

# Social Media, Protest Cultures and Political Subjectivities of the Arab Spring

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## Abstract:

This article draws on phenomenological perspectives to present a case against resisting the objectification of cultures of protest and dissent. The generative, self-organizing properties of protest cultures, especially as mobilized through social media, are frequently argued to elude both authoritarian political structures and academic discourse, leading to new political subjectivities or 'imaginaries'. Stemming from a normative commitment not to over-determine such nascent subjectivities, this view has taken on a heightened resonance in relation to the recent popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The article argues that this view is based on an invalid assumption that authentic political subjectivities and cultures naturally emerge from an absence of constraint, whether political, journalistic or academic. The valorisation of amorphousness in protest cultures and social media enables affective and political projection, but overlooks politics in its institutional, professional and procedural forms.

## Key words:

Social media; protest cultures; political subjectivity; Arab spring; phenomenology; objectification

# Social Media, Protest Cultures and Political Subjectivities of the Arab Spring

## Introduction: Social media and the Arab uprisings

Not long after the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt scholars many journalists and political commentators began to shy away from the phrase 'Arab spring'. On the face of it this simply reflected a growing awareness that swift and coherent transitions to western-style democracy across the Middle East and North Africa were unlikely, and that the spring metaphor with its suggestion of an emergence from darkness was increasingly inappropriate. However, there is a more durable tendency in the academic literature and media discourse surrounding the uprisings to invest emotionally in them and to project specific political commitments, and this investment and projection are facilitated by the perceived amorphousness of these recent protest movements, predicated in large part on the conception of social media activism as spontaneous and self-organizing. Based on a survey of around 150 journal articles published before the end of 2012, this article offers three responses to such conceptions of social media, protest and political change. First, it contends that the use of ecological and biological metaphors to describe social media is associated with the broader misattribution of vibrant agency to these platforms, and a teleology uniquely geared towards the creation of new and progressive political spaces. Second, it connects specific accounts of social media to broader conceptions of protest cultures based on similar norms of structurelessness, namely individualized creativity and imagination. This isn't to suggest that reform movements cannot be powerful agents of historic change; simply that there is nothing intrinsically *about* a protest culture, network or space that is politically fertile or generative of new identities, as conceptions of protest networks as viral or rhizomatic presume. The belief that transformative, more authentic political subjectivities can only emerge in the absence of structure and constraint is associated with the claim that emergent, mediated protest cultures in the Arab world need to be protected not only from political authoritarianism but over-determination by western media and academic discourse. This article, thirdly, resists such a claim, arguing that this aversion to over-determination is connected to a broader desire not to objectify protest movements – to claim to speak for them or locate them historically – a desire which is based on a misapprehension of the role that objectification plays in understanding, in phenomenological terms, our being in the world.

There is little point in denying the role that social media has played in the Arab spring and other recent protest movements such as that in Iran after the 2009 elections. On an organizational level there is ample evidence of its effectiveness, with Tufekci and Wilson (2012) showing for instance that Twitter social media users were more likely to have attended the first day of mass protests in Egypt in January 2011 than non-users. Howard et al. (2011) paint a vivid picture of the subversive uses to which social media can be put, and as valid as it is to point to the harnessing of social media by authoritarian regimes for the purpose of surveillance, practices of sousveillance – uploading video of police brutality, for example – are also enabled by new platforms. Further, different social media have been favoured by participants in and supporters of different political, social and activist movements: Facebook was particularly popular in the Tunisian uprising, Twitter was the medium of choice in an already well-

established culture of blogging in Egypt, while online the civil war in Syria is largely being played out on YouTube. Any cursory empirical exploration of the plentiful data available, however, counsels against either reading too much politicality into social media discourse around the Arab world uprisings, or indeed dismissing it as trivial. Rinke and Röder (2011) make the point that while much is made of the Egyptian blogosphere in the five years leading up to the Arab spring, most of it was markedly apolitical. What is sometimes referred to as futile 'chatting' (Hofheinz, 2011), however, should not be so easily dismissed, with the dominant motivations for engaging with social media in the Arab world as anywhere else being socializing, networking and entertainment. Looking at tweets archived in the Tahrir Data Sets,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that even of those referring directly to political developments, many are more socially than politically oriented, explicable by turn-taking or affirmation of group membership rather than expressing political commitments or setting out to convince and mobilize.

The lesson here is that while seriousness may have its uses, its absence should not be interpreted as a sign of political vacuity. While there is no shortage of evidence in the tweets from westerners around the 25 January protests in Egypt of a lack of awareness of context and, perhaps, political naivety, it is an established feature of social media that content and users switch between the weighty and the throwaway. There is nothing to suggest that Facebook is inherently depoliticizing, even though its conception was apolitical, any more than it is inherently politically transformative as is argued by others who point to its horizontal, dynamic networks as generative of a new and more democratic way of doing politics. Lewiński and Mohammed (2012) show how easily apolitical status updates can be turned political by friends' comments, while Kuebler (2011) makes an important distinction between campaigners on Facebook with origins in Egypt's Kefiya reform movement and those who are simply keen to know what others are talking about, political or otherwise. The distinction between the two is inevitably porous, and Rinke and Röder (2011) note that such a deliberative environment will be familiar to anyone who has spent time in cities across the Middle East, with televisions broadcasting news and other content a standard fixture of shops and coffee houses, and conversation and debate ranging from the critical to the comical drawing in regulars and passers-by alike. Social media then is no different from many other kinds of discourse: multifarious, argumentative, wide-ranging, entertaining, contradictory, not uniquely expressive and not exempt from the constraints of culture, convention and language. My own analysis (Markham, 2014) of tweets by Arab journalists at key moments in 2012 shows them alternating between high rhetoric, banal statements of support for democratization and more or less straight reporting of events – though other research (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012) suggests they find this switching between the profound and mundane harder going than amateur tweeters. There is an identifiable epistemological orientation to the world detectable in this emergent professional discourse, and it may indicate a particular kind of political subjectivity. But it isn't the product of its platform, and can only be understood in the context of the habits and affordances, pressures and pleasure of everyday life, in which professional principles are inevitably subsumed to the mechanics of work and the social context in which it is situated. Likewise, any subjectivities emerging out of mediated protest cultures or interactions between ambivalently-engaged supporters and onlookers cannot be assumed to be transformative, apolitical, democratic or vacuous on the basis of their means of communication.

Yet the language used by many academics, both western and Middle Eastern, to describe these forums throws up a set of normative terms – 'galvanizing' (Lynch, 2011), 'empowering' (Kuebler, 2011), 'liberating' (Christensen, 2011), 'energizing' (Agathangelou & Nevzat Soguk, 2011)<sup>2</sup> – suggesting a particular kind of agency associated with social media. As an agent or set

of agents, social media has a certain intangibility: it is organic in its genesis and development, elusive and fleet-footed. By this conception, the perceived lack of constraint or objectification in social media, whether it is narrative, professional or political, is productive of a distinct mode of subjectivity. This is similar to the new and widely-invoked 'radically alternative' political subjectivities that are said by many researchers working on the Arab spring to emerge spontaneously when an authoritarian regime is overthrown – the product of liberated political 'imaginaries' (Elseewi, 2011). There is no suggestion in the literature that the majority of tweets are politically or culturally transformative in themselves, but there is a strong vein in academic writing on this topic emphasizing the unchecked flow of communication, notwithstanding the constraints of character limits, bandwidth and literacy, as productive of *something* – whether it be freer discourse, more creative activism or a different way of inhabiting mediated worlds. This only makes sense if subjectivity is seen as something which emerges naturally from a vacuum, and the phenomenological position this article takes is that subjectivity exists not in spite of constraint, but because of it. To begin with, a brief statement of approach and definitions is in order.

Phenomenology<sup>3</sup> aims at explaining how we come to apprehend the world around us and our relation to it. More specifically, it begins with the fact of our continually finding ourselves thrown into a world which always-already exists, a present which is determined both by past experience and anticipation of future outcomes. Normally this present is experienced as seamless, unproblematic and above all *given*, but since in any encounter there are stakes – we have a sense of 'care' or an interest in how things play out – it is imperative to unpack what that givenness is contingent upon. Givenness is the basis of subjectivity: the subject experiencing the world only comes to exist as that world emerges to consciousness. On the individual level this means recognizing that sense of thrownness – how we got to this always-already present, what futures are really possible, which in turn means recognizing how we as subjects are also objects for others. *Political* subjectivity applies this logic to collective selves: how we as groups of individuals find ourselves thrown into a present always oriented by past experience and towards possible futures, and what is at stake in this orientation to the world. An absence of objectification by this view is a fantastic projection: there is no outside of structure, simply different structurings of subjectivity. This is not intended as philosophical pedantry, nor an attempt to cast as deluded those cheered by the dismantling of restrictive structures and the possibilities this presents. But there are consequences in eschewing objectification and merely positing new, self-generating political cultures – in short, an over-readiness to overlook the continued relevance of the professional, institutional and deliberative aspects of politics.

### **Cultures of protest and political imaginaries**

Fenton and Barassi (2011) flesh out some of the commonalities and differences of those who argue for the radical transformativity of social media. For Stiegler (2008) the key is individuation: it is only through self-expression that the individual is able to shake off the deadening, flattening pressure of market forces. For Castells transformativity stems from autonomy, a more socially situated kind of subjective freedom but one which is nonetheless distinctly individuated. Both foreground individual creativity and voice, with Castells (2009) famously describing social media as enabling a mass communication of the self. Fenton and Barassi, however, argue that this inward-looking, even narcissistic encapsulation of what social media enable is fundamentally counter-productive in relation to political subjectivity, which is

necessarily collective in its genesis. This in itself requires pulling apart, because at first glance it is not obvious why a mass communication of the self is intrinsically uncollective. The authors are akin to those who look on with sadness at the briefly ubiquitous silent flashmob, in which each participant dances while listening to music only they can hear, through headphones. The distinction is one between actions which are simply common, in this case expressing a voice, and those which amount to a common endeavour. Others have similarly distinguished between logics of aggregation and logics of networks (Juris, 2012), and of connectivity and collectivity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). It could be argued that the notion of common endeavour is simply a romanticized view of collectivity, and that being less constrained by the act of working with others towards a common purpose is conducive to a different kind of creativity, one which more or less naturally emerges when large numbers of people do roughly the same thing, and this appears to be the claim underpinning Stiegler's understanding of transformation, if not Castells.

Yet for Fenton and Barassi it is precisely the constraints of structured deliberation, with agreed or imposed rules for interacting and acting, that are required in order to sustain political subjectivity as opposed to diffuse subjectivities. The efficacy of activist media is said to consist in part in collective rituals, which are conceived as historically constituted cultures of practice. While the same could theoretically be said of social media champions – what is tweeting if not ritualistic? – the difference lies in the consequences of those rituals, subsuming the individual to a collective product on the one hand, and enabling individuals to be heard by an at least minimally attentive and comprehending audience on the other. For Stiegler, individuation is made possible by the act of speaking out, and only by speaking for oneself is one able to establish one's 'singularity', though I would argue that his position is not diametrically opposed to Fenton and Barassi's insofar as recognition of one's singularity is not entirely achieved through self-actualization; there has to be at least an abstracted sense of others recognizing oneself. But for Stiegler abstraction is not only a minimum but imperative to the work of self-creation: it depends on a sense that others are engaged in similar practices, that their practices in no way constrain one's own self-expression, and that a less coerced kind of collectivity can result, one which does not compromise individual creativity but can be productive of something greater than it. Fenton and Barassi, however, argue that there needs to be collective construction of political messages, not mere co-presence, in order for coherent political subjectivity to be realisable. This affirms the phenomenological conception of subjectivity not only as a collective endeavour but the product of active, if non-instrumental, intention.

This can sound slightly old-fashioned, especially as the authors at one point write of the importance of physical co-presence as well as mutual engagement in deliberation. But such assertions are backed up by an empirical study of a solidarity movement who found that their embrace of social media undermined their sense of collective symbolic identity. This isn't couched vaguely in terms of a less tangible imagined community, but as an observed effect of social media: losing the ability to constrain and direct members' attention, communication and interaction made it impossible for them to achieve one of their principal aims. Their subject was the Cuban Solidarity Council, but they hoped additionally to spark self-reflexiveness on the part of westerners about the contingent nature of neoliberalism – a tall order to be sure, but one rendered inconceivable by abandoning concentrated, protracted discussion for a forum more suited to brief expressions of *sympathy* – expressions which, after Stiegler, are more important as acts of individual creativity than as acts engaging with and seeking to transform an external world. It is important that Stiegler does not see this as a dead end: indeed, for him individual participation in the creation and dissemination of symbolic production is the premise upon

which all politics is based. Fenton and Barassi criticize this mainly in terms of effectiveness: it is naïve to think that individual yet networked instances of communicative experience will deliver substantive political or social change. But there is a bigger point at stake, the fault line being between collectively working towards – and struggling over the terms of – political subjectivity, and having faith in a novel and benign political imaginary emerging from, yet remaining subservient to, acts of individuation.

There is a broader debate here between those who see new cultures of practice situated on more private or intimate terrain as empowering, ensuring that politics happens on familiar territory through acts over which one has control, and those who see instead a retreat from necessarily public deliberation without much by way of political substitute (see especially Sennett, 1974). While there is not space here to take on all parameters of the politics of intimacy, it is certainly an interesting possibility that instead of the dissolution or mutual colonization of the private and public spheres (Fraser, 1990) there remains a clear distinction between the two regarding the viability of collective political subjectivity, and that what has changed instead is where individuals' attention is focussed.<sup>4</sup> But more germane to the present discussion is the fact that emergent academic discourse around the Arab spring cleaves to the individual, expressive and quotidian as the main loci of politics. So while authors such as Elseewi (2011: 1197) write about the implications of satellite television, they are not cast in terms of an emerging pan-Arab public sphere but 'a revolution in individual subjectivity'. And for Wall and El Zahed (2011: 1339) YouTube is creating new political selves and new kinds of citizenships because as a medium it is 'visual and intensely intimate'. This revolution is purported to unfold in the realm of imagination, not in the sense of what is possible in a symbolic world collectively inhabited and invested in, but in the more traditional sense of individual creativity: a freeing of the mind to think and rethink what is possible. What sounds like a defence of daydreaming is in fact contextualized in terms of the mundane – technology, travel, finance – but the emphasis is very much on what Appadurai (1996) terms the 'prisms of the possible', where possibility is determined only by the ability of the disconnected, autonomous mind to come up with alternatives. But the idea of pure or unfettered creativity does not stand up against the phenomenology of spontaneity: it is not an absence but a differently determined template for action; freedom of thought is not unstructured cognition but that shaped more by pre-reflexive instincts, learned and internalized over time. There is a sense that for Elseewi and others there should be respect for what individuals imagine in the privacy of their own minds, but this valorisation is based on a misplaced notion of individual ownership of anticipation and meaning-making.

For others it is the spatial rather than simply networked or communicative that is given to be generative of political subjectivity. The notion of places of protest pervade Sassen's work (2012), for instance, with the supposition that places in which protest can occur (or spaces that can be 'opened up') assume a transformative teleology. For Sassen as for others the idea of political parties or movements creating places of protest is suspect, since this implies a normative pre-loading of what that place should resemble. So, as with social media, it is the places themselves that are subjects creating politics, from which the possibility and form of protestor takes shape. As Greene and Kuswa (2012: 271) put it: 'as a political subjectivity, the protester emerges in the crease of a regional fold of protest places as these places make and unmake maps of power'. The disembodied subject of power here is striking, and reflects a real ambivalence about people 'making maps of power', in the discourse seen as a complicit act of subjugation. The repeated refrain of emergence is also telling, displaying a commitment to something above the everyday experience of politics, in line with Hegel's taxonomy of higher

and higher manifestations of subjectivity. But whereas Hegel's Spirit emerges out of a dense and iterative process of repeated objectification, whether by others, the material world or history itself, for these authors the emphasis is on taking a hands-off approach so that, once a space has been deemed transformative, it needs only to be left alone in order for a new political subjectivity to develop.

For others still – many others, in fact, across the discipline of activist studies (in this context, see Khamis et al, 2012; Rahimi, 2011a & 2011b; Tagma, 2011; Wall & Zahed, 2011) – properly transformative politics are the product not of ideology or institution, but creativity. Speaking of the post-election protests in Iran, Rahimi (2011a: abstract) describes internet activism as a 'creative configuration of complex networks that primarily interact through meaning-laden performances that carve out spaces of dissent'. The idea of performance is elevated in this field of research above conventional political practice, and it is striking again that while the act of individual expression is valorised as a form of engagement, the creativity and presumably the meaning of these performances emanate from networks rather than individuals as such. But as with Stiegler, this does not mean that networks as conceived by Rahimi are collectivist in the sense that the individual is subsumed by a shared endeavour; rather, the meaning generated by 'dynamic' networks remains very much the product of individual expression. While care must be taken not to co-opt or objectify such expressions, their very expressiveness when situated in an appropriate space, and done not collectively but multiply, will reliably produce political change. For Rahimi, interaction is not about common cause but the mutual display of emotion and 'narratives of protestation', and the 'contentious' nature of performances of protest consists in the intensity of its emotion. This is in line with the characterization of relations between individuals in networks as affinities (Rahimi, 2011a), conceived minimally as what people have in common, their individuality and the right to express it safely intact.

While widespread in the literature, notions of dissent as artform and performance (see for instance Lim, 2012) and as situated in networked places of protest are narrow in their applicability. Certainly it seems that the emphasis on mass individual self-expression producing a new politics which does not threaten individuality but, as organic or vivified, has a life of its own, is not something uniformly detectable across the Middle East over the past few years. And yet for Rahimi hacktivism, use of social media and organizing street protests are all regarded as performances of an affective nature that are generative of 'vibrant' and informal public spheres. Affect looms large here, with the belligerent or offensive character of expression enough to create new political realities, viable in the longer term because they combine through self-sustaining networks characterized as organisms. In another article Rahimi (2011b: 160) refers to dissent as dynamic and porous, and that 'such an ephemeral process carries the element of spontaneous creative interaction in the ways individuals can carve out new domains of communication through which dissent can be articulated and enacted in diverse ways'. What is questionable is the way dissent is described as a fragile kind of life, one that cannot or should not be moulded but that must be nurtured until it develops its own sustainability and resilience. And it is this insistence on vibrancy that suggests wishful projection onto the Arab spring more than anything else, evident in the richly normative language used to describe its inception in contestation and conflict, the possibilities that are then 'opened up' or spaces 'carved out', and the sacred, vulnerable but eventually irresistible new political subjectivity that 'emerges'.

This view, however, is built upon a romanticization of protest cultures in which there is frequently a sizeable gap between specific practices of dissent and what they are given to represent. In the most general terms this stems from an extrapolation from practices which

have to be adaptable, quick and often furtive, to an ideal of a political subjectivity that is innately fleet-footed and elusive, unable to be pinned down by authoritarian regimes or academic discourse. This in turn rests on a reduction of complex political realities to a game of cat and mouse, where the lumbering yet lethal force of the state is pitted against the wiliness not just of dissenters, but of dissent. Much is made of agonism (Mouffe, 2000), which is seen here not in the sense of incessant contestation of the way different and unequal groups vie for power and authority, but again as something creative: 'newer forms of social media have complicated the agonistics of political life in the articulation and staging of new contentious performances in the public sphere' (Rahimi, 2011b: 161). Where agonism could otherwise be defended as a commitment to struggle as well as dogged reflexivity, here it is cast as something more limiting in its conventional form, ripe to be transformed by the introduction of the contentious. While it is easy to delight in the sheer cheek as well as bravery of many actions of dissent and protest in the Middle East, to celebrate contentiousness itself as something politically productive, and apparently productive in a good, which is to say empowering or democratizing sense, is to subscribe to the reification of transgression as a pure act, much as critics of Foucault's earlier work allege (see for instance McNay, 2000), denuded of the reality of the unvivified, relentless slog that comprises the work of protest.

Rahimi's thesis is part of a broader trend, by no means invalid, that reinterprets Judith Butler's conception of performativity in a way that is both more voluntarist and more instrumentalist than she allowed for in earlier texts such as *Excitable Speech* (1997). Indeed, it could be argued that Butler herself has in the past decade written more agency into performativity, where previously performance, while not entirely predictable and always with real world effects, was nonetheless an unwilling incitement of discourse. The upshot is that the illocutionary is prioritized over the perlocutionary, where the latter refers to an act performed as a consequence of something said or done, and the former actively enacts new realities *in* being said or done ('I promise' is a classic example of an illocutionary act, one which is made real by its utterance). In order for activist performativity to be illocutionary, it is implied, it simply needs to be resistant, creative or counter-intuitive: once voices or truths that are other than the dominant or official are expressed, they take on their own reality and continue to create effects as they build momentum. But while this is consistent with Butler's argument that performativity can, under certain circumstances, produce radically different subjectivities, it neglects the fact that, due to the overwhelming given-ness of most everyday experience, radical alterity is rarely a viable or even thinkable outcome, and it assumes a generativeness that ignores all the other generative structures enabling and shaping emergent subjectivities. And the basis of this oversight appears to be, at base, normative: these acts of resistance have a special ontological status because they are right.

The idea that radical political imaginaries can emerge out of certain types of practice because those practices are contentious or transgressive, in isolation from the myriad other generators of subjectivity embedded in any phenomenal experience, is a common trope in the literature. It is especially evident in the pervasive characterization of domination – whether it be political or discursive – as extrinsic. Talking about both authoritarian regimes and official cultures of politics (in the media, for example) as external forces acting against authentic expressions of democratic fervour, enables a kind of othering that simultaneously denies the generative power of official discourse – constitutive rather than constraining, to use Foucault's (1978) distinction – and allows that which is unofficial, alter or simply populist to be accorded a special teleological status that is defined by its lack of structuredness. The result is an elision of observations of laudable acts of ingeniousness and determination on the part of dissenters and



activists, and theorizations of the nature of protest itself that necessitate its efficacy – not in the sense of achieving tangible outcomes, but in opening spaces for political alterity whose eventual forms cannot and should not be predicted, but whose scope for positive transformation is irresistible. This is evident in the kinds of metaphors that are used to describe both protest and that which would seek to silence or control it – whether that be outright oppression or conventional thinking. Tagma (2011), for instance, talks of protest movements being ‘tamed’, which makes two significant commitments. First, it suggests that protest is somehow wild in its natural state. And second, it implies that protest *has* as natural state, a kind of protean fecundity that exists in idealized form in isolation from politics as it is usually lived. This form of extra-discursiveness does not sit well with Foucauldian models of power, and it cleaves to a conception of the political defined only by its unconventionality. Deeply pessimistic about procedural or institutionalized politics, its optimism for change is rooted squarely in its refusal to describe what form a newly imagined politics might take.

In a corrective to this abstracted political imaginary, Ismail (2011), in a compelling and often provocative special issue of *Third World Quarterly* devoted to the applicability or otherwise of Norbert Elias’s work in the post-revolutionary Middle East, enlists the concept of civility in order to understand how political subjectivities are constituted in authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies. Ismail insists that intersubjectivity can only be observed, and not interpreted through western notions of civilization or good governance, though this warning against imposing political norms is itself normative in the sense that it rests on assumptions about the organic or viral development of collective consciousness. But what is interesting is her focus on politics as it is lived at the level of the everyday, through nuanced, unacknowledged negotiations of appropriateness in social situations. For Ismail, conventional politics is not seen as the other of lived experience, and she explicitly affirms that the state cannot be understood as an abstraction opposed to society, for the simple reason that subjects’ understanding of the state is not imagined but based on actual interactions with its agents and institutions. However, while this account seeks to demystify the state, it does so in a way which again characterizes it as an extrinsic force that demands particular subjectivities, neoliberal as much as authoritarian. It is not that Ismail oversimplifies the idea of ‘regimes of subjectivities’, based on Butler’s line that one subjects to power in order to become a subject. But to say that subjectivity is the *product* of state practices of governance clearly imagines a relationship of interiority and exteriority between the two, as opposed to one of mutual constitution. The result is that while in theory open to the complexity of subjectification, in practice it becomes instrumental and in places mechanistic.

In particular, Ismail investigates *ishtibah wa tahari*, state suspicion and investigation policies enacted on the streets of Cairo in the form of stop-and-search police practices. Although initially prefaced by a Foucauldian elucidation of power, this research is much less interested in the dispersed and undetectable manifestations of power as its most visible and literal forms, such as ID cards and military uniforms. It is reasonable to assert that the experience of *ishtibah wa tahari* ‘informs subjects’ understandings of and feelings about state power as exercised by its agents’ (Ismail, 2011: 849), but this is quite distinct from the question of political subjectivity. The latter rests on all the contingencies that underpin our experience of the world, most of which are ritualized to the point of insensibility, and the totality of which is complex, conflicted and always to a degree indeterminate. Her functionalist interpretation in evidence here suggests that stop and search procedures exist *primarily* in order to shape subjectivities, where in reality these subjectivities are at most imperfect translations of an official political template, if not through conscious resistance then simply through the vicissitudes of practices

and their structuring effects. The partial and mistranslated determination of subjectivity is something which can be analysed and challenged, but this is not the same as suggesting that it can be opposed, implying as this assertion does that the individual and the state are mutually discrete entities. This allows Ismail effectively to other the state itself, which, as with Rahimi's use of villainous metaphors, becomes a coherent agent, a subject in its own right, that will single out a youth for his posture and demeanour.

As with the wilful projection of democratizing subjectivity it helps to give form to, the subjectification of the state as essentially nefarious can be seen in functionalist terms: by being not just corrupt and sclerotic but actively motivated by evil-doing it allows for a more straightforward articulation of alternatives. But it rests on assumptions which are doubtful. The first is that official agents unproblematically and without slippage embody the state. Second, there is a kind of one-to-one correspondence between the actions of a state executed by its agents, and the determining influence this will have on citizens' sense not only of the state but themselves. Third, and most significantly, she argues that forced subjectification can be resisted by the simple act of refusal. Counter to Foucault's will to power and Butler's model of incitement, Ismail describes the slouching and scruffily dressed youth as refusing to perform a docile subjectivity, whereas in the literature of power in which this research is situated, docility is not something that can be chosen or rejected: it would instead be an unremarkable part of existing in society, the most natural thing in the world. As it is, acting uncivilly is elevated here to the status of a resistant political act, and though Ismail is at pains to point out that this in itself does not constitute coherent resistance, as an expression of disgust at the state it is certainly thought to open the way for an emergent culture of dissidence. This is in line with historical arguments that the only way to effect real political change is to break the social contract, in that challenging the very nature of social relations compels a society subsequently to reassess the kind of political culture it wants in place to nurture and protect those relations. And yet it is also politically infantilizing, suggesting that when faced with an uncivil state it is not only rational but right to act uncivilly. There is certainly a case for upsetting the rules of appropriateness that govern social interactions. Ismail convincingly argues against the faintly condescending line seen in the literature that the richness of social capital in the Middle East forms a natural basis for collective action; it remains unproven, however, that the uncivil can form the basis of radically alternative political imaginaries distinct from those associated with conventional political engagement.

### **Talking about a revolution**

Ismail is characteristic of those in the literature who argue that nascent Middle Eastern subjectivities need to be protected not only from the machinery of oppressive regimes but also the West's over-determining ways. Newsom et al. (2011), for instance, insist that western researchers start from the assumption that all Arabs are oppressed, but are either unaware of or complicit in their subjugation. This suggests a certain lack of imagination about how academics relate to the subjects of their research: while it is simple enough to speak of authors othering those whom they research, it is more productive to look at the relation between researchers and their work, in the same way that we can investigate the sometimes distanced, sometimes intimate, sometimes conflicted relation that, say, medical doctors have to their patients, but in terms of the routines and regulations by which they become present to the practitioner as work. Likewise, when Newsom et al. go on to assert that 'the West receives rhetoric and reframes it to suit itself'

(2011: 1308), this reveals a lack of awareness of the complicated and conflicted world of news media work, work which on the everyday level comes to be experienced as complex yet naturalized by way of training and routinization, precarity and competition. Characterizing 'western media' as a discrete subject demonstrates a projection of hardwired preconception similar to the lack of differentiation and open-mindedness to the counterfactual diagnosed in Orientalist narratives. It also suggests an insupportable degree of instrumentalism, as though the media can collectively 'do something' to what is assumed originally to have been an authentic, local message.

For Newsom et al. as for others, the only ethical alternative to misguided assumptions about the Arab world is for western academics to desist from imposing interpretive or normative frameworks on it. While elsewhere (Soguk, 2011) consideration is given to the changing forms that Orientalism has taken over time, frequently corporate media are cast as monolithic and *therefore* antagonistic towards new voices emerging in the Middle East. Volpi (2011) starts from a premise similar to Newsom et al., offering a critique of the assumption that Islamic communities are incapable of political reform because of the illegitimacy of states' claim to monopolies on violence, and regional citizens' intransigent preoccupation with ethnicity, religion and tribalism. While this is entirely valid, Volpi then goes on to argue that not only are academics who continue to hold such reductive beliefs discredited, but so too are the political concepts they deploy. The upshot is that we should content ourselves with observing rather than analysing Arab societies, and dispense with conventional western ideals: if only we would move on from Montesquieu and Tocqueville we would stop obsessing over deviations from our own abstract models of civil society and look instead at *how* civil society is constituted and negotiated, without prejudice. (It is worth noting that this article is part of the same special issue of *Third World Quarterly* mentioned above.) Without wanting to reduce Volpi's contribution to soundbites, he argues that while we, meaning westerners, possess a clearly developed notion of civility drawing on the history of political thought and the practice of academic theorizing, in the Middle East civility is more about communication and display in everyday rituals, for example rhetorical devices for expressing respect. This seems an appropriately phenomenological response to a genuine dilemma of objectification and subjectification in academic work: putting aside the abstractions of western metaphysics and focussing instead on what Volpi calls the 'everyday subjective'.

But there is a subtle yet important elision here. Volpi is right to warn against the imposition of ontological or normative frameworks on cultures and societies that may have distinct and potentially incompatible organizing principles. However, it does not follow that by refusing to explain the constitution and development of Arab civil society in western terms that an alternative local and more authentic political subjectivity will become apparent. This relates to a common fallacy in the literature: that each society has distinct and intrinsic political ideals and ideal mechanisms for achieving them which will spontaneously come to fruition once the constraints of authoritarian government *and* western over-determination are eliminated. It makes sense to be open to alternative ways of thinking about and doing politics, including radical ones, but that doesn't mean that political, or discursive, vacuums are naturally generative of such alternatives. While not put so bluntly, the implication is that western scholars and commentators should refrain from offering critical perspectives on developments in the Arab world because they should not presume to understand local political subjectivities. But although it's reasonable to resist the wholesale importing of western conceptions of democracy – whether they be liberal, neoliberal, social democrat or socialist – this does not amount to a justification for withholding all academically-informed perspectives. The same is true of

scholarly perspectives on gender, religion or media practices, in that the presumption of discursive over-determination is as tenuous as that of a neat transposition of innocent theory to newly discovered context. What becomes known is neither authentically local nor hegemonically imposed. The objectifications produced by applying various concepts and models to recent events in the Middle East can be compared and criticized; objectification itself is not the issue. In particular, the everyday contexts in which politics in all its forms are lived offer opportunities for critical transparency in setting out what can be inferred from a tweet or a demonstration, or a tweet from a demonstration. The pre-revolutionary work of Tarik Sabry (2010) is instructive in this regard, drawing on Heideggerian phenomenology to explore how modernity is experienced in all manner of quotidian encounters. In political terms it means asking how individuals come to experience an encounter such as a demonstration as immediately present, thrown not just into a physical environment but a historical one full of embodied experience, felt relations to others co-present and distant, learned rules of interaction and negotiation and orientation towards possible futures. After Heidegger, authentic being in the world consists precisely in the conceivability of possibilities present in the situation one finds oneself in; future political subjectivities are not endangered by their being articulated. For Foucault, famously, subjectification entailed subjection, and it is this mantra that underpins scholarly approaches to protest cultures: avoid objectification at all costs. But this forgets that subjects only come to exist through objectification, not despite of it. Objectification can take better or worse forms, but the fact of objectification is morally neutral.

## Conclusion

This article doesn't offer a definitive framework through which we should view recent events in the Arab world. But it has sought to set out some of the limitations of our often well-meaning efforts so far. The refusal of docility valorised in Ismail's work suggests a commitment to stubbornness or belligerence – a precious commodity in the face of seemingly intractable inequality and injustice, though as expressed through the actions of individuals here it is perhaps less suited to the compromise and sublimation of individuality that characterize collectivist politics. For Khondker the state is personified first as *sneaky*, and then as an agent which does bad things inadvertently. A conception of the state as something to be outwitted is certainly evocative, and potentially an effective means of mobilizing opposition to it, but it also risks conflating acts of guilefulness with the idea that protest and dissent are *inherently* guileful. This in turn can lead to self-satisfaction or gleefulness in performing and observing acts that appear clever or wily, acts which perhaps invite a more emotional response, at best one of camaraderie and at least one of cheerleading, but which may not be more effective than resistance played out in less captivating ways. It is this centrality of captivation in the discourse of political imaginaries that begs the question: captivating for whom? It is amply evident in Khamis et al's (2012) work on creative resistance, where when confronted with tales of audacity and evocative expression – from hacking Google maps to dyeing a fountain's water red – it is difficult not to feel compassionately invested in the protester's plight. It is natural enough to feel gleeful at the breaking of political and social taboos, or at the mocking of authority figures through satire. But it is important to understand what is being recognized in such moments, and on what grounds: delight in the small victories of an underdog that chime with genuinely-felt humanitarian compassion and commitment to democracy, a readiness to recognize political transformation met all too easily through symbolic forms familiar to us from popular culture,

half-remembered history and our own experience of watching the world, made more real if not more engaged through years of practice.

Emotional investment in recent popular uprisings in the Arab world is understandable, as is support for any protest movement fighting for democratic reform and an end to tyranny – often at great cost in human terms. However, the use of emotive language in academic discourse, from couching analyses in terms of aspiration, frustration, tragedy and hope, and with writers such as Axford (2011: 682) explicitly referring to events as ‘almost unbearably poignant’, should make us aware of the affective work being done by the Arab spring for those investigating it. Specifically, it allows for engagement with a projection of political change that is about individuality and creativity, rather than the institutional and procedural machinations through which politics conventionally proceeds. This is a qualitatively distinct, unironic kind of engagement with what is perceived as authentic political expression by noble agents, but the relation between emotion and authenticity is a fraught one. It is arguable (see Papacharissi and Oliveria, 2012) that where a response to Tahrir Square is primarily emotional it is likely a response learned from exposure to other climactic political events in recent history: Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, the established narratives of which doubtless draw on earlier precedents. But if western projections of idealized political subjectivity are naïve, so too are nativist perspectives that assume the spontaneous emergence of freer, more creative subjectivities once the constraints of authoritarian regimes, as well as those of western discourse, have been removed. Each is based on the possibilities opened up by perceived structurelessness, of unpredictable and irresistible new political forms emerging from a void and going viral. Each is an abnegation of understanding what it means to be continually thrown into a world full of pasts and futures demanding critical engagement and cool assessment of what is at stake. Historical and comparative analysis can be useful in this regard, as well as an awareness of how politics is experienced at the level of the everyday – as social as well as serious, laborious as well as creative, banal as well as imaginary.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theengineerroom.org/projects/tds/>

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to these biological metaphors, ecological descriptors are often more explicit: see for instance Seegerberg & Bennett (2010); Rinke & Röder (2011).

<sup>3</sup> There are many and various approaches to phenomenological thinking; this article refers primarily to the Heideggerian framework set out in *Being and Time* (1926).

<sup>4</sup> In the US context, Papacharissi (2010) writes that the public-private distinction remains meaningful to most people, and they have become more adept and moving between these two spheres in order to sustain their political engagement rather than to withdraw from it.