

## The Rebel

Felix Lang and Malcolm Théoleyre

Who is the rebel in the Middle East and North Africa? Translating the 'rebel' in the Arab spring context bears lexical and semantic difficulties, but, most of all, it requires to guard oneself from western liberal bias. Discussing different notions of 'the rebel' and related Arabic terms

such as 'thā'ir' and 'mutamarrid', this article introduces META issue #6 on 'The Rebel'.

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"Arab Spring," "Arab uprisings," "Arabelion"<sup>1</sup>—after Ben Ali had boarded the plane to Jeddah on January 14, 2011 and Mubarak resigned from office less than a month later, the European and American public did not have to wait long for a range of labels to mark the historic dimension of the events taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. The "Arab Spring," it seems safe to say, has won out over the other contenders.

Reading the 2011 uprisings from a perspective that keeps in mind the Springtime of the Peoples from 1848 is akin to "comparing the incomparable," as Roger Heacock admits. The Springtime of the Peoples, which inaugurates the adjunction of "Spring" and "revolution," was a wave of political uprisings that swept through Europe in 1848, all of which were suppressed within months by a reactionary backlash. Beyond the semantic legacy that unites the Springtime of the Peoples and the Arab Spring, Heacock believes that the comparison between both revolutionary events has much heuristic value, especially when considering what he calls "Sicilian-Syrian and French-Egyptian dyads," in which the contexts of 1848 and 2011 share structural similarities in terms of the respective causes of the uprisings and how events unfolded (30). Sadik Al-Azm also underlines such structural correspon-

dences, since the “unfolding of the Arab Spring can be connected to classical European revolutionary politics and the intellectual energies expended on the theorization of these politics” (274).

Be that as it may, “Arab Spring” was not conceived simply as a historical analogy: born as a catchphrase (Keating), it nonchalantly integrates events into a European narrative of revolutionary “springtimes,” a narrative whose inner impetus and ultimate trajectory is the idea of “enslaved Europe’s sudden realization of its possible liberation” (Fejtö); moreover, it signifies the burgeoning liberal minds that crafted radical socialism and social democracy: the “forty-eighters” (Aghulon 237). Socialists or liberal democrats, naïve for believing that Democracy is a self-evident horizon (Tocqueville, 827), in European memory the “forty-eighters” have nonetheless remained distinct from conservatism and reaction (Aghulon 237). Thus, the idea of a “springtime” is indissolubly tied to the spirit of progressivism embodied by the 1848 rebels.

In this issue of META, we wish to explore the relevance of the notion of Arab Spring by looking at the actors behind the 2011 uprisings. Beyond the structural similarities pointed out by Roger Heacock or Sadik Al-Azm, we intend to examine the discourse in which the insurgents of the

Arab Spring frame their action and see if it reveals similarities with the “forty-eighters” and their narratives of progress, democracy and revolution.

Our entry point in our study of the 2011 uprising’s actors/narrators is “the rebel,” simply defined as “one who revolts against the government to which s/he owes allegiance.” The (apparent) neutrality of the term enables us not to prejudge the inclinations of the “overthrowers-of-established-order” we are to observe; especially when, following Eric Hobsbawm’s lead, we should not only be looking for the “progressive” rebel but also for those whose aims are less in line with a project of liberal democracy. We therefore want to address the following questions: what notion of the rebel do we find in the Middle East? Who are the 2011 rebels? To what extent can we say that a culturally-specific notion of rebelliousness is projected onto them? Does the Middle Eastern “forty-eighter” exist?

#### **Naming the Rebel in Arabic: *Thā’ir* and *Mutamarrid***

The notion of the rebel has become instrumental in framing a wide array of actors involved in the Arab Spring uprisings and their aftermath. On the one hand, the term has been used widely, in academic discourse and in the media, to refer to armed

groups fighting the regime in Libya and Syria. On the other hand, the rebel has become a template for describing or portraying civil society actors: the rebellious youth of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, the work of artists, musicians and cyber activists are all frequently viewed through the prism of rebellion.

However, “rebel” is not a neutral word in the European context. It is worth noting that the “rebels” of the German *Vormärz* of 1848 rejected the label and preferred to call themselves “revolutionaries,” a term increasingly associated with progress and a legitimate political project since the late eighteenth century (Koselleck 655, 760). This battle over the choice of words, the tension between meaning and connotation, requires that we pose the question of translation and restate the words of rebellion such as they are employed in the Arab context.

#### ***Thā’ir?***

Mohammed Harbi, Gilbert Meynier, and Tahar Khalifone point to the fact that *thawra*, which denotes non-concerted rebellion short of a political program, is particularly suited to describing the 2011 uprisings, since these are not revolutions—the term usually used to translate *thawra* into English—but spontaneous revolts, sparked by despair. In fact, the authors

believe that even the 1848 “revolutions” would be better accounted for by the term *thawra* (13).

In the Middle East the word has acquired a positive glow in association with over 150 years of anti-imperialist struggles, from Urabi's revolt (*al-thawra al-'urabiyya*) to the Algerian revolution, or “revolution of Algerian liberation” (*thawra al-tahrīr al-jazā'iriyya*), and came to be invested with connotations inspired from European revolutionary semantics. For instance, the National Liberation Front articulated a “revolutionary doctrine” inspired by western liberal and socialist legacies, drawing analogies with European causes such as Ireland's (Khelifa 124). As such, while *thā'ir*—“he who partakes in *thawra*”—would seem to be a good translation of “rebel,” it also appears to be shrouded in a similar semantic nebulous as that of the “forty-eighter,” with elements of a common inspiration. However, in the Middle East, the leap between *thawra* and *thā'ir* is not self-evident. In the case of Algeria, Gilbert Meynier explains that during the war of independence, the notion of *thawra* was understood as the social and political changes which would follow independence, while the conflict itself was more often referred to as “jihad.” As a consequence, the Algerian rebel combatants were systematically called *mujāhidīn*.

### **Mārid and Islam**

From the point of view of Sunni Islam, the rebel has suffered from his/her association with *'iṣyān* (“disobedience”), discredited by early interpretations of the Quran. Umayyad rulers and men of law established *'iṣyān* as contrary to the Prophet's injunction to “obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you” (4-59), and associated it with Satan, the first of disobeyers. The “rebellion verse” (49-9) gives a definition of the rebel based on factiousness (*ṭā'ifa*) and oppression/excess (*bagha*). Until the tenth century, hadiths conflating rebels and corrupters (*fasād*) flourished (Aillet, Tixier and Valet 478), and jurists linked rebellion to brigandry (*ḥarāba*) and even *fitna*. It would thus seem that the fundamental religious corpus of hadiths and early jurisprudence has bequeathed a negative image of the rebel.

This negative connotation was turned around by Islamism in the mid-twentieth century however (Bianquis). Just as the FLN, under the influence of its pious fringe, phrased revolution in religious terms, so too the followers of Qutb have legitimized their sedition by invoking the war on infidels. The existence of a distinct noun, *baghi*, was in fact what enabled this reversal: rebellion, heresy and brigandry,

woven into a single strain by early interpretations, could now be differentiated and kept separate (Aillet, Tixier and Valet 481); as a result, the legitimacy of sedition became a matter of interpretation. Moreover, Islamists could also count on well-established authorities, such as Ibn Taymiyya, to find the justification for killing an impious president: Anwar El Saddat (Kepel 339).

The notion of the rebel in European languages is of course no less multifaceted and ambivalent. In some respects we find clear parallels with the usage of *mārid* in Arabic: from the days of the Roman Empire until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, “rebellion,” “revolt,” “uprising,” “upheaval,” etymologically related words and their equivalents in other European languages would be used by the ruling powers in “top-down” definitions of violent political unrest (Koselleck 655). The Glorious Revolution as well as the American Revolution were qualified as rebellions by their opponents (Williams 272). In the colonial period we find a similar usage, whereby anti-colonial insurrections, be it against the Ottoman Empire in the 1916-1918 Great Arab Revolt or against the French Mandate in the Great Syrian Revolt (1925-1927), are qualified as illegitimate by the European colo-

nial powers. Arguably, some of this meaning survives in the current definition of rebel groups in political science, while it has shed at least some of its normative weight: as non-state actors engaged in armed struggle, rebel groups are contesting the established—if not necessarily legitimate—order.

### The “Good Rebel”: Wired Youth and Blind Spots

This decidedly negative notion of rebels has been supplemented by a positive rebel discourse which began to emerge in the US from the 1950s onwards (Medovoi) and has grown to be an integral part of popular and, in particular, youth culture. The “rebel heroes” of American cinema of the 1950s (e.g. Marlon Brando, James Dean), joined later by the rebels of rock music, established (unarmed) rebellion as socially acceptable behavior. As Medovoi argues, the 1950s rebels of popular culture could be seen as preparing the ground for the more explicitly politicized intergenerational rebellion of the 1968 student movement and the increasing importance of identity politics. While things may look slightly different in Europe, 1968 certainly contributed to consolidating a rebel discourse in which the notion of rebellion, heretofore used to dispute the legitimacy of any uprising against the powers that be,

is appropriated by the rebels. Drawing on images of the bohemian and the outcast who purportedly resist the demands of conformity imposed by bourgeois society, the rebel-label becomes a mark of distinction for authenticity. In the decades following 1968, the appropriation of the rebel identity is maybe most conspicuous in music and the various subcultures associated with it: from reggae (Bob Marley’s “Rebel Music,” 1974), rock and pop (David Bowie’s “Rebel Rebel,” 1974) to punk, the rebel functions as a positive identifier. This figure of the heroic rebel who challenges social and political authority, meanwhile firmly anchored in European and American discourse if not beyond, also informs academic analyses of the Arab Spring.

One dominant figure with which the Arab Spring is associated in recent works is what Juan Cole calls the “New Arabs”: “The young people, from teenager through 34-year-olds, spearheaded the large social and political changes that erupted in 2011 and created cultural and political frameworks that their elders often then joined or allied with” (1). In Cole’s view, the 2011 rebels were born “between 1977 and 2000.” The outstanding feature of this brand of revolutionaries is its connection to social networks; its “struggles for democracy in the digital age” (Herrera

and Sakr 7). Pitched against its parents, the autocratic state and the Brotherhood, “Gen Y showed a new ability to form political coalitions across ideological lines, successfully cooperating across the divide between left-liberal and those devoted to political Islam” (Cole 27). Is this then the emblematic Middle Eastern rebel? In any case, they could certainly fit the positive discourse on “rebel youth” prompted by Western popular culture and which translates into analogies with 1848 and the “soixante-huitards” (the sixty-eighters). The academic gaze on youth counterculture and rebellious postures, which frames youth violence in “adult” political terms (Humphries), percolates in the works on the Arab Spring, with, in some cases, a clear sensitivity for popular culture representations (Wright).

Be that as it may, the 2011 “youth rebel,” presented in these terms is, by and large, a construct. In her contribution to this issue, **Ilka Eickhof** demonstrates how documentaries on the Cairo protests are dominated by Western production networks and narrative codes. They structure an archetypal, European-modelled figure of the rebel youth.

**Matt Gordner**, in his piece “Blogging Bouazizi,” also casts into question such a romantic notion of the rebel when he

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shows how the Tunisian cyber activists, who were at one time lauded as *the* decisive force behind the removal of Ben Ali from power, use their symbolic and social capital to further their respective entrepreneurial projects.

**Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė's** article for this issue, "Intellectuals and the People: Portrayals of the Rebel in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising," reveals how differently the "rebel youth" question was framed by Egyptian intellectuals in private newspaper op-eds. Their understanding of the uprisings was dominated by class bias: stressing the thuggishness of certain types of violence harbored by revolution, they expressed their fear of seeing the peaceful process overcome by popular class youth.

The issue of class is also central to **Carl Rommel's** contribution on the role of the football Ultras in the Egyptian Revolution. Tracing the development of a "rebellious subjectivity" among supporters of Ahlawy Football Club, Rommel argues that the Ultras, often framed as prototypical Arab Spring rebels, were actually quite late in espousing an unequivocal political stance in favour of the revolution, fearing that they would be associated with the 'thugs' of the lower classes.

By way of contrast to the Arab Spring rebels, **Sune Haugbolle's** article on the Lebanese activist Bassem Chit shows us a type

of Middle Eastern rebel who is much more closely and self-consciously connected to a European history of rebellion. As a Marxist and leftwing activist, Chit (d. 2015) actively inscribed himself in a political tradition directly connected to the rebels of 1848 and 1968.

### The Forgotten "Rebel": Islamists and Jihadi-Salafists

Is it because Islamists only played a part later in the Arab Spring that they are considered another adversary to the "rage and rebellion across the Islamic world" (Wright), rather than rebels in their own way? In any case, the jihadi-Salafists of ISIS appear rebellious in at least two ways: first, in fighting Syrian and Iraqi regimes, ISIS's project reflects its filiation with Qutb's "rebellious" stance against the secular state (Kepel 44); secondly, ISIS is also a rebel faction facing up to al-Qa'ida, not only on the basis of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's opportunistic secession, but because the April 2013 proclamation of the caliphate is in contradiction with the al-Qa'ida *manhaj* ("plan"), according to which a caliphate can only follow the defeat of the *'adū al-ba'īd*, the "far-enemy": the West (Malka 24). Interestingly, even more than al-Qa'ida, ISIS's urge to recreate the caliphate seems to place it alongside the most revolutionary of primitive rebels and

their millenarian craving for The Day (Worsey).

"Primitive rebels" (Hobsbawm) par excellence, ISIS insurgents are not usually branded as such, not even by themselves. **Thomas Richard** gives a detailed study of ISIS's propaganda films in this issue, and underlines the absence of the notion of *thuwwār*—revolutionaries—in the organization's videos. ISIS prefers terms such as *ikhwān* ("brothers") or *mujāhidīn*. However, if not necessarily in terms of its self-branding, Richard demonstrates however that ISIS is revolutionary in many ways: among other things, for instance, ISIS filmmakers will refer to Régis Debray and deploy an articulate discourse on revolutionary warfare.

We see how Western liberal opinions will find it hard to use the term "rebel," connoted positively, to an organization whose practices are seen as barbaric and, at any rate, contrary to the "forty-eighters'" aspirations for human rights. In line with US strategic semantics, one might prefer to make a distinction between progressive "rebels" and hostile "unlawful combatants" (Scheipers). The "modernist" bias, which Hobsbawm denounced in 1959, impacts on our approach to Islamist militants, especially armed jihadi-Salafists.

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This bias may explain why we speak differently about Tahrir youth’s use of the Internet and jihadi use: as **Gilbert Ramsay** shows, the “terrorist use of the Internet” has become a subfield of its own, while the civil society activists’ use of the Internet is investigated in a different academic context. Ramsay’s cautioning against overstating the role of the Internet for jihadi recruitment and terrorist operations, however, could easily be transferred to the realm of cyber-revolutionaries.

To break with Western subjectivity, **Hyeran Jo**, **Rotem Dvir** and **Yvette Isidori** offer a taxonomy of armed Middle East rebel groups from the perspective of political science, based on categories they use for other rebel groups throughout the world. Their contribution enables us to extract the Middle East rebels from the normative canvas of Western post-revolutionary representations. As consequence, it appears that jihadi-Salafists hold a significant share in the 2011 rebellious context, while claiming that Islamists have ambushed the Arab Spring only underlines how they constituted the more ancient and established revolutionary force of the Arab World.

The various contributions to this issue, we believe, go a long way to problematizing the notion of the rebel as an analytical

concept, as a representational trope and an element of anti-authoritarian identities. It appears that the relevance of the 1848-(1968)-2011 parallel is challenged by the Arab uprisings rebel narratives, which are diverse and ambiguous in the face of progress, democracy, and even revolution. What remains missing from this issue is a reflection on the questions of gender and masculinity. The rebel, be it the armed rebel of the Free Syrian Army, the ISIS jihadi-rebel, the Cairene graffiti-rebel or the socialist rebel-intellectual is by and large identified with the male gender. The female rebel seems to occupy another blind spot in the history of rebellion and revolution in the Middle East and North Africa. Addressing this should be the objective of future research on the figure of the rebel.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term "Arabellion" was coined by the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Lerch).

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