

# Egypt's Three-Card Monte: The Arab Spring and Human Revolution

Written by Robert L. Oprisko

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ROBERT L. OPRISKO, JUL 23 2013

*“You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.” [i]*

– James Baldwin

*“Edna Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.”[ii]*

– Kate Chopin

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Image by Molly Crabapple

## Introduction

Inescapable inequality provided a common bond for the large protests that erupted across the globe in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. Although many of these protests have faded into the background of social consciousness on a typical day, the inescapable inequality remains. Reading the epigraph from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, we discover a reality where individual ambitions are extinguished before they emerge, where talent is overshadowed by birthright, where mediocrity is ordained upon the many by the few. The world appears to be locked into a shell game where the political, economic, and social elites con the common persons out of what little they have. Egypt appears to be an exemplary case of this con, with the newly elected government renegeing on promises of tolerance, compromise, and pluralism; the new elites are very similar to the old in practice if not in ethos.

Appearances may be, and often are, deceptive. This article will argue that the fear and turmoil at Egypt's current use of democratic practice stems not from some anti-democratic nature of their process, but from a lack of familiarity and the inherent disregard for structural authority that undermines all institutionalized governmental forms. It will also argue that Egypt represents not an exemplary case of meekly accepted structural inequality, but an exceptional case of dignified and rebellious humanity where the political shell-game has been turned on its head such that would-be elites are walking into a functional political system that devalues institutionalized authority, legitimacy and sovereignty and those who rely upon them. Post-structural international political theory provides an excellent lens with which to study contemporary Egypt as an emergent human revolution situated in generic-universal communitarianism.

## Egypt at the Brink (of What?)

The democratic nature of Egyptian government appears to be at risk according to multiple news sources following the removal of Mohammed Morsi on July 3, 2013. The initial shock of a democratically elected president of a sovereign state was evident from the rhetoric employed by journalists and commentators. The problem, succinctly put, was that public outcry isn't deemed sufficient to warrant change using a conservative understanding of democracy. What Egypt needed to do, rather than to remove a president with delusions of grandeur was to suffer meekly until the formal mechanisms of government allowed for said removal (Ross, 2013).

The *prima facie* problem appears not to be what was done, but how it was done. Critical reaction stems from the diminished ability of authorized institutions wielding sovereign power to dictate what democracy is allowed to look like in practice. This is an example of the divide between formal and functional democracy.[iii] The formal democratic government in Egypt is a functional infant and includes several problems inherent with young systems of government – incomplete procedural tools. Morsi could not be

Contrasting the concern of (primarily Western) media outlets is the celebration of large numbers of Egyptian citizens who are enjoying the newest wave of politically successful mass protests. Voices from the multitudes are quoted in their desire for a politically united rather than a politically divided Egypt. "We don't want to be so divided and polarized, and this is what the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi did to us" (Hassieb, 2013). Although several political realists would begin to frame the current situation as a contest between the *de jure* legitimacy of a formally elected government and the *de facto* authority of military might, but that paints an incomplete picture of the situation and forces Egypt's Arab Spring experience into the classical form while undermining the legitimate experience of how democracy is working for Egyptians. What Egypt's mass revolutions have reaffirmed, is that sovereignty is personal and that, even if relinquished to a government, the people can always rescind said decision (Oprisko, 2012b). Egyptians, like Chopin's Edna Pontellier, have remembered that they are personally engaged with their world; in Egypt, politics is existential and is better defined by Camusian rebellion rather than party affiliation.[iv]

An election is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy. The Mursi government may have been elected, but there are other requirements for a democracy. A democratic government has to guarantee minority

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rights. It has to accept the opposition as legitimate. It has to be willing to abide by the rules. And the truest test of a democracy is that the government has to give up power if it is defeated at the polls. The Mursi government failed all those tests except the last one (Reuters, 2013b).

The use of protest in Egypt functionally conforms to Dahl's two-step mandate for a functional democracy: contestation and participation (Dahl, 1971). To a large extent, post-Mubarak democracy is more pure than American democracy. Western media has been "confusing *democratic legitimacy* with *legitimate democracy*."

The Egyptian people have spoken using mass protest, both for and against Morsi. In 2011, massive Egyptian protests led to the overthrow of the Hosni Mubarak regime and Egypt's first democratic elections. Political parties were quick to form and the resultant Democratic Alliance coalition government included the Islamist Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), other Islamist parties, liberal secular parties, and left-of-center parties. The FJP committed itself to compromise, stating that it was, "based on Islamic Law 'but will be acceptable to a wide segment of the population'" (Al-Arian, 2011). The Democratic Alliance's focus on compromise and inclusion was both well received popularly and highly successful with Mohamed Morsi (president of the FJP) winning the Egyptian presidential election and the largest number of seats in government including 217 of the 498 seats in the House of Representatives, 118 of the 270 seats on the Shura Council, and 16 of the 100 seats on the Constituent Assembly (El-Din, 2011).

Following the elections, the FJP splintered from the Democratic Alliance Coalition government, focusing on increasing the Islamist power base, failing in their commitment to compromise and acceptance.[v] Upon a ruling by the Egyptian high court, an Islamist parliament was dissolved for "constitutional violations" (Staff, 2012). President Morsi recalled the Islamist led parliament in violation of the court decision (Awad and Fayed, 2012). The court, once again, ruled against the recall (Reuters, 2013a); this contest put the military, the enforcer of political will, into a difficult position as there was a clear division between the executive and judiciary branches of government. In the end, Morsi solidified his downfall with his increasingly religious rhetoric and his desire for Egypt to enter the Syrian Revolution against "The Infidels" (Staff, 2013b).

The executive government was no longer representing Egyptians, but were merely controlling Egypt. The return to power-mongering was too soon to be tolerated by politically empowered citizens, so tens-of-thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Cairo and Alexandria demanding the end of Morsi's rule (Staff, 2013a). The military hasn't imposed a puppet regime or assumed power. (Bigelow, 2013) The emergent perception is quickly becoming that massed protests and the removal of Morsi was both the only way to preserve peace (Helm and Chulov, 2013), and the only way to preserve democracy (Hawkins, 2013). If we accept these premises, the world is looking at a new form of democracy that relies on public will as a check and balance to structural overreach. This political system contains the same actors that existed prior to the Arab Spring: government, military, citizens, but it appears that they have switched positions. Below, I will argue that the political activity of the populace has dramatically altered the political reality not only from identitarian pluralism to generic universalism, but also from structural inequality to structural equality as universally dignified individual persons.

## The Political Shell Game

The shell game, or Three-card Monte, is a fantastic example of a social encounter designed by confidence artists (typically one primary operator and a number of associates, or "shills") to take advantage of an unsuspecting and unsophisticated person known as a "mark". Each game uses optical illusion and sleight of hand in order to decrease the ability of a mark to successfully follow the target card and win the game. Such a game presents itself as challenging, but the fraudulent aspects emerge when the odds of winning reach zero. In New York City, Three-card Monte dealers convene daily in order to divide and conquer, "they assemble to form teams of six to eight people, each team claiming a territory and each member assigned the job of dealer, lookout or shill" (Perez-Pena, 1992). Such collusion is done to perpetuate the fraud – the mark cannot and will not win. Wallace Ford uses eloquent succinctness, "You can't win, you won't win, you will never win, so don't play the game" (Perez-Pena, 1992). Penn Jillette, a professional magician agrees, "Your chances of winning are absolutely zero" (Associated Press, 1999).

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The difficulty of a political shell game is that citizens are forced into playing the game; it is impossible to escape fraudulent behavior that is not only accepted as normal within a social setting, but is legitimized by the sovereign authority. Political reality is premised upon the concept of sovereignty, which legitimates. When this occurs, a person is not merely alienated from their labor, but from social value altogether.[vi] This thought-pattern extends from Nietzsche's dual value-systems with the talented and successful occupying the noble good and the common man being bad, or, more appropriately, better and worse respectively.[vii] The important distinction between good v. bad and good v. evil is that the former relies on talent and is temporally located such that one can, arguably, become better. The latter is absolute and does not define levels of talent or ability, but defines people as being better or worse people. This form of social-value inscription all too easily mutates into social-Darwinism (Mosca, 1939).

Egypt is emerging as a location of exemplary generic-universal political activity; individuals have shown a remarkable willingness to initiate and sustain massive protests against structural inequality and the governmental leaders who promote it. The Egyptian people have learned the power of protest and are unafraid to rally at Tahrir Square and the Kasr-al-Nil Bridge in order to effect political change. This human revolution is one that is capable and willing to produce power-vacuums; vacuums that emergent, and hopeful, elites seek out like moths to a flame. Like most flames, Egyptian power is capable of burning those who enter its fiery embrace. Politics under Mubarak and Morsi (at least, what we may assume Morsi believed) placed the executive government led by the president as the Monte dealer, the army and courts assumed the role of shells and the individual citizens were marks who could not escape the rigged game. This game has changed. Now, the Egyptian people who self-realize their sovereignty occupy the role of dealer with the army and courts defaulting into their customary roles as shells. In lieu of a captive populace stuck in a rigged game, hopeful and ambitious politicians (beginning with Morsi) have been lured into politics, happily walking into the mark's role and playing a rigged game. As Morsi stated, whether or not he internalized the lesson,

O steadfast men of revolution; the great people, I came to you today and to all great Egyptian people, as I believe that you are the source of power and the ultimate legitimacy. You are the people and the source of power, and you are the legitimacy and the strongest part of it. Those who do not seek protection with you shall lose, and those who support your will shall succeed; and we want our nation to succeed.

I came to you today as I believe that you are the source of power and the legitimacy that is above all. No one, no institution, nobody can be above this will. The nation is the source of all powers, and it is the one that rules and decides; it is the one that can embrace or dismiss. That is why I came to the Egyptian people today. Everyone hears me now, all the people can hear me – the government, the army, the police, Egyptian men and women inside the country and abroad. No power is above this power. You are the people of power; you are the people of will; you are the source of this power; grant it to whoever you want and do not grant it to whoever you want (Daragahi, 2012).

The president serves at the pleasure of the people and once the people realize that, the president will either realize his servitude or be removed.[viii]

Human revolutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century focus upon gross inequality between the few elites who control the vast majority of social, political, and economic wealth and the massive hordes of have-nots who do not enjoy political influence, social mobility, and economic independence. The struggle of these masses against inequality has been brought to life in the artwork of Molly Crabapple, most famously in her *Shell Game* exhibition of artwork, which “takes on the tradition of massive satirical painting, focusing her attention on uprisings like Occupy Wall Street, the Anti-Austerity Indignant Citizens Movement in Greece, Anonymous hacktivists and American healthcare” (Zimmer, 2013). Crabapple's painting, *Dégage*, presents an important anthropomorphic personification of the Arab Spring and places it within the context as a singular form of resistance against elitism (Crabapple, 2013). Existentially, this collection is a the embodiment of Crabapple's rebellion against the oppressive structure and the reflection of her personal engagement with Occupy and related movements, phenomenologically, *Dégage* represents a visual definition of the Arab Spring and the *Shell Game* exhibit the totalization of human revolution following the global financial crisis (Camus, 1991, Levinas, 1979).

Crabapple calls *Shell Game* her love letter and each painting is a votive reminding her and others not to forget (Baer, 2013). The birdcage is simultaneously formed by and consumed in flames; this, the home of the common persons

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(represented as song-birds) is thus portrayed neither as a structure nor as a danger, "Here the birds have escaped from the cage at the heart of the fire. They slip off their Guy Fawkes/Anonymous masks to claim freedom. Right now on the walls of Cairo is a graffito: 'O stupid regime, hear my demand: freedom, freedom'" (Mirzoeff, 2013). Throughout the exhibition, the selfish activity of the elites to benefit from the plight of humanity reveals their symbiosis: there must be a lower-class for an upper-class to emerge. What is also evident, however, is that humanity itself is not contingent upon hierarchical class structures.

## Sovereignty Reconsidered

According to Carl Schmitt, the "Sovereign is he who decides upon the exception" (Schmitt, 2005). The exception is that which is simultaneously outside and inside the norm, both the decider and the embodiment of a decision – an authentic agent. [ix] The most important decision is the determination of the political relationship – are you *withus* or *them* (Schmitt, 1996a)? However, Schmitt also accepted a complex reality, and has posited what may be considered the origin of quantum politics with the *complexio oppositorum*, the acceptance and valuing of two opposing ideals of a value-slope simultaneously and without contradiction (Schmitt, 1996b). It is the *complexio oppositorum* that binds Schmitt's existential ontology of politics: it is possible to be both *us* and *them* even if you're *me* (Wolin, 1990). Sovereignty is not a given or a benefit, but an obligation and a curse to not only make the tough decisions, but to act upon them; sovereignty is a responsibility (Walker, 2010).

From a post-structural understanding of existential politics, sovereignty is irrevocably in the hands of the individual persons who comprise humanity (Oprisko, 2012b, Oprisko, 2013). It manifests in acts of freedom that are outside of the structure of a given system (Prozorov, 2007). The political reality in Egypt, focusing on a political will to unite a diversely interested population is propelling the Egyptians at the very least up in Badiou's set theory, such that the smaller identitarian multiplicities are diminishing in political relevance if not toward Agamben's coming community of beings-thus (Agamben, 1993, Badiou, 2005). It is, perhaps, too early to consider the viability of a people who operate without the social manipulation of honor-systems, but relationships premised on generic-universal dignity is a potentially viable outcome in quantum political theory (Prozorov, 2011, Prozorov, 2012). Humanity exists. Individual groups cannot define themselves through difference without acknowledging similarity (Nancy, 2000), there is no isolation without taking into account plurality (Bartelson, 2009). Using Badiou's structure, it can be argued that humanity, which includes all individual humans and individual humans, who belong within the universal set of humanity are non-negotiable elements of reality, whereas every other grouping within a set-theory of politics is contingent, negotiable, and expendable. These middle layers are self-realized, which axiologically hierarchize differences in order to disproportionately benefit some at the expense of many (Oprisko, 2012a), are nothing more than agential cuts of reality that provide an incomplete vision of reality (Barad, 2007).

Resistance to Egyptian protest-driven democracy, especially by states, is only one instance marking inertial resistance to revision of an international system that has been historically dominated by states. Similar resistance can be seen happening in real time with Edward Snowden's difficulty in procuring asylum from any government because he leaked state secrets (Drezner, 2013). In a similar vein, Anonymous, which has worked tirelessly to keep the internet open in conflict zones has been vilified as terrorists for acting extralegally (Armstrong, 2013). Anonymous operates as a collective, without individual merit and distinction, thus confusing accountability for said actions by a traditional judicial system (Anonymous, 2011).

Politics is an art, not a science, and the lessons from Egypt and elsewhere is that a community based upon dignity is a viable goal. Although a universal polity exists in potential, I demur from suggesting that it is an inevitability of final causation as Wendt has his world state (Wendt, 2003). This goal can be reached in two ways: 1) a concert of activity to attain global community as a goal to which billions of individuals direct a tremendous amount of energy or 2) a concerted lack of political activity by each of Earth's 6+ billion people such that entropy overwhelms petty politics and the identitarian middle layers erode due to neglect.[x] The danger lies in the middle ground, the much more easily maintained current system of competing interests wherein disproportionate gains and losses manifest disproportionate value of individuals based upon their group membership and identification rather than talent. Should Egypt succeed, it will be a beacon to the world in a novel form of democratic practice, one that a reinvigorated and ascendant interest in international relations theory will likely devote a great deal of attention.[xi] Should it fail, we may

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always return to the haunting images of Molly Crabapple so that we may never forget that some exceptionally difficult goals are worthy of consideration and, perhaps, multiple attempts.

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ZIMMER, L. 2013. Shell Game: Beyond the Political Cartoon. *ArtSlant* [Online]. Available: <http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/34767> [Accessed 7/5/2013].

[i] BALDWIN, J. 1993. *The Fire Next Time*, New York, NY, Vintage.

[ii] CHOPIN, K. 2012. *The Awakening*, New York, NY, Seedbox Press. I owe the use of this particular epigraph to the influence of Ms. Alexandra M. Grubbs who posted it on Facebook as I was searching for inspiration.

[iii] TOOPS, S. W. 2007. Peoples, Places, and Patterns: Geography in International Affairs. In: ANDERSON, S., HEY, J. A. K., PETERSON, M. A. & TOOPS, S. W. (eds.) *International Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Global Issues*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Although this is a chapter from an introductory textbook and one on geography at that, I believe that Toops' distinctions between formal and functional regions are applicable to this argument and that the divisions are politically relevant across all social sciences.

[iv] CAMUS, A. 1991. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York, NY, Vintage International. The key element here is that for every "No!" that a rebel stands for, he is also standing for something positive, a right or dignity that is universal and exemplified in the personal position of the rebel that cannot be dismissed.

[v] *Al-Tahaluf al Dimuqrati (The Democratic Alliance)* [Online]. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available: <http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/26/the-democratic-alliance> [Accessed 7/5/2013 2013].

[vi] OPRISKO, R. L. 2012a. *Honor: A Phenomenology*, New York, NY, Routledge. Refer to Chapter 2: Honor and Value for greater detail on the axiological processes of valuation and evaluation of humans by humans.

[vii] NIETZSCHE, F. 1989. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, New York, NY, Vintage Books. Nietzsche's focus on talent as a means by which individuals ought to be judged actually coincides with the demands issued in the Declaration for the Rights of Man and Declaration for the Rights of Women, which hold, "Social distinctions may be based only on common utility."

[viii] I can't help but think about the movie *Aladdin* and the lesson of Jafar: A genie is granted and enjoys, "phenomenal cosmic power" but must suffer servitude, an inability to will-to-power and an, "itty bitty living space." *Aladdin*, 1992. Directed by CLEMENTS, R. & MUSKER, J. Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Company.

[ix] I recognize that the term authenticity is immediately polarizing and may initiate a rather heated and lengthy vituperation from some of my beloved colleagues, but I employ it anyway because it is the best word for the job. For those unfamiliar with authenticity and don't wish to dive into the origins, I suggest the following: ANTON, C. 2001. *Selfhood and Authenticity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, CHARME, S. Z. 1993. *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Amherst, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, GOLOMB, J. 1995. *In Search of Authenticity. From Kierkegaard to Camus*. New York, NY: Routledge, TRILLING, L. 1972. *Sincerity and Authenticity: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1969-1970*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

[x] I owe this conceptual thought to a conversation with Alex Wendt and his suggestion to read the following article: SCHWELLER, R. L. 2010. Entropy and the Trajectory of World Politics: Why Polarity has Become Less Meaningful. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23, 145-163.

[xi] Perhaps some will question the veracity of this sentiment on IR theory, but I see it as the cutting edge of political science today. Its on-line presence is tremendous. Blogs such as the Duck of Minerva, the Monkey Cage, e-International Relations, and IPE at UNC help maintain the community of our scholars, which makes our scholarship better. In particular, however, I suggest this book for a marvelous examination of the state of the discipline of IR theory: JACKSON, P. T. 2011. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, New York, NY, Routledge.

# Egypt's Three-Card Monte: The Arab Spring and Human Revolution

Written by Robert L. Oprisko

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## About the author:

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