

# The Arab Uprisings, Globalisation and Postmodernity

Written by Ueli Staeger

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*“The ‘Arab Spring’ is still in its infancy and may continue for decades. It will not fail, even if it stalls here or there. [...] It is a river sweeping forward only, so it will never flow backwards.”*

Moncef Marzouki, Caretaker President of Tunisia (March 2014)

The announcement ‘the Arab Spring is dead’ is a pleasantly sensational claim. This essay challenges this claim by arguing that the Arab uprisings initiated no less than a new epoch in the history of the region. Through non-violent mass mobilisation, the legitimacy of an out-dated political order was swept away in favour of postmodern politics and life. This essay will describe this irreversible new narrative and also explain the ‘failure’ of some uprisings through economic-capitalist and cultural dimensions of globalisation. Key rally chants and rap songs from Egypt, as well as speeches by Rasheed Al-Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian An-Nahda Movement, exemplify an appearing Arab postmodernity: humanist, Islamic, pluralist and slightly cynical. I build on Walter Benjamin’s work to argue that the disruptive theoretical mechanics of Arab postmodernity’s arrival are an anti-teleological ‘standstill of dialectics’.

### **Globalisation as Capitalist Politics and Postmodernity**

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Across Northern African and West Asian (WANA) countries, uprisings erupted and unfolded dramatically differently from late 2010 onwards. The different trajectories are marked by significant political hindrances put forward by incumbent elites. I will first turn to an economic reading of events and then present a cultural effect of globalisation as postmodernity. Both elements co-constitute an overall appreciation of globalisation in WANA countries.

Critical contributions from economics are often marginalised in Middle Eastern studies: the idea of closed national economies is illusory, but some analysts of the Arab uprisings successfully pretended that economic interests were apolitical (cf. e.g. *The Economist* 2013). Contrarily, Adam Hanieh argues that international capital interests in Egypt explain the Gulf's status-quo-ante politics during Egypt's uprisings (2014). Gulf capital, Hanieh suggests, asserts political power against the uprisings. Economics however also explain broader societal change: Globalised modes of production enter a dialectical relationship with cultural globalisation, not least by enabling interconnectivity.

Such a significant cultural change happened in the 1970s in Western societies: Postmodernity, a novel time-space compression and globalisation effect, arose: the "transformation in the *spatial* organisation of social relations and transactions, expressed in transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and power" of this era was thus established (Held 1999, 16). It was the departure from hopeful modernity and its pursuit of "human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life" (Harvey 1989, 12). Undermining this Hegelian promise, postmodernity introduces societal relativism and cynicism. The mechanics of postmodernity were first described by Jean-François Lyotard, who suggested that 'differends', multiple, equally valid discourses compete and "cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (1988, xi). Different discourses compete for societal legitimacy in a field without set rules; all is incommensurable. Politically, modernity's ideologies enter an incommensurable, relativistic ideological arrangement (Freeden 2005).

Postmodernism provides a meta-narrative for a society that abdicated meta-narratives. It is "the great narrative of the end of great narratives" (Lyotard 1988, 135). As a consequence, Debord presciently wrote, the banal and profane dominates modern society through "seemingly endless choices" (1967, sec. 59). This threatens the modernist project: it undermines political democracy and the 'project of Enlightenment' at large, and it normalises capitalist contradictions under the "category of difference" and false unity (Habermas 1993; Ebert 1996, 150–1). Normativity is only part of this debate of economic and cultural change, however. The next sections will use 'postmodernity' primarily *descriptively* to analyse the Arab revolts.

## "The People Want": Ontology and Narrative of a Movement

The Arab uprisings hinge on a unique set of demands, all of which overcame an antiquated finality: life for the protestor is not about 'winning history' and realising a great Hegelian *telos*. Instead, the uprisings' demands were no less and no more than legitimate postmodern political expressions. This section establishes 'The People' of the uprisings as a postmodern movement that champions a postmodern meta-narrative.

The Arab uprisings were mass movements without the charismatic figureheads of modernity's bourgeois revolutions. Instead, the postmodern celebrity dominated revolutionary personality cult as a "spectacular representation of a living human being, [embodying banality] by embodying the image of a possible role" (Debord 1967, thesis 60). Among the uprisings' figureheads was the 'blue bra girl', a peaceful protestor at Tahrir Square, brutally beaten and stripped of her clothes by policemen, or Muhammad Bouazizi, a jobless vendor whose desperation with circumstances and authorities led him to self-immolate. Both characters epitomise the normalcy of postmodern celebrity and were lauded widely.

The ontology of the movement is best symbolised by the arguably most-chanted slogan *sh-sha'ab yurid isqat an-nizam* (the people want the downfall of the regime). A humanistic universality radiates from *sha'ab*: it posits the belonging to a "collective singular" (Colla 2012) that transcends the sum of its parts. 'The People' of the Arab uprisings are thus a Deleuzian assemblage, "a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Hence, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'" (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 69). The demands of the uprisings surely are diverse, but as utterances of a collective assemblage, they are "variables of the

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function, which constantly interlace their values or their segments” (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 71). As ‘differends’ of a postmodern movement, feminists, youths, Christians, Muslims, atheists, paupers, and all other parts of the revolutionary assemblage thrived on its very diversity, which constituted its strength as a non-violent mass movement.

Second to the ontological awareness of the movement is the meta-narrative that ‘The People’ put forward. This meta-narrative stems from profane desires that “animate the assemblage” (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 72; Adib-Moghaddam 2013, 23). Acknowledging innate desires is relevant in two ways: it legitimates them as something positive despite being ‘profane’. Also, it enables these desires to be mobilised in favour of a universal yet localised humanism. These elements are dialectically interrelated; both co-constitute the strength of the *sha’ab’s* meta-narrative. The uprisings’ demands were remarkably basic desires for better lives: “human dignity and human rights” and “employment, dignity and democracy” were demanded (CFR 2011). “Employment is a right”, announced Ghannouchi, adding that the “right to bread and life” is a “natural and legitimate right” (2010).

## In Defence of the ‘Profane’

How can profane demands justify a grand movement? Such (partly understandable) doubt both underestimates the historical contingency of ‘profanity’ in popular mobilisation, but also neglects the political legitimacy of the profane. I will propose a positive politicisation of the ‘profane’ along Walter Benjamin, but also show how cynicism enters the postmodern political scene.

Throughout the Arab world, there is a history of non-violent, popular resistance on which the Arab uprisings’ movements built (Bayat 2009, 215). This mobilisation uses urban public space for participative contention that ranges from daily resistance to mass insurgency – as a space, the ‘political street’ accumulates the symbolic utterances of citizens (ibid., 11-13). The quaint character of the political street invites Benjamin’s account of politics. He theorised theology and politics along this essay’s distinction of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’. Benjamin described happiness as “political” and constitutive of the ‘profane’, a non-messianic, secular force that is immanent in our world (1982, 203). The worldly ‘profane’ is thus not the disenchantment of politics, but it positively means that postmodern society is simply more universally political and politicised. Even in the self-organisation of the uprisings, examples of the politicised profane were visible: The regular joint cleaning of Tahrir Square and the ‘human fence’ around the Egyptian Museum nearby during street battles illustrate the importance of a socially and politically shared appreciation of the ‘profane’ (El-Ghobashy and Bradley 2011; El-Aref 2011).

Postmodernity’s politicised ‘profane’ however also opens the door to cynicism. In a seemingly post-ideological age, the postmodern subject operates on a “libidinal spontaneity” that can render ideology vain, because it is unmasked as ideological and unfitting for postmodernity (Žižek 2005, 16). The cynical citizen is thus cognisant of the “distance between the ideological mask and social reality” (Žižek 1989, 29). After cleaning Tahrir Square, the same protestors might also approach their protest cynically. A telling example for this cynicism is the simultaneously ironic and sincere rendition of the uprisings’ key slogan by Egyptian rapper 3mr 7a7a:

The people want something new [to think about] / The people want five pounds’ phone credit / The people want to topple the regime / But the people are so damn tired / It’s hard living hand to mouth / The people have said their word / And Tahrir is their place. (Colla 2012)

When cynically reducing *ad absurdum* the demands of the revolution to phone credit, 3mr 7a7a continues to honour the ‘profane’ demands: despite all ironic detachment, 7a7a leaves untouched the fundamental momentum of the uprisings – “the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself” (Žižek 1989, 30). The profane safeguards its political salience and remains a building block for humanist amelioration.

## A Universal Yet Localised Humanism

The profane demands of Arab postmodernity are not selfish. They did not reject the general idea of modernisation; they safeguarded a universal sense of amelioration and emancipation. Humanism, originally a distinctly modernist

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project, thus still can fuel progress in postmodern society. We hence acknowledge postmodernism's descriptive import and humanism's normativity simultaneously. This combination permits a universality of the uprisings' demands, seemingly uniting the Orientalist Arab 'Other' and the Euro-American 'Self'. This universality however, like globalisation at large, needs to allow local specification into a non-Western and non-colonial humanism.

Both at the meta-narrative analytical level and via its politicised profane desires, Arab postmodernity does not simply integrate Arab societies into an all-encompassing Euro-American universality of postmodernism. Scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington have worked successfully to translate orientalist ideas about an Arab 'otherness' into the 21st century – as increasingly reified social constructions, these ideas have served elites and demagogues on either side of this constructed binary well. Given the profound degree of social construction of Arab and Western difference, it is useful to think of Arab postmodernity as principally similar but never identical to a Euro-American postmodernity. In other words, the meta-narrative of postmodernism at large is, concurrent with its content, itself not uni-versal but pluri-versal and sensitive to socio-cultural constructions. Postmodernity is thus not the 'End of History', as European and Arab postmodern societies will never prioritise the exactly same 'differends'. More generally, globalisation does not engender complete cultural assimilation, because it is not the mere extension of Western-liberal society – this view conflates 'universal' and 'Western'. Postmodernity therefore does not ship with a "wider social ontology of liberalism" of contemporary Western societies (Joseph 2010, 241).

If localised universalist amelioration is possible, its different prioritising of 'differends' will produce an ameliorated, non-Western Arab postmodernity. Throughout Western media coverage and public discourse, the universalistic-humanistic meta-narrative of the uprisings was however equated with concepts of Western liberal democracy; the postmodern *sha'ab* and the modern European 'Third Estate' or the US constitution's "We The People" semantically coincide. Much to the chagrin of Western leaders, however, the authoritarian leader's wisdom has perhaps been replaced by the views of 'The People' – but not to the extent that citizens are "keen on [liberal] democracy" for the realisation of the uprisings' demands (BBC 2012). It is therefore clear that Arab postmodernity and Western postmodernity will be similar in their ontology, but will continue to champion different cultural narratives. An important part of this difference stems from an emerging postmodern Islam.

## Islam and Postmodernity

The Islam-oriented political movements emerging from the uprisings were often misinterpreted as part of an 'Islamist resurgence', mainly by virtue of re-introducing religion into political discourse after decades of Ba'athist and Arab nationalist state doctrines, and because of Western fears of radical Islamist terrorism. However, there is little that unites An-Nahda and radical Islamist terrorism other than their common religious scripture. This section discusses the contribution of Islam to Arab postmodernity.

Rather than a transcendent goal of the uprisings, Islam was mainly a medium and signifier through which the demands of the revolutions were framed and realised: "All the oppressed must stand today in solidarity and defend their own right to life, which is their religious duty" (Ghannouchi 2010). This mediating role of Islam is not its marginalisation or the secularisation of WANA, but plural and democratic access similar to what Islamic legal scholarship calls *ijtihad* – the individualised, independent (legal) reasoning about and through Islam. A key component of this prospect is 'profanity' as enjoyment. While Islamists would deny pleasure beyond "spiritual, mystical, and inner pursuits" (Bayat 2009, 142), the levelling rule of postmodern Islam is its ability to accept the importance of enjoyment, possibly eventually through *ijtihad* amending Islamic doctrine not just to accept but support worldly pleasures as relevant and divine. In this undertaking, cynicism seems by far the greater threat, whereas the openness and tolerance of postmodernity seems promising (Ahmed 1992, 6). Progressive *hijab* policies exemplify postmodern Islam's stance on societal issues, also taken by Ghannouchi: "We are against the imposition of the headscarf in the name of Islam and we are against the banning of the headscarf in the name of secularism or modernity" (Moshiri 2011).

If postmodern Islam is "diffuse, networked, differentiated, multi-institutional and (in the sense that it is neither paternalistic, nor primarily feminist) 'transsexual'" (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, 23), political Islam is possible in Arab postmodernity. Its political implementation is Ghannouchi's idea of inclusive coalition politics: "We were keen on

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forming a national unity government, [...] that includes Islamists, [seculars, leftist and liberals.] We want to unite and include, not divide, and the debate is not between Islamist and non-Islamist or Islamist and secular. There are many kinds of secularism and many models for secularism" (CFR 2011). Despite all political pluralism, postmodern Islam however was to take a central political role as a "moderate, democratic Islam which we want to become mainstream" (Moshiri 2011). Within such a coalition, postmodern Islam is highly apt as source and vehicle for humanism. It can revive Islam's century-old humanist tradition (Arkoun 2008, 21), but it can also build on the 'profane' demands of the uprisings to realise the emancipatory promise of post-modern Islam.

## A Standstill of Dialectics

How did 'The People', driven by innermost desires, deliver the epochal change of Arab postmodernity? Having considered the ontology and meta-narrative of the assemblage mobilised in the uprisings, and having understood the humanism embodied in its profane demands, this section suggests a historiography of the Arab uprisings: Along Benjamin, the politicised 'profane' suggests an anti-evolutionary history-making momentum that introduces a completely new narrative into political space.

Benjamin's conception of happiness as a history-making force makes desires politically relevant. Individual desires were aggregated and morphed into a into a political momentum of resistance, through mass mobilisation, "daily anti-order practices" and by regaining ownership of the 'political street' (Adib-Moghaddam 2013, 25). Collectively mobilised desires become an autonomous assemblage – and it seems that the uprisings' desires and their mobilisation are of such autonomous, powerful and disruptive nature through their profanity that they arise independently of political intricacies: they are in fact non-dialectical. Benjamin called for the possibility of such anti-evolutionary historical change, a caesura of dialectics that amounts to a "messianic standstill of history" (1982, 204).

The modernist *telos* is not entirely denied in the historical mechanics of the uprisings, since even at the heart of anti-evolutionary 'standstill of dialectics' through the profane, there is the "slightest hint" of messianic finality (Benjamin 1982, 204) – indeed the slightest hint of humanistic, modernist amelioration through the profane. This humanist hint drives the meta-narrative of the 'The People', gives its transversal and transnational momentum a vertical dimension (cf. Adib-Moghaddam 2013, 25). Additionally, the 'standstill of dialectics' explains why historical continuity of street mobilisation in the Arab world and the explanations by social movement theory of the uprisings are only partially satisfactory (e.g. Bein 2012): They are blind to the radiance of the postmodern narrative.

The anti-evolutionary character of the Arab uprisings is well captured in another rally chant: "*Irḥa!*" (leave!) was the immediate politico-institutional goal of the movement – for current elites to leave the political space henceforth occupied by 'The People'. Spatially, this is not a takeover from the outside, but the pushing out of the past political order. Non-dialectically, the movement requires no less than the freeing of political space for the realisation of its innate demands. Additionally, if the Arab uprisings were non-dialectical, this also explains why they are a moment of non-coloniality (Dabashi 2012). This situation does not preclude a culture of memory of colonialism, or its political salience in international politics, but it now is part of Freedom's 'broader ideological arrangements'.

## The 'Failure' of the Revolution?

All is not well in the Arab postmodernity. There is a fundamental disjoint between the meta-narrative of the movement and its factual realisation by overcoming out-dated political structures. This political 'failure' of the Arab uprisings, most prominent in Egypt, can be explained by the re-emphasising the economic dimension of globalisation: the resilience of regional economic interests in the status-quo-ante and the ability of states to undermine the realisation of revolutionary demands have ultimately prevailed and created a hybrid status quo.

There is a stark contrast between the (underreported) successful post-revolutionary political process such as Tunisia and the continuing political upheaval in countries like Egypt, despite the Arab postmodern meta-narrative having been established in both countries. As discussed initially, economic interests are political interests, too. Similarly to the politics in the Gulf after the invasion of Kuwait, there was a strong push for the neoliberalisation of the Egyptian economy and its further integration into the global economy in the last decades (Hanieh 2011, chap. 6). The Egyptian

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'deep state' is entirely committed to this economic project, which coincided with safeguarding its position of power. Postmodern politics is not particularly apt to tackle this problem, as it "disregards class structure and material conditions" (Eagleton 1996, 22). This is why it may well be that the revolutionary meta-narrative and a pre-revolutionary economically driven 'deep state' will coexist in Egypt. The hybridity in Egypt and elsewhere is subject of heated academic dispute (cf. Bayat 2013; Ali 2013 for a definitional debate). One of the major reasons for the resilience of the Egyptian elites, now paradoxically arising as vanguards of the revolution, was their ability to instil divisionism among 'The People' by undermining the universal 'profane' character of the movement. Well-established, state-sponsored *baltagi* (thugs) infiltrated rallies, chanting extreme slogans, beating protestors and damaging property in the area of the protests (Ismail 2006, 145). Overall, Arab postmodernity accepts and possibly even fuels 'capitalist peace', but as Friedrich Engels argued, capitalist peace is an incomplete peace and intensifies "enmity between individuals" through the "fraternisation of thieves" (Engels 1983, 283). Against and within this momentary 'peace', the sweep forward of the revolutionary narrative will not fade.

Euro-American and Arab postmodernity's ontological similarity more positively enable new avenues for resistance and intersubjectivity between Western and Arab postmodern citizens, even if they will emphasise slightly different 'differends'. The emancipatory promise of postmodern Islam becomes the localised expression of an appearing networked 'global heresy' à la Occupy!, Indignados, Euromaidan or the Vienna student protests. Additionally, the 'war on terror', reducing the Arab to a security threat to the West, has been relativised through Arab postmodernity's universalism. Hence the Arab uprisings emerge as a phenomenon of globalisation: the emergence of an "interconnected and unified field of global politics" (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, 21), into which 'The People' integrate.

## Conclusion

It should be clear that by proposing an Arab postmodernity, I do not intend to impose value judgements on the successful work and upcoming travails of 'The People'. Instead, sketching postmodernity *explains* the profane and humanist demands, the religious character and sweeping historical self-imposition of the Arab uprisings. A twofold account of globalisation in cultural and economic terms accounts for the failed political transposition of the socio-cultural meta-narrative in some countries. We are left with the *sha'ab* integrated into a globalised political field, but also localised and different from Western postmodernity. This offers opportunities to overcome Orientalist and Occidentalist binaries. Naturally, to fully realise the postmodern demands of the uprisings in hybrid contexts is not a postmodern undertaking alone – but Egyptian president Sisi will govern a different *sha'ab* than Mubarak. As Arab postmodernity is here to stay, humanist amelioration will require strategic work within the postmodern assemblage: critical interrogation of the present, in view of a non-teleological better future, and using the emancipatory potential yielded by the past.

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