

The Aesthetics of Revolt: Emerging Political Subjectivities in the Arab Spring

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SAMUEL SINGLER, MAY 12 2017

“One does not dictate to those who risk their lives facing a power. Is one right to revolt, or not? Let us leave the question open. People do revolt; that is a fact. And that is how subjectivity (not that of great men, but that of anyone) is brought into history, breathing life into it.” – Michel Foucault (2000)

“[T]here exists a specific sensory experience—the aesthetic—that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life of individuals and the community.” – Jacques Rancière (2002)

Following the revolutionary wave that swept across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from late 2010 onwards, subsequently known as the “Arab Spring,” numerous explanations for the revolts have emerged. Such explanations have frequently focused on the analysis of structural factors such as economic conditions, transformations in telecommunications technologies, or the ideological and material pressures of globalisation, often according a certain inevitability to the revolts by pointing out the ways in which these factors contributed to political discontent across the region. Considering the surprise with which the string of uprisings took the world, including the realms of academia and policy-making, this air of inevitability seems curious indeed. This essay argues that while the aforementioned structural factors played a facilitating role in the Arab Spring, it remains imperative to recognise the contingency of the uprisings, as well as the fact that they are not simply manifestations of familiar political processes of contestation or democratisation, but rather embody a novel form of political existence. Key to this recognition is shifting the primary analytical focus from structure to agency, achieved in this essay via an examination of the aesthetic dimensions of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Examining the aesthetics of revolt, that is, the “material, visual, physical and sensual manifestations” of political subjectivity in a revolutionary context (Werbner et al., 2014: 2), uncovers not only how the peoples of Tunisia and Egypt were mobilised, but also more fundamentally how “the people” as a political collectivity emerged as such.

There has been no shortage of accounts seeking to explain the Arab Spring with reference to the socioeconomic conditions of the MENA region prior to the revolts, as well as transformations in communications technologies and the pressures of globalisation. The importance of such factors should not be overlooked, as they constitute the structural conditions and constraints which gave rise to political discontent in Tunisia and Egypt, and within which the agency of the protesting peoples was operationalised. The regimes of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt had both been marked by increasing economic inequality, as a small class of business elites close to the regime accumulated vast fortunes through the new opportunities presented by economic reform, at the expense of much of the population (Gause, 2011: 85-86). Such economic discontent among the disadvantaged classes is often seen as a primary cause of the Arab Spring (Malik & Awadallah, 2013). While no doubt central to the motivations of many protesters, the revolts cannot be fully attributed to economic conditions alone, as the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were concerned with “recognition” as much as they were with “redistribution” (Ben Moussa, 2013: 54). Despite variability in the extent of linkages between the military and regime, and in the limits to free expression, both Egypt and Tunisia had been characterised by a relatively closed political system based on a personalistic form of dictatorial rule (Anderson, 2011: 3-4). The dual aspiration to rectify both economic and sociopolitical concerns was reflected in surveys, where 84% of Egyptians described both “democracy and economic prosperity” as the goal of the revolts (Moaddel, 2012), as well as in the social composition of the

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uprisings. Cutting across class boundaries, the revolts included even those who had previously gained from the economic policies of the authoritarian regimes, such as Google Egypt executive Wael Ghonim, organiser of the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook campaign to mobilise protesters (Gause, 2011: 86). Although economic conditions should not be discounted, therefore, it seems the uprisings were also “liberal, participatory, deliberative revolts ... they were about demands for citizenship” (Anderson, 2014: 52).

This overview of the socioeconomic conditions in Tunisia and Egypt prior to the revolution illuminates some of the important structural pressures fuelling the Arab Spring and shaping the demands of the protesters. Nevertheless, we must look beyond these structural conditions to explain the occurrence and forceful spread of protest movements from late 2010 onwards to appreciate their contingency and to examine the agency of the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia. Economic disparities and political repression had long characterised the two countries, leaving open the question of why the people suddenly rejected the status quo after decades of acceptance. Furthermore, explaining the Arab Spring solely in terms of socioeconomic discontent overlooks the ways in which the revolts allowed for the emergence of entirely novel forms of political subjectivity, rather than reflecting familiar processes of political contestation. Indeed, the “revolutions were caused not by an act of tyranny, since such acts were common enough and quite expected. Rather, they began by an unusual *reaction* to such acts, a reaction that gave participants a sense that what they were doing ... was *extraordinary*” (Bamyeh, 2013: 189 – original emphasis). Shifting primary analytical focus from structure to agency via an examination of the aesthetics of revolt captures the contingency of the Arab Spring, the emergence of political subjectivities through acts of revolt, as well as the ways in which the uprisings spread within and across countries.

Lacking the material power possessed by the regimes they faced, the protest movements constituted a radical form of critique and resistance via aesthetic “movements of symbolic and experiential solidarity,” which, “mined from social, political and national histories,” allowed for the emergence of “the people” as a collective political subjectivity (Werbner et al., 2014: 1). The production, performance and dissemination of an imagery of resistance to repressive rule created an “exceptional episode ... marked by a swift transformation of consciousness, utopia and euphoria” (Bayat, 2013: 594). Such an exceptional episode constitutes a radical form of critique by calling into question accepted truths, political systems and manifestations of power (Foucault, 2007). In this way, an aesthetics of revolt allows for the emergence of new political subjectivities by refusing pre-given “terms within which existence will and will not be possible” and asserting instead an alternative form of political existence “which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts” (Butler, 2001). This is not to say that an aesthetics of revolt is comprised solely of original imagery, as indeed both the Tunisian and Egyptian protest movements were characterized by aesthetic allusions and citations, both “*geographical*, across borders, and *historical*, across time, recalling earlier protests” (Werbner et al., 2014: 14). Nevertheless, although partially based on previous experience and familiar imagery, an aesthetics of revolt is a “means to a new knowledge” in that it inspires “further exploring the new revolutionary possibilities unveiled by its very emergence” (Bamyeh, 2013: 188, 190). Analysing the aesthetics of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts from this perspective explains the mobilisational power of revolts cutting across traditional lines of political demarcation.

The “exceptional episode” of the Arab Spring began with the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010, “in a display of helpless, hopeless frustration at government harassment” (Anderson, 2014: 50). This act radically challenged and reformulated the field of possibility for political action, giving rise to local protests as images of Bouazizi were subsequently disseminated via social media platforms. In this context, “consciously non-ordinary, non-routine political choices began to be translated into actions that undermined the dominant discourse and organization of social normality in the country” (Volpi, 2013: 979). As the local protests gained traction and the government began to violently crack down on protesters, violence and martyrdom became aestheticized in images, poetry and songs widely disseminated within Tunisia and across the MENA region via social media and television networks such as Al Jazeera (Hawkins, 2014: 34), as well as in graffiti and monuments on the ground, such as that dedicated to Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, which read: “for those who yearn to be free” (Deasy, 2012). In Egypt, also, an aesthetics of martyrdom was central to the initial mobilisation of protesters, as images of the Tunisian protests spread across the region, and social media campaigns in tribute to victims of the Egyptian regime sprung up, such as the aforementioned “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page. Conceptualising social media from the perspective of an aesthetics of revolt is better able to capture its mobilising force than accounts

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which explain it in terms of traditional forms of political deliberation. While such accounts argue that social media constituted a political space for rational democratic discussion and debate (e.g. Howard et al., 2011), in fact “the success of the revolution depended not on rational persuasion, but the unification of large segments of the Tunisian [or Egyptian] population and the bodily participation of this newly self-conscious group” (Hawkins, 2014: 33). The power of social media, then, was in disseminating an aesthetics of revolt around which the populations of Tunisia and Egypt could come together as “the people,” reflected also in the self-actualization of individuals as part of that “people” through aesthetic performances such as setting the image of Bouazizi or Said as their Facebook profile picture (Loader et al., 2014).

Although the production, dissemination and performance of this imagery of resistance, violence and martyrdom were central to initial mobilisation in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, this reactionary imagery could not in itself sustain the protest movements following their initial spark. Rather, as the protest movements began to gain momentum, they shifted towards a more inclusive aesthetic which allowed not only for the continued mobilisation of the protesters, but also for the emergence of “the people” as a political collectivity. In practice, “the people” as a political subject embraces a form of “radical inclusion ... addressed to absolutely everyone” (Raunig, 2011). Transcending traditional cleavages of class, gender, religious belief, age, education and profession, the social composition of this collectivity presents a challenge to accounts of the Arab Spring that accord primary explanatory power to structural factors (Sabea, 2014: 79). One of the clearest aesthetic manifestations of “the people” as a political collectivity was in the revolutionary chant, “*ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam*” – “the people want to dismantle the system,” started by the Tunisian protesters and subsequently raised in uprisings across the MENA region, including Egypt (Werbner et al., 2014: 6; Fig. 2). This chant not only expresses the goal of the uprisings, to topple the regimes, but also constitutes a speech act forcefully asserting “the people” as a collective “subject for thought and action ... [possessing] political agency” (Abulof, 2012). In Tunisia, the national flag also became a particularly powerful symbol emphasising the inclusiveness of “the people”. Having previously been linked to the personalistic rule of President Ben Ali, flying and even embodying the flag became “an act of reappropriation, claiming the flag – and the moral and political legitimacy that went with it – for the people” (Hawkins, 2014: 39). Furthermore, the physical occupation of spaces such as Tahrir Square, Cairo, constitutes a central form of participatory action, as indeed “nothing substitutes for the huge numbers of bodies that packed into the revolutionary squares during the Arab Spring” (Werbner et al., 2014: 10; Fig. 2). Although such collective action is of obvious importance in terms of physical resistance to the regime and its security apparatus, these occupations nevertheless constitute a participatory form of aesthetic production as well. Images of occupied squares acted as both historical citations to protests in the past (Hanafi, 2012: 199), as well as aesthetic performances affirming the existence of “the people,” images of which could be transnationally disseminated to an external audience and subsequently mirrored back into the country to bestow legitimacy upon the revolutionary movements (Hawkins, 2014: 43-44). However, the significance of occupations of physical space is not limited to such visual imagery. In fact, as the occupied spaces constituted a sphere of existence entirely detached from the state, protesters were forced to solve the problems of everyday life “without the help of the state ... [This] determines the people, all of a sudden and for an indeterminate period, there where it has decided to gather” (Badiou, 2011). Thus the aesthetic performance of occupying physical spaces simultaneously constitutes a “search for new forms of living,” in other words, a radical alternative to previous forms of political existence (Raunig, 2011).

While an analysis of aesthetic production and performance can explain the initial mobilisation of the protesters and the subsequent emergence of “the people” as a collective political subjectivity, examining the eventual fracturing of that inclusive aesthetic also illuminates the political fragmentation signalling the end of the Arab Spring. As the demands of the protesters had focused on “recognition” and “redistribution,” the revolutionaries initially overlooked the possibility of attempting to seize state power (Bayat, 2013: 597). Thus, following the realisation that the inclusive revolutionary movement lacked the coherence and resources to capture and reshape state institutions, the aesthetically constituted unity of “the people” gave way to more sectarian reappropriations of familiar imagery. The previously unifying symbolism of the Tunisian national flag was now challenged by the black flag of Salafi Islam, signalling the political fragmentation between Islamists and secularists (Hawkins, 2014: 48). Similarly, the geographic dispersal of protests in Egypt marked a shift away from the unifying movement concentrated at Tahrir Square whereby the inclusive subjectivity of “the people” gave way to a “multitude of faces” asserting their political demands (Sabea, 2014: 83).

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It would be mistaken to conclude, however, that the eventual fracturing of the inclusive aesthetics of revolt in Egypt in Tunisia attests to the irrelevance of aesthetic production in a revolutionary context, or proves that structural pressures should therefore be seen as singular causative factors driving political change. This essay has examined the ways in which political agency was operationalised via aesthetic production and performance, which often challenged traditional expectations of the social composition of political movements, and constituted entirely novel forms of political action and organisation. Although ultimately falling short of bringing about a profound transformation in the politics of Egypt and Tunisia, as reflected in the continuity of political turbulence in both countries following the revolts, the aesthetics of the Arab Spring nevertheless constituted the emergence of new forms of collective subjectivity, in addition to significantly broadening the field of possibility for political action and imagination. These aesthetic forms live on in the collective memory as well as in their material forms, and continue to provide a repertoire for subsequent political action, such as Egypt's "second revolution" of 2013, in which protesters replicated action taken in Tahrir Square in 2011 (Werbnner et al., 2014: 19). The power of an aesthetics of revolt, then, lies not only in its potential to mobilise and unify "the people," but more fundamentally in the ways in which it can challenge and reformulate existing terms of political existence, thus resonating far beyond the immediate geographical and temporal dimensions of its manifestation.

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