Can a New Generation Bring about Regime Change?

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Peaceful protests and demonstrations have swept through the Arab world, toppling rulers and advancing programs of radical change. Some enthusiasts for these movements have already proclaimed them a revolution. They predict a new Middle Eastern political and economic order. A new generation of young people—men and women, mainly in their twenties and thirties, using their skills in cyberspace communication and fueled by many frustrations—assembled vast numbers in peaceful protests that have thus far claimed many triumphs. They forced the departures of the long-standing dictators of Egypt and Tunisia and have demanded that the monarchs of Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain reign rather than rule.

The leaders of these uprisings share many goals. They want more open societies where security forces will not terrorize the citizenry and where the inhabitants will enjoy more abundant and free lives. Yet, they also differ on profoundly important issues: the place of Islam within their societies, the relations of their countries with the United States and Israel, the degree of state control over the economy, and the limitations that society should or should not place on freedoms, including on free elections. To date, the protesters have ousted some detested rulers but have yet to effect true regime change. Everywhere the old guard clings to power. In Egypt, Mubarak, his son, and some of his cronies are gone. But the Supreme Military Council, headed by aged, Mubarak-appointed generals, wields the ultimate power. In Libya, Colonel al-Qadhafi, forty-one years in power, has refused to follow the example of Mubarak and the Tunisian strong man, Bin ʿAli. He has mobilized the army to suppress the resistance. The future is still in the hands of the older generations. Will they be responsive to the youthful protesters and their goals, or will they dig in and defend their privileges? Their decisions and the choices that their youthful opponents make will determine whether these uprisings ultimately transform Middle Eastern societies.

Imagining "the Political" Otherwise

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The recent revolutions and uprisings in the Middle East represent a rare historic opening for scholars, offering us nothing short of the opportunity to rethink the possibilities of history and our conceptions of "the political" itself. In so doing, we might be more open to the ways in which the empirical continually challenges us to rethink our conceptual

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models. Thus, while some immediately sought to categorize and co-opt the revolutions for their own purposes (Žižek's impassioned, albeit simplistic, "freedom is universal"), others listened closely to the voices on the ground in Tahrir and elsewhere. Now, if ever, is the time to critically reevaluate some of our theoretical models, our tenacious binaries (chiefly among them secularism versus Islamism) and our catch-all monolithic frameworks, such as "the military dictatorship," "authoritarianism," and even "neoliberalism."

In particular, rethinking neoliberalism (or resistance to it) in terms of these revolutions will require a more nuanced attentiveness to historical specificity while avoiding the pretensions of universalizing and totalizing logics that seek a pro-forma explanation in terms of the primacy and purity of economic forces and center–periphery dynamics. Accounts that seek to understand the forces of change in terms of an "either/or" logic—liberalism or Islamism, revolution or counter-revolution—will need to be replaced by careful sociohistorical genealogies of governance, political subjectivity, and popular protest and mobilization. This will surely include a return to structural and class analysis, but any such understanding need no longer be grounded in orthodox conceptions of class as a universal subject of history. Rather, we may be better served by the conception of a multiform social, perhaps best conceived as an assemblage of complex forces and contradictions, in which class is ever present, albeit cross-hatched by other histories of struggle and alterity, subjectivity and solidarity.

Literature and Revolution

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The three-week uprising in Egypt that ended with the removal of Husni Mubarak on February 11 happened to coincide with the section of my spring course syllabus on the Egyptian novel from Najib Mahfuz to Ahmed Alaidy. As was the case for many of my colleagues and their students, the rapid and awe-inspiring events unfolding daily before us pushed purely academic concerns to the margins of class discussion. This tidal wave of revolutionary politics erupting into the classroom forced me to the realization that my larger syllabus was not simply some neutral or systematic survey of half a century's worth of Arabic literature. I began to think about the largely invisible dystopic intellectual and historical paradigms through which modern Arabic literature is often framed, at least in the United States. The *nahḍa*/*naksa* narrative, which compelled many of us to read Arab cultural history of the 20th century as a story of brief "awakening" followed by irredeemable decline and corruption, is clearly no longer tenable in the wake of February 11. This same narrative underpinned the highly self-conscious postmodernism that began to emerge in Egypt in the 1990s and that reached its apogee a couple of decades later at the end of the 2000s, a postmodernism that was celebrated (though by

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