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Forum

The 'Arab Spring' and the city

Hopes, contradictions and spatiality

Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Barbara Lipietz

'Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa, das Gespenst des Kommunismus' ('A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism'): thus Marx and Engels captured the zeitgeist at the turn of the 20th century, beckoning in the process revolutionary changes and brighter tomorrows for Europe's working class. Today, it is as if those very words were being revived—adapted by numerous observers to fit the current socio-political processes in the Arab world. This time around, it's the Arab elite being haunted and the spectre is that of democracy. However, is such a depiction remotely accurate?

The dawn of 'democracy'?

The 'Arab Spring', the 'Arab Revolution'¹ or the 'Arab awakening', as it has variously been called, refers to the popular uprisings that arose in December 2010 in Tunisia and have spread like wildfire in the region ever since, stretching across the Maghreb and the Middle East. The Arab world, long judged immune to 'democratic' ideals, is now finally joining the fold. And yet, the rebellious impulse unearthed by the 'Arab Spring' raises fundamental questions. First of all, what do we mean by 'democracy'? Are we exclusively referring to Western 'democracies'—those which the Greco-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis critically defines as 'liberal oligarchies'?² Or does the Turkish 'model' fit the bill? In fact, can the goals of such varied groups of protesters in diverse countries be reduced to a single formula? While most or at least many observers dream of the introduction of Western-style representative 'democracy' in countries like Egypt and

Tunisia,³ a few others are dreaming more radical dreams (grassroots democracy, popular power, etc.), among them, Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi, in their contribution to this *Forum* series devoted to the 'Arab Spring'. And we should not forget those whose expectations of radical change are steeped in religion and/or enmeshed in some localised reworking of formal politics in the context of an emerging new order.

Whose dreams are more likely to become reality? Are any of them realistic? As we write, the processes of change in the Maghreb/Mashrek are continually evolving, the future is still pregnant with possibilities—even as old accommodations are rearing their heads in places. Certainly, the probability of one or another—or a hybrid—of these dreams becoming reality will depend on internal factors, internal balances of forces that vary across countries. Syria is not Yemen, Yemen is not Morocco, and Morocco is not Egypt. Nasser's and May's are two voices commenting in unison on these varied processes at work, from

their particular, neighbourly vantage point. Many other voices are yet to come in the *Forum*: this is the first of a two-part series of discussions on the nebulous of the 'Arab Spring', voices from different perspectives and different countries.

Yet as observers—from the West as well as from the Maghreb and Middle East—we should perhaps be wary of an (inevitable?) fault: are we, in fact, projecting our own fascinations, our own wishes, rather than seriously trying to understand the complex situations as they 'are'? The fascination regarding the role of cyberspace and technology in the framework of the 'Arab Spring' is a case in point. Similarly, our 'surprise' at the presence of women occupying the squares may be more revealing of our truncated understanding of women and public life in the Arab world, than of specific novel developments in gender relations and the affirmation of women's citizenship.

In an interview to the *Folha de São Paulo* (15 May 2011), Slavoj Žižek argues that 'what is happening in Egypt is not simple. It is not merely a matter of "we want liberal democracy". People in Egypt are fighting for something different, something new.' Is that indeed the case? And how can we define this *newness*? Can it, in fact, be 'defined' from a single perspective? In their thought-provoking text, Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi allude to an event that took place almost 30 years ago, when French philosopher Félix Guattari travelled Brazil. Talking to activists of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party), Guattari urged his audience 'to understand Iran in the early 1980s—before the clerical take-over—as the collective production of new subjectivity [...] not just a sum of new individual subjectivities but a confrontation and rupture with global or macro production of subjectivities'. How would Guattari have regarded events had he been in Teheran, or had he been ... a woman?⁴ Surely, Guattari (as Foucault before him) was highlighting something very important, and this importance goes to some extent 'beyond'

particular lines or subjectivities. And yet, as an experience of the ordinary women and men, revolution/revolt is constituted by people who act together, but who, at the same time, are different—in part because they are *oppressed differently*. Marjane Satrapi, in her wonderful autobiographical graphic novel and animation film *Persepolis*, experienced that process in a different way. Not from the perspective of someone who observes an emerging new subjectivity from outside and at a very general level, but from the point of view of somebody (an insider *and* a woman) who sees the old still embodied and curiously potentialised in the new—and suffers its consequences. That is the very concrete perspective of at least one set of actors, who in the course of events in Iran, became dis-empowered rather than empowered.

One element we nonetheless can *all* ascertain is that we will now have to count with the long-discarded weight of the Arab street. One can no longer say or think that the Arab peoples suffer from a chronic 'apathy', or that they are unwilling to welcome and unable to enjoy 'freedom'. As Nasser and May put it, '[t]his is the most enduring aspect of the Arab revolts: the sense that people, ordinary people—through this novel relationship between politics and experience—were remaking themselves, shedding off years of conditioning and inertia to emerge as political subjects'. As such, the 'Arab Spring' is already a very relevant and remarkable socio-political phenomenon—comparable (at least for the peoples of those countries) to '9/11'.⁵ The 'Arab Spring' shows (as Mexican Zapatistas, Argentine *piqueteros*, South African Abahlali baseMjondolo, Brazilian *sem-terra* and *sem-teto*, etc. have already shown for many years) that important, emancipative social movements and creative popular protests are by no means a privilege of the 'Global North'—quite to the contrary. Raúl Zibechi, a Uruguayan journalist and thinker, has characterised the *piquetero* uprising in Argentina as more than 'just' a social



Figure 1 'Che [Guevara]' in Beirut. (Photo: Ruanne Abourahme, 2010).

movement, but as a 'society in movement', a '*sociedad en movimiento*' (2003). Of course, every society is, in a sense, perennially 'in movement'—even when they seem (at first glance) petrified, ossified. However, in some cases, such as in Argentina at the beginning of the last decade or in the Maghreb and Middle East today, the phrase 'society in movement' sounds particularly appropriate.

Urban reverberations

The 'Arab Spring' has, so far, primarily been an *urban* phenomenon, and its epicentres have been cities and metropolises. Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act of self-immolation, which sparked the 'Arab Spring' last December, took place in the small Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid (nearly 40,000 inhabitants in 2004). Yet, the main places and symbols have been big and complex cities such as Cairo, Tunis, Alexandria, Suez and Ismailia. Prophecies of 'the end of territory' (Badie, 1995) or the absolute 'annihilation of space

by time' (Marx, 1973, p. 538)⁶ have clearly failed to cope entirely with reality, even as technological progress and globalisation have altered the space (and time) in which we live.

Strikingly, and similarly to movements such as the *piqueteros* and *asambleas barriales* in Argentina, the 'Arab Spring' has been characterised by a new vitality, a new or renewed meaning, of public spaces, from the streets of Tunis to the Tahrir Square in Cairo. Protests and demonstrations in public spaces in Tunisia and Egypt, reported through social network sites and the visual media, helped ignite protests in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Algeria.⁷ The use of new communication technologies such as social networks and Twitter (more than 15 years after Zapatistas pioneered the use of the Internet as an organisation tool) has *not* rendered face-to-face contact, go-ins, sit-ins and physical presence in general, superfluous.

Space – spatial differentiation, sense of place, territoriality, distance – then, *matters*.

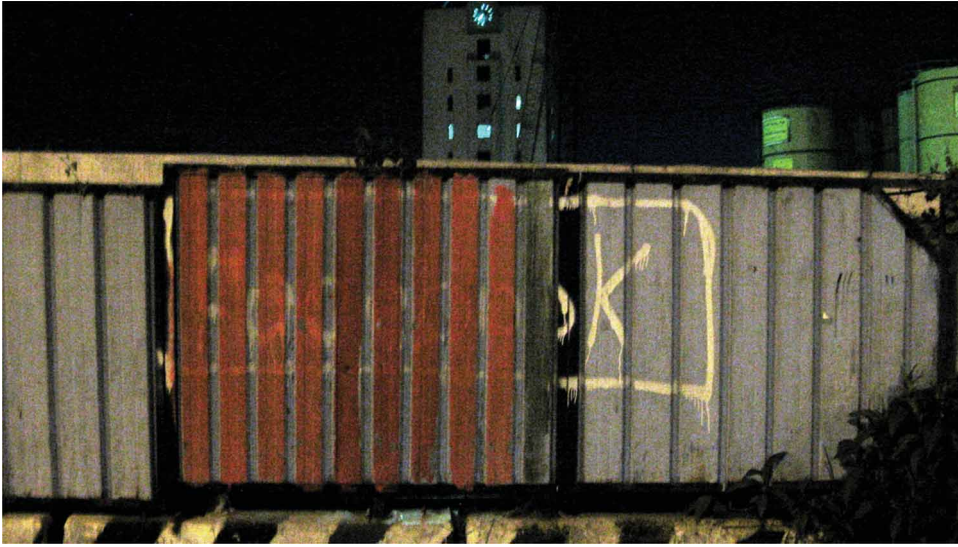


Figure 2 The word 'Facebook' painted over—just outside the Egyptian Museum. (Photo: Maryum Saifee, May 2011).

And it matters at several scales and for different reasons: from its role in 'consciousness-raising' (the felt injustice of residential segregation and socio-spatial inequalities, for instance) to the spatial practices (re)discovered and developed by protesters. 'Urban geographies' have, in the moment of the Arab Spring, (re-)emerged, and they are still emerging. Public spaces in a weak sense turned into public spaces in a strong sense, as they turn politically *vital*; public spaces reinvented as spaces of socio-political contestation, reinvigorating past iterations of protest (though the West barely took notice of them).⁸

Arab futures, *our* futures?

The question on everyone's lips is of course: what next? Where will this lead? Will it, to paraphrase Prufrock's throbbing and anguished trepidation in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 'will it have been worth it, after all?' Will the contradictions ensnarl the transformatory promise? It is impossible to predict anything with confidence when the target is so continually

shifting. At the time of writing (mid-August 2011), Gaddafi's regime is collapsing, but the dictator refuses to give up state power and his troops continue to brutalise and kill its own people; Egyptian protesters appear frustrated with the meagre results of their January–February uprising and are trying to push the transition government towards reforms, while the military in an uneasy alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood are seeking to protect the status quo; repression has increased in Syria and remains shockingly brutal; the situation in Yemen is as yet unclear.

In these times of extreme contradictions between glistening possibilities and enduring stasis, this two-part discussion on the Arab Spring has modest—but we believe crucial—ambitions. On the one hand, it is to recognise and affirm the enduring legacy of these uprisings (and the role of cities in general and public spaces in particular, as their epicentres and symbolic content)—even and beyond inevitable doubts about the direction of democratic transitions or indeed consolidations. Of course, Perry Anderson is right when he highlights in the *New Left Review* the tenuous socio-political



Figure 3 'Glory to the Revolution' (with the names of the two Egyptian martyrs Mustafa El-Sawi [left] and Ahmad Basyouni [right]). (Photo: Maryum Saifee, May 2011).

and organisational basis of transformation in the Arab world:

'To date, between the deeper social springs and the political aims of the Arab revolt there has been an all but complete disjuncture. In part, this has reflected the composition of its main contingents so far. In the big cities—Manama is the exception—it has not, on the whole, been the poor who have poured into the streets in force. Workers have still to mount any sustained general strike. Peasants have scarcely figured. That has been an effect of decades of police repression, stamping out collective organization of any kind among the dispossessed. This will take time to re-emerge. But the disjuncture is also an effect of the ideological limbo in which society has been left by the same decades, with the discrediting of Arab nationalism and socialism, and the neutering of radical confessionism, leaving only a washed-out Islam as a *passepourtout*. In these conditions, created by dictatorship, the vocabulary of revolt could not but concentrate on dictatorship—and its downfall—in a political discourse, and no more.'

Moreover and as Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi remind us, the upshot is far from certain, the spectres of containment

and co-option are jostling for the finishing line while hopes of progressive outcomes to the transitions are being let down by moribund political forces on the left. Much needs to be done still to transform authoritarian practices and subservient ways of being. However, if 'the sublime spectacle of pure popular power sweeping away tyranny, could only ever be ephemeral and temporary', as Nasser and May say, let us at least embrace the sublime, let us acknowledge, admire and *enjoy* it! The face of the Maghreb and Mashrek is, after all, unlikely to be (exactly) the same again. Moreover, it will have been the effect of ordinary women and men's incredible courage in the face of enduring hardship and often brutal repression.

Our second ambition is to question and probe the 'Arab Spring' and its potential ramifications with a sympathetic, solidaristic and curious eye. This is no trivial matter. As Seyla Benhabib has remarked, the fears and prejudices of many observers in the West have been almost as visible as expressions of hope and solidarity:

'We know that the spring of revolutions is followed by the passions of summer and the



Figure 4 '27 May' (day of the 'second revolution' in Cairo). Near Tahrir Square, Cairo. (Photo: Maryum Saifee, May 2011).

chilling discord of fall. At least since Hegel's analysis of the follies of the French Revolution in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it has become commonplace to think that the Revolution will devour its own children. Such warnings were expressed not only by Hillary Clinton in the first days of the Egyptian uprising, but many commentators who have hid their distrust in the capacity of the Arab peoples to exercise democracy, are now rejoicing that the first signs of contention between religious and secular groups are breaking out in Egypt and Tunisia. The journalists and intellectuals of the European right, who have spilt a lot of ink on whether or not "Islamophobia" is racist, are now attempting to cover their own tracks, while the "pseudo-friends" of Israel among European conservatives are warning of doomsday scenarios of imminent attacks on Israel by Hizbollah in the North and Egypt cum Hamas on the South.' (2011)

The editor in chief of the ultraliberal⁹ monthly journal *Reason*, Matt Welch, has perhaps put the ambivalence most starkly, stating that the Arab Spring is 'really not about us'; Americans should rejoice the fact that the USA is no longer 'the protagonist in all the world's dramas' (2011).

One important objective of this *Forum* then, bringing together voices in the spirit of *critical pluralism*, is to bring a corrective to such distantiating thinking. We hope that this series of papers can contribute to a discussion of the 'Arab Spring' in general—and especially of the role of cities and urban

space in shaping the prospects for citizenship and social change in North Africa and the Middle East. However, we hope to do so with the eager stance of those who wonder what all of this can mean for 'them' and for 'us'—in the 'North' and in the 'South'—who instinctively refuse to say simply that 'it's really not about us'.

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Notes

- 1 The word 'revolution' has been often used in the Arab world itself, but usually in the context of more specific phrases (such as '25 January Revolution' in Egypt) or as part of expressions like 'Revolution of the Youth' and 'White Revolution'.
- 2 See Castoriadis (1999).
- 3 David Kilgour, for instance, wrote that '[e]vents across the Middle East and North Africa appear remarkably similar in causation to what occurred in the 1970s in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and after 1989 across Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union' (2011).
- 4 The information 'before the clerical takeover' is inaccurate. We should not forget that Iran approved a theocratic constitution in December 1979 (ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini then became 'Supreme Leader' of the country); and the removal of Abulhassan Banisadr from the presidency of the country in 1981 could be considered as a further benchmark for the rise of clerical authoritarianism. At the beginning of the 1980s, the patriarchal 'new order' and other conservative aspects of the regime were already clear—at least for an insider.
- 5 In fact, some argued that the scale of the march against public spending cuts in London in March 2011 (at least 250,000 people marched through

central London) did not only reflect the depth of public anger but was also spurred on by the example of the Egyptian people taking to the streets; people in the UK were re-kindled with the idea of the *visible* democratic voice. A similar thought was developed in relation to the protests against Spain's economic crisis in May 2011, when thousands of demonstrators took to the streets and especially to Madrid's central Puerta del Sol square, where the main protests actually began. As some commentators have put it, 'the Arab Spring has arrived in Spain' and 'the Arab Spring blooms in Spain'. And during a march in Tel-Aviv in August, a large sign (in Hebrew and Arabic) read 'Egypt is here' ...

- 6 In full: 'Thus, while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time' (Marx, 1973, p. 538). Of course, the point is not that Marx's analysis is wrong or unrealistic; and, as discussed by David Harvey (see, for instance, Harvey, 1989), the question of 'annihilation of space by time' (or 'space-time compression') in the framework of globalisation is surely of cardinal importance too, no doubt about this (and Harvey, of course, is by no means assuming that space in general has become irrelevant—on the contrary). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the motto 'annihilation of space by time' has been often misunderstood, oversimplified and misused.
- 7 In Iran, mass protests have occurred for a couple of years; actually the 2011 Iranian protests that began on 14 February are nothing more than a series of demonstrations that have their immediate roots not only in the similar Middle East protests, but also in the 2009–10 Iranian election protests.
- 8 For instance, the now internationally famous Tahrir Square has been a traditional site for major demonstrations and protests for many years, including the 1977 Egyptian Bread Riots, as well as the March 2003 protest against the War in Iraq.
- 9 Mistakenly called the 'libertarian' in the USA.

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