SYMPOSIUM

Spatial Dynamics of the Arab Uprisings

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Analyses of the spread of the Arab uprisings have been dominated by three comparative angles. Single-country studies have emerged as the most common framework, often put to use in a second comparative approach of examining variation across cases. For example, studies explore which states have had major uprisings and which have not, which uprisings were peaceful and which were violent, and so on (Amar and Prashad 2013; Haddad, Bsheer, and Abu-Rish 2012; McMurray and Ufheil-Somers 2013; Sowers and Toensing 2013). A third approach explores comparisons with other waves of popular mobilization against authoritarian regimes, for example, in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and so on (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2013; Weyland 2012). These literatures investigate the complex processes of mobilization, revolution, and transition unfolding in parts of the Middle East since the outbreak of the uprisings in late 2010. From the literature on revolutions, for example, we know that a popularly based movement that brings about some change in political leadership does not necessarily lead to a regime change resulting in a fundamental overturning of an economic, political, or social system. From past cases we have learned that at least some old institutions and alliances almost always reemerge, and what form the new institution will take eventually is often unknown for several years—for example, think of the Iranian revolution, let alone the French revolution. As events in postrevolutionary Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen continue to unfold—and it is questionable whether those revolutions are even over—and as the bloody civil war in Syria continues, these insights provide us with useful tools for examining how institutions, processes, and power relations are changing—and how they are not.

These comparative analyses make good sense, and there is certainly a need for detailed case and comparative studies. It is also easy to see how the Arab uprisings might be incorporated into courses that deal with revolutions, political transitions, social movements, and contentious politics. As discussed in the introduction to this symposium, however, the Arab uprisings offer some other exciting avenues for both scholarly research and incorporation into broader thematic courses. The spatial dimensions of the uprisings, for example, can reveal surprising insights while also substantively advancing scholarly debates. In this article, I examine some in-case as well as across-case variations in the Arab uprisings through the lens of political geography—that is, by directing attention to the spatial dynamics of the protests.[1]

DIFFUSIONS

One of the most commonly studied spatial dimensions of protests and revolutions is diffusions, or transport phenomena, broadly understood as the spread of some seemingly new practice across space within a relatively limited time. Much of the literature on diffusion emphasizes the "transfer of an innovation" from one locale to another, usually across neighboring countries or at least within the same general region, and the diffusion can double as regimes learn by watching what works and does not work elsewhere as well as how protesters respond (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2013). Political as well as economic revolutions may diffuse (Lucas 2009; Weyland 2009, 2012), as may electoral strategies (Bunce and Wolchik 2011), democratization (Huntington 1993; Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution 2012), patterns of repression (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2013), and so on. The Arab uprisings present interesting comparative cases for examining different mechanisms of diffusion, such as demonstration effects versus deliberate diffusion, as well as for tracing the spread of particular tactics and strategies, such as self-immolations, chants, naming days, use of social media, and so on. But we might raise some interesting insights if we shift away from comparing sites of protest—that is, between uprisings in different states—to focus on the active role of space within each instance. What factors explain why some mobilizations begin in major urban centers while others begin in smaller towns or rural areas? How and why do protests spread? Why do some tactics and strategies spread while others do not? How do various security agencies respond across time and space? Are state responses similar in different places? The objective is not just to compare across cases, such as Syria versus Tunisia, but also to examine variation within a single country or even a single city or neighborhood. Have the dynamics of mobilization and repression in Yemen been similar around Change Square in Sanaa as they have been in Taiz and Ibb? In Egypt, were the dynamics around Tahrir similar to those in Suez? These are questions scholars can tackle in their research, but these also raise interesting angles for incorporating discussion of the Arab uprisings into a wide range of thematic courses beyond social movements and revolutions.

We can also fruitfully analyze other kinds of diffusion, such as the spread of notions of legal accountability, or how discourses (by regimes as well as their challengers) adopt new tropes, draw references to similar justifications, and so on. This can include a simple slogan that spreads "The People Want the Fall of the Regime!" (Colla 2012) to various references to "occupy," to patterns of resistance focused around the reclaiming of public space, from occupy to the public art of

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the Arab uprisings (Pahwa and Winegar 2012; Lindsey 2012; Morayef 2012). We can consider the political economy of security and surveillance paradigms and how they are connected to foreign aid (Amar 2013), to notions of modernity and cosmopolitanism, to neoliberal economic projects, to the "war on terror," to which states (or nonstate groups) are training which security agencies in which countries, and so on. We can also think about how certain economic paradigms remain unchallenged across cases and why. Free trade zones, for example, seem to be diffusing across the region, creating spaces in which "normal" legal codes are not applicable (Moore 2005; also Ong 2000). What are the precise ways in which economic dimensions of grievances are being shut out of the debates about "transitions" (Amar 2011)? What role are "experts" (like political scientists, but also aid agencies and security specialists) playing in advancing certain models of what is happening and what are the possibilities of what might happen (Mitchell 2002)? These questions can be successfully raised in classroom discussion without a substantive focus on the Middle East per se.

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SPACE

The Arab uprisings have another spatial dimension that has not been systematically explored in the flurry of analyses that have emerged since 2011. Tunisia's protests began in small towns outside of the capital and spread to many other towns before finally reaching Tunis, only three days before the fall of Ben Ali's regime. That is, most of the revolutionary momentum was achieved outside of the capital, so that when protesters mobilized on Bourguiba Boulevard the regime was already in trouble. This is a lesson that Bashar al-Assad learned quickly: in Syria, attempts at protests in Damascus were quashed before they escalated, but the real mobilization that began in outlying towns created the momentum that has taken the country into civil war. The Syrian regime has struggled to prevent the opposition movement from taking Damascus, as the loss of the capital would virtually ensure the end of the regime.

In Cairo, protesters launched the January 25 demonstrations in Tahrir Square because of its symbolism as a former site of revolution as well as its name—Liberation Square. But Tahrir Square is also among the most easily policeable spaces in the city, with its wide streets and easy access. Built on the model of Haussmann's Paris (Abu-Lughod 1971), Tahrir is reachable by wide boulevards that facilitate the movement of troops into the square, as compared to the narrow and winding streets of many other parts of Cairo. The vast size of Tahrir also provided easy access for protesters, but it created other challenges for them as well: a gathering of even a few thousand would make only a minor impact offset by even larger expanse of empty space. Indeed, the gathering on January 25 marked the beginning of the revolution partly because more than 75,000 protesters turned out, creating a spectacle of a massive movement that could not be easily denied or repressed, particularly as Al-Jazeera cameras broadcast the images worldwide. The spatial dynamics of Tahrir thus required that a critical number of protesters turn out to offset the ease with which the security forces control crowds of a few thousand.

Political crises, such as those of the Arab uprisings, emerge within and against topographies of power. Examining political geography entails moving away from great revolutionary narratives and the focus on the life-cycle of movements to instead structure inquiry around, for example, the spatial and material organizations of international and domestic economic institutions and bureaucracies, the identification of constructed spatial boundaries, and regulators of flow and exchange as well as the movement of citizens. Tahrir Square has long been dominated by the physical embodiments of state repressive capacities. The National Democratic Party headquarters towers over the square, literally and figuratively surveilling activity in all directions. The Mugamma, a central administrative building that stands at the south of the square, has become such a symbol of impenetrable and crushing state bureaucracy that it has been featured in several films.[2] The National Museum, and the state-sanctioned narrative of national triumph it tells, is located on the north side of the square. The Arab League headquarters, the US Embassy, several major international hotels (and symbols of international capital), and the Ministry of the Interior are all located nearby. As a topography of power, Tahrir Square embodied the oppressive script of Husni Mubarak's regime and a topographical node of power on constant display and legible to all who traversed the square. The weight of the regime was unmistakable in Tahrir, providing an intimidating environment but also an obvious symbolic location for challenging the regime and reclaiming public space.

Therefore, what is remarkable about the January 25–28 mobilizations, which started as a protest against police brutality and repression on January 25 and had evolved by January 28 into a call for the downfall of the regime, was how the massive and peaceful gathering of protesters quickly restructured the existing topography of power. While many analyses focus on the comparative arcs of the uprisings—whether the mobilization is waxing or waning or whether the regime remains unified or becomes fragmented—shifting our attention to spatial dynamics of protest and policing allows us to examine the revolutionary potential of who is visible (and to whom) and what particular capacities are enabled or foreclosed (for both protesters as well as state security agencies)

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as a result of spatial boundaries (Schwedler and King 2013). By shifting our analytical lens in this way, we highlight the intersection of the physical characteristics of a space and how space is represented though its meaning and social context. The uprisings have attempted, sometimes successfully, a radical reclaiming of public spaces by citizens who are insisting that their countries belong to them rather than to corrupt and repressive regimes. These efforts are reflected in the artwork that has emerged in many public spaces, such as the murals and art exhibits that adorn the vicinity of Tahrir (Lindsey 2012; Morayef 2012) and the graffiti art that appears all over Bahrain.[3] When successful, as in Egypt, narratives and expected scripts are collectively shattered, but what is left or reterritorialized is not necessarily bereft of repressive power. New and old regimes alike seek to (re)gain control over such spaces, as we have been witnessing in Cairo since the resignation of Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

As noted previously, the revolution in Tunisia did not reach the capital until the last three days of the regime. Tunis's Boulevard Bourguiba is a wide thoroughfare in the heart of that city with one end stretching toward the old casbah district and its winding streets and shops owned by individual merchants. The boulevard has a wide pedestrian path stretching down the middle and dividing the traffic, with numerous cafes, stores, benches, and rows of lush trees. It passes in front of the Ministry of the Interior, an institution known popularly as the site of state repression and the headquarters of the secret police. Prior to the revolution, pedestrians passing in front of that ministry were forbidden from even looking at the building; to do so would land one in jail immediately (and perhaps for long periods) (Chomiak 2011). In the days before the regime of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fell on January 14, 2011, protesters packed the streets in front of the building, facing it directly, pumping their fists in unison toward the building as they chanted together in French, "Degage!" meaning that the regime should "Go!" Symbolically, the ministry *was* the regime, and tens of thousands of Tunisians packed that boulevard as the central space in the capital from which they would demand that the people reclaim their own country.

Tunisia is a good example of why our attention to the spatial dimensions of protests should not be limited to the study of major urban centers. The protests that led to Ben Ali's departure began weeks earlier in a small town south of the capital. The protests spread to other towns where economic grievances were acute, so Tunisian police were struggling to put down protests in multiple locales for more than two weeks before protesters mobilized in Tunis (Chomiak and Schwedler 2012). In those smaller cities, demonstrators often gathered in public squares or main intersections. In some smaller towns and across much of the countryside, a single pile of burning tires can virtually shut down traffic into and out of the town center. Policing can seem easier than in major urban centers, but the protesters' deep local knowledge—and their personal connections and network ties within the community as a whole—can create significant obstacles for police when faced with repressing protesters who are personally known to the whole community. Even a few serious instances of repression, let alone deaths of locals, can send most of the population of a single town into the streets. As James Holston argues in his study of Brazil, "Insurgent citizenships may utilize central civic space and even overrun the center," but they are often fundamentally manifestations of peripheries (Holston 2007). As important as the center stage is for a crowd to gain attention, contentious flare-ups frequently occur in the peripheries, whether urban peripheries or in rural areas. Mobilization is also often more challenging when it requires moving many people from diverse neighborhoods into a central locale that is "local" to few, if any, of them. This observation highlights why the open spaces of places like Tahrir Square, while providing a focal point and ready access for protesters, can entail significant obstacles in mobilizing a critical mass to travel to and assemble in the square (Schwedler and King 2013).

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The spatial dimensions of the Arab uprisings often also have entailed a strong class dimension that is common to protests and the policing of protests in general. In affluent neighborhoods, where embassies, many foreigners, and the upper classes reside in grand apartment buildings or stand-alone villas, the police often strive to prevent protesters from reaching planned sites of rallying. Harsh repression would be easily witnessed in these neighborhoods by an elite group that could criticize the regime, access foreign media, or activate their own channels to high government officials.[4] In poorer neighborhoods, however, harsh repression is less visible to the elite and to international audiences. A spatial analysis of protests particularly brings to light enclaves of economic distribution, and by extension, which topographies are being privileged economically and politically. Many planned protests, particularly those in visible locales or wealthier neighborhoods, have higher obstacles to mobilization because organizers need to get people not only onto the streets but also all arriving at the same location at around the same time (Schwedler and Fayyaz 2010).

When these mobilizations happen, they are all the more remarkable and threatening to the regime. Bahrain's mobilization in Pearl Square, a roundabout in the capital of

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Manama, was the site of a major uprising of protesters that began in 2011 and continued into 2012. The space was vast and stretched in all directions, so protesters were able to occupy the grassy park-like lands surrounding the huge white monument at the square's center, and sometimes portions of the surrounding streets. Because access to the square was also unimpeded for the police, their ability to repress was primarily a function of that decision as well as the size of the crowds. The protesters were severely exposed, but while the police repression was rapid after the decision was made, it was also highly visible and required considerable assistance from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (Ryan 2012). International criticism flowed in, including a firm but constrained rebuke by US president Barak Obama during his historic address on the Arab uprisings in June 2011. The Bahrain regime's decision to physically destroy Pearl Square in late 2011 was a drastic effort to control the representation of space. Pearl Square attained the status of a symbol for the mobilization, not only locally but also internationally, and eliminating the monument on the square may have even enhanced its symbolic holding. Its destruction did not, however, achieve the desired effect of ending the protests.

CONCLUSION

The Arab uprisings offer exciting potential for new intellectual insights and new opportunities for integrating Middle Eastern cases into comparative analyses, and the primary materials in this and other articles of this symposium offer nonregion specialists accessible means to bring Middle Eastern cases into the classroom. The literatures on social movements, revolutions, and political transitions prove extremely useful in identifying many dimensions of the mass mobilizations that led to revolutions in some cases but not others, but the Arab uprisings themselves are not likely to add more than small innovations to those well-developed literatures. Pushing our analyses of the uprisings into relatively underexplored directions, such as political geography, however, provides a greater opportunity for generating new insights and revealing less-studied dynamics of both large- and small-scale mobilizations. Space often serves to strengthen and camouflage practices of state repression and surveillance while also allowing certain kinds of economic reform to flourish, resulting in the often radical restructurings of urban and peripheral spaces. Attention to spatial dynamics can also illuminate uneven development and material reality. Although spatial dynamics have not been entirely ignored in political science, they remain understudied. The lens of political geography offers a new dimension that could be brought into many existing bodies of literature, including revolutions, social movements, and transitions. But it also provides and opportunity to explore new dimensions of political economy, the politics of identity, gender politics, and state repression, to name just a few. The Arab uprisings thus offer an opportunity for us not only to test our existing theories, but to push comparative analyses into exciting new directions.

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A spatial analysis of protests particularly brings to light enclaves of economic distribution, and by extension, which topographies are being privileged economically and politically.

NOTES

1. This article draws on research from my current book manuscript, "Protesting Jordan: Space, Law, Dissent," and from a forthcoming chapter on the Arab uprisings co-authored with Ryan King, "Political Geography" (Schwedler and King 2013).
2. The most famous is "Terrorism and Barbecue" (*al-irhab wal kebab*), 1992, starring the popular and Mubarak-approved comedian, Adel Imam.
3. A photo archive of street art in Bahrain is available at rebelliouswalls.com (accessed September 6, 2013) and on Facebook at the page of the same name.
4. This is not to suggest that wealthier neighborhoods are welcoming to protests, or more welcoming than other neighborhoods. But state violence in many peripheries is often "less visible" than in elite neighborhoods and less likely to attract media attention quickly, if at all.

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