppose war and all forms of aggression, demanding civil rights, women's rights, and environmental protection legislation, the Trilateral Commission published its book *The Crisis of Democracy* in 1975 (authored by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki) which outlined the steps that needed to be taken to induce what they referred to as "more moderation in democracy." The authors argued that "too much democracy" was not in the best interests of the state and that an informed citizenry in particular was detrimental to maintaining social stability. They were concerned that the institutions responsible for the "indoctrination" of the citizenry, in particular the youth, meaning schools, universities, churches, and media were neglecting to an unacceptable degree their role to help maintain the established social order designed to benefit the privileged elite and give the illusion to the majority that it is designed to benefit the society as a whole.

Nichols neglects to address the issue of the role of education, particularly for those of us who live in advanced capitalist countries, to maintain the status quo, with slight modifications, by hindering the development and utilization of critical thinking skills. Children as students become adults as workers who have been socialized, through the saturation into every area of daily life of the dominant culture's values, social assumptions, definition of self in relation to others, and interpretations of history and contemporary social phenomena, to internalize those cultural values and social assumptions and accept them as common sense. They are thus, for the most part, unable or unwilling to ask critical questions regarding their assigned role in the workplace, home, and society.

Thus, a crucial component in the Wisconsin uprising and the Occupy Together movements that I believe would have strengthened his book was missing: the need to support the teachers calling for going beyond teaching for the test to have the freedom to engage in a critical, engaged pedagogy. What these teachers are demanding is the right to enable students to be in position to question the validity of the dominant culture's truth claims. The students can then

start to question the ways in which they are conditioned and socialized to accept as “objective truth” what they’re taught in school and what they’re told is “objective analysis” in mainstream media. And, hopefully, they will come to realize that they can become involved with others in helping to establish a new world order based on such universal principles as peace, human rights, and social justice.

It would also have been helpful to define “net neutrality” (the attempt by governments and corporations to limit access to the Internet) and to briefly introduce the reader to the ways in which governments, government agencies (including militaries), and corporations are inundating new social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube with anonymous “persona” who strongly endorse the government or corporate position on a large variety of social issues.

However, even with these shortcomings, there is much to be gained from the reading of Nichols’ book and I have no reservations in recommending it to the general public.