

TOO EARLY TO TELL: WHEN IS A REVOLUTION A REVOLUTION?

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The title of my paper, “Too Early to Tell: When is a Revolution a Revolution?” comes from an apocryphal story in which the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai responded to the question, “What do you think the impact of the French Revolution has been?” by saying, “It is still too early to tell.” Of course, this was in 1960. There is a certain sublime verisimilitude to this statement. History may be viewed as the momentary punctuation of an event that can result in tectonic shifts in class configurations, discourses, and conceptions of political possibilities that are felt centuries later.

In this essay, I hope to cast a brief glance at the uprisings of the Arab Spring and, by comparing them to the revolutions of the twentieth century, particularly the Iranian revolution, examine some of their resulting transformations and address how ephemeral or lasting these transformations may be, particularly for Tunisia and Egypt. This comparison begins by looking first at the particular ways in which a revolution is made, then examines what changes a revolutionary transformation entails, and finally offers some reflections on meaningful ways of looking at revolutions and revolutionary movements.

So, how are revolutions “made”? One of the foremost theoreticians and practitioners of revolutionary arts in the twentieth century was Lenin. He identified three potential prerequisites for the emergence of a revolution: mass insurrection; a well-mobilized class (rather than a party or conspiracy) acting as the leaders of the movement; and divisions and “vacillations” in the ranks of the enemy.

In both Tunisia and Egypt, the uprisings’ most notable characteristic was its broad-based nature. As in Iran of 1978 and 1979, the movements crossed class boundaries as well as religious and urban/rural divides. In all three cases, clearly organized working class movements were crucial to the formation of those face-to-face, hard fought, and longstanding relationships that often underline mass mobilization and that make or break revolutionary movements. In Tunisia and Egypt, union mobilization—which began a long time before the uprisings—was crucial, as was student activism. Here I am not referring to generalized youth, but students specifically. In Iran, as in Egypt, the mosques were a means of mobilization and dissemination of revolutionary directives and speeches. However, the mosques in Egypt were a starting point for demonstrations, rather than the organizational nodes they had been in Iran.

The extent to which internal divisions within regimes cause their vulnerability to uprisings depends greatly upon the complexion of power. This is where I differ in my analysis from Lenin. Such divisions were not present in a meaningful way in the monarchical regime of Iran in 1978 or 1979. Nevertheless, the revolution proceeded until it produced a horizontal split in the military that allowed revolutionary forces to take over military bases and arsenals throughout the cities. What was notable in Iran was not fissures in the ruling class, but precisely what Lenin considers a necessary precondition: vacillation. The Shah's regime could not decide between a wholly violent suppression of the revolt and a gradual opening of political space. In fact, its alternation between coercion and a safety-valve style of appeasement opened up a space of mobilization where fear dissipated and the sense of possibility grew.

Vertical fissures, on the other hand, have occurred almost daily in the case of Libya. For example, officials began defecting from the regime as soon as the uprisings started. Yet, because of the concentration of power and political institutions in the hands of the Qaddafi family, these vacillations and divisions did not quickly alter the stability of the regime or its use of extraordinary violence in countering the armed insurrection against it. On the other hand, in both Tunisia and Egypt such divisions and vacillations were absolutely crucial to the outcome of the uprisings. In Tunisia, the military took the side of the protestors. In Egypt, the military—which is a much more powerful force with a much larger corpus of economic and political interest than in Tunisia—protected its flanks by forcing Mubarak out of power. (Post-revolution, however, it has left the structures of authority untouched, which does not bode well for the post-revolutionary regime.) These divisions will also determine what is to come in Yemen, but in petrol monarchies they may not matter, as the families monopolize the levers of power and the institutions of the state, decreasing the likelihood of divisions in general.

What Lenin does not mention is the role of outside intervention in precipitating revolution. However, given the Russian Revolution's timing during the First and Second World Wars, he focuses on the effects of international war on revolutionary mobilization. And, in a very interesting text called "War and Revolution," he reflects on the French Revolution. Lenin writes,

When the French revolutionary townspeople and revolutionary peasants overthrew the monarchy at the close of the eighteenth century by revolutionary means, that policy of the revolutionary class was bound to shake all the rest of autocratic, czarist, imperial, and semi-feudal Europe to its foundations. And the inevitable continuation of this policy of the victorious revolutionary class in France was the wars in which all the monarchist nations of Europe, forming their famous coalition, lined up against revolutionary France in counter-revolutionary war.¹

¹ V.I. Lenin, "War and Revolution," 1917, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/14.htm> (accessed 7 September 2011).

Lenin viewed this counter-revolutionary war as not necessarily a detrimental occasion, but one in which a new form of warfare is invented, where *levy en masse* underwrites the legitimacy of the new state, and where Napoleon invents entire new strategies of warfare which, in fact, are still reflected in the ways European powers fight.

Further along in the twentieth century, perhaps no moment is as striking as the war waged between Iran and Iraq. Taking place only a year after the revolution had overthrown the Shah, it had an immediate effect that was very much in line with Lenin's analysis. Power was consolidated in the hands of Iran's regime rather than the reverse, which is what Saddam Hussein and his Western allies had hoped. In the case of the Arab Spring, we have not seen outright war, but rather brutal suppression using foreign troops. This was the case in Bahrain, where Saudi Arabia deployed some 4,000 troops under the Peninsula Shield to an island whose population only numbers one million. Foreign interventions in most of the rest of the ongoing Arab revolutions have been less coercive and more willing to be hegemonic in the Gramscian sense. This means that the attempt from the outside to co-opt revolutionary movements has been far more pronounced than outright warfare. For example, U.S. and European powers have already attempted to affect the outcome of Tunisian elections via their "democracy promotion" programs, which entail injections of millions of dollars and euros to "assist" democratic forces into power.²

In Egypt, the form of co-optation has been more directly economic. The moderate elite who are in power right now are in mediations to allow for the IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. government to "invest" in the country, or to ensure that the kinds of economic transformations that could take place fall within the narrow remit of a new liberal capitalism that we have come to recognize as Washington consensus.

In Yemen such interventions are more difficult to trace. There are certainly covert movements we are not privy to that likely take the shape of military-to-military cooperation between the United States, its allies, and the Yemeni army. But what is striking in the case of Yemen, Bahrain, and, I also argue, Syria and Libya, is the extent to which Saudi Arabia—as the most significant U.S. client in the region, along with Israel—has its own desperate agenda of survival, and has attempted to prevent the kind of transformation that it was helpless to forestall in Tunisia and Egypt. In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, Saudi Arabia has been very quick to cultivate and support its own acceptable oppositional candidates. These are figures from within the establishment with varying volumes of blood on their hands who would not rock the proverbial security boat in the region. It is important to remember that Saudi Arabia has long struggled to impose its own profoundly conservative—in all meanings of that word—vision of what social, socioeconomic, and political relations should be in the region, especially upon those countries unfortunate enough to be in its immediate periphery. This imposition involves not only

² Please note that this lecture was given before the NATO intervention in Libya.

the channeling of vast sums of money unaccounted for and opaquely transmitted to political subcontractors in the region but also, as we have seen especially with Bahrain and Libya, ensuring that its international patron—the United States—follows the contours of its own policy.

Having spoken about the larger forces that affect revolutions, I now focus on what sorts of transformations revolutionary movements are thought to bring. People influenced by Marxian ideas—who have been prominent in our thinking about revolutions in the twentieth century—usually see large-scale and lasting sociological transformations as those that matter. C.L.R. James, the great Caribbean historian who was an unorthodox Marxian, wrote:

In a revolution, when the ceaseless, slow accumulation of centuries burst into volcanic eruptions, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the subsoil from which they come.³

The subsoil James mentions is the interrelation between social classes. One has to recognize, as James does, the power struggles resulting from the end of colonialism. In a sense, the structural conditions that led to the revolts in the countries of the Middle East fit the classical models. One of these structural features is the persistent widening of socioeconomic fissures between a fast-rising capitalist class that seems intent on flaunting its newly acquired wealth, and a group that Asef Bayat, a sociologist, has called “the poor middle classes.”⁴ These classes are educated, but they are barred from paths of affluence and prosperity because of a lack of jobs for skilled and educated workers. Such structural transformations tend to occur over generations, sometimes centuries. With hindsight, we can see that the Russian and Chinese revolutions were crucial in eventually bringing about a capitalist class who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the robber barons of the nineteenth century United States. These revolutions also brought about lasting transformations in such things as gender relations and political regimes.

In the Middle East, the Iranian revolution’s structural effects are still difficult to discern some 30 years later. We can at least say that the revolution has accelerated the rise of a bourgeois class and has brought about the slow transformation of the old American capitalists of the bazaar into a hybrid class engaged in industrial production. The revolution’s effect on gender relations in Iran is, of course, mixed at best. While women of lower and middle classes have been incorporated into the economy due to urban capitalist formations that the revolution hastened, the regime has also been retrograde in its rolling back

³ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint l’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), xix.

⁴ Asef Bayat, “A New Arab Street in Post-Islamist Times,” 26 January 2011, available at: http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/26/a_new_arab_street (accessed 7 September 2011).

of legal and political protections for women. This issue has brought about an unintended consequence: the rise of an extraordinarily vibrant women's movement that features innovative and creative coalition building across ideological divides.

This is also something that we see in the Arab world. Gender relations are very visible right now, and we are seeing transformations. What is striking is the role that women have played in all of the revolutions, particularly in Yemen, where the figure most clearly associated with organizing demonstrations is a woman rather than a man. It will likely take another generation for us to see whether these revolutionary movements have shifted class configurations.

The rise of a new political elite is another of the earliest and most visible revolutionary transformations. It is again striking to see the extent to which social, economic, and political elites are attempting to domesticate the Arab revolutionary movements by ensuring, or at least attempting to ensure, that the new guardians of the state be "moderate" economically and politically—in relation to both neighborhood and global hegemony. We saw this in the early attempts to ensure that Ghannouchi remained in power as Prime Minister of Tunisia as well as the overwhelming presence of the generals and functionaries of the former regimes in the ranks of the "opposition" in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. It is still too early to tell what sorts of changes we will see, but we will not have to wait for generations; elections and regime changes will give us some sort of an indication.

Beyond structural changes, I diverge from C.L.R James and his assessment of what he calls the "meteoric flights and flashes above," or the ephemeral nature of such revolts. What have these revolutions wrought in terms of changes in the affective or the emotional terrain? Authoritarian regimes, especially those with well-developed police states, are particularly good at imposing a sense of powerlessness and an atmosphere of paralyzing fear. In Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime had a secret policeman for every 40 people. In Egypt, where the police force, by some reckonings, numbered 1.8 million, police stations functioned with impunity as places where violence was exercised on the bodies of anyone showing any defiance whatsoever. In the Iran of my childhood, the most famous saying was, "The wall has mice and the mice have ears," which exhorted us—the children, the adults, everyone—to silence. When the Shah came to visit my primary school, when I was five or six years old, my father, a committed Marxist, sat me down and said, "You know, I want you to recognize that they are going to say he is a god, but he is not a god. He is just a man." My mother became upset and said to my father, "Don't say that! What if she repeats that? They will come and arrest you." The atmosphere of fear was so incredibly powerful that even parents felt that they could not really speak to their children about what was what.

What we have heard again and again from the people of Sfax and Tunis, of Cairo and Alexandria and Suez, of Damascus and Daraa, of Bahrain and Aden and Sana'a, of Sohar and Muscat, is that their fear has broken. In places where the revolutionary movement has succeeded in bringing about changes in the political elite, we have what Elizabeth Wood has called, in her beautifully evocative phrase, "the pleasure of agency." This, the sense that it is Spring—that revolutionary possibility can travel across borders, can take refuge

in people's hearts and homes and emotions and ideas, in city streets, plazas, cafes, and mosques, where people gather before marching; that a sense of solidarity and affection can bind people in an imagined community of revolt; that all is possible—is at once ephemeral and difficult to grasp, but also profoundly transformative over generations. Many of the youth who mobilized in Iran in 2009, who were not even born during the revolution, know something about this fear having been broken. As Aimé Césaire, one of the great Caribbean poets, wrote, “The work of man is only just beginning, and it remains to conquer all the violence entrenched in the recesses of our passion. And there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.” That rendezvous of victory is still to come. ❖