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Notes on revolution and locality: a focus on Egypt in 2011

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ABSTRACT

The unravelling of massive protests and forms of spontaneous and organized dissent across the MENA region in 2010-2012 has brought critical theorists and political and cultural scholars to confront, and possibly re-interpret, the concept of 'revolution', widely re-circulating in the media, but also claimed and upheld as the ultimate goal by most of these movements (notwithstanding the success or failure of such objectives as of today).

This article proposes a reading of the cultural construction of 'revolution' with a specific focus on the Egyptian uprising of 2011. Revolution is read as anchored to locality, through Arjun Appadurai's definition of "the production of locality" as a work of the imagination, as much as a work of material social construction. If, still following Appadurai, we consider imagination "a collective tool for the transformation of the real" then the production of locality is closely linked to revolutions, and the "right to participate in the work of the imagination" is crucially claimed by the (collective) subjectivities who fought in the revolutions of 2010-12, and who are (though in different forms and with extremely less media coverage) still fighting today.

Political systems must always deal with the possibility of revolution. In fact, one might go as far as saying that the entire existence of a given political system revolves around the difficult work of maintaining a stability able to weather changes and demands without succumbing to revolt. Clearly, and this is not the place for such discussion, there are numerous and very different ways of ensuring or imposing such stability, and history has proven time and again that both endogenous and exogenous factors affect the tenability and durability of a certain regime, especially in the age of the modern Western nation-state. The interesting aspect of this balance-game, one that governance always appears to require, is that change is necessary. This entails, in a way, an embedding of *the possibility of revolution* in the idea itself of modern Western politics. The discourse of revolution becomes indeed foundational to the Enlightenment's teleological frame. For Hegel, the positivistic idea of human progress implied the need to develop the individual and society's 'full potential', breaking, where necessary, with a State organization whose rationalizations were (by law of history) bound to "come into conflict with the free rationality of thought" (Marcuse 1955, 239). The Hegelian view first, and then the Marxist one, thus, place revolution within the 'destiny' of humankind, with Marx translating – in a way – Hegel's abstractions into the materialism of class struggle, and

capitalism's destined collapse at the hand of class revolution. This general view of 'revolution' is clearly embedded inside a basically universalistic approach to political theory that has characterized Western thought at least until the epistemological break brought about by postcolonial and decolonial theorists. Indeed, while the mechanics of power and governance may apply, possibly, to any small or large community of humans, the (Western) theories of modern revolution refer quite exclusively to the nation-state, and, most importantly in my view, look solely to the mechanisms that lead to and follow revolutions, perhaps precisely because such theories are not concerned with revolutions in themselves, but rather with systems of government and their negotiations with – more or less – radical change.

The forces at work inside the revolutionary moment, the discourse that is produced and articulated when revolution happens is something less thought about, if not perhaps in terms of the degree of violence involved or required in the process. This moment – which may last well beyond 'a moment' in the common meaning of the measure – implies many more variables and factors than the ones theorized in the paradigms mentioned above. This moment, which we may also think about in terms of "transformation" (Heydemann 2016), involves collective horizons of possibilities, which in turn open up by way of what Arjun Appadurai has termed "the work of the imagination" (Appadurai 1996; 2002), as a process for changing 'the real'. The horizons that open up in each revolutionary instance, I argue, are closely linked to *locality* as the 'place' where, again, the (collective) work of the imagination allows change to become possible. As Appadurai explains through the connection of electronic mediation and mass migration as the key features of the contemporary world, locality becomes "a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern" (Appadurai 1996, 4). The localities of revolutions are constitutive elements of revolutions themselves, of the discursive practices that construe them, of the ideas and metaphors mobilized within them to imagine and produce change.

Much has been written about the protest movements that exploded in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-12, especially in the months following the events. The debate on how to define these movements is wide and still open, given also the ongoing – often tragic – evolution of the different local, national and regional situations (see, among others, Alianak 2014; Sadiki 2015; Lesch and Haas 2017). The interesting fact, however, is that at least part of those who participated in the 2010-12 movements, dubbed by the (Western) media "The Arab Spring," defined their own movements as 'revolutions'. Whether such revolutions are to be considered as failed or not – or even as still ongoing in some cases, and with the different national and local situations making up a clearly composite and highly variable overall picture – is a crucial and widely debated question which this article is not going to address (on the 'failure', among others, see Davis 2013; Alfadhel 2016). The focus of this investigation will rather be on the 'revolutionary moment' and on how its discursive practices have a very

interesting potential to re-configure the conversation on what radical political transformation means. This study will focus primarily on the Egyptian case, with no pretence of completeness and in the full awareness that no single case can be taken to represent the complex events and realities of an entire region. The succeeding uprisings did speak to each other, and undoubtedly the word and the possibility of revolution circulated in a somewhat common horizon, even if only at moments; however, it is undeniable that an analysis of just one national space is limited, fragmented and widely open to amendments as both the Egyptian and the regional situations change. The intent of this article, then, is to register the process of transformation, exposing analysis itself to transformation, in response to a particularly interesting unfolding of political and cultural practices, situated in a space that speaks critically to the limits of Europe and the Western organization of knowledge, which, not so incidentally, is my personal site of observation and locus for critique.

Indeed, for at least two years after the Arab uprisings, and with still a certain echo today, the word 'revolution' entered the media and the academic debates, and with it the narrations and discursive and social practices of revolution. The events in Tunisia are referred to within the nation and region as "Thawra Sidi Bou Zid" (the Sidi Bou Zid Revolution), "Thawrat al-Karama" (the Dignity Revolution), o "Thawrat al-Shabab" (the Youth Revolution), while the international press has mostly, and controversially, dubbed it the "Jasmine Revolution."[1] The walls of Cairo were covered with flourishing graffiti in which the word "thawra" continually recurred, in a true explosion of public and collective creativity, now erased and replaced by the face of power: President al-Sisi's portrait, in an uncanny replacement of the decades-long, pre-2011 omnipresence of Mubarak's face all over the city (on graffiti: Kraidy 2016; Dal 2014). The word 'revolution' and the language of explicit mass opposition enter, too, the musical vocabulary of the revolts in the region: the rap song "Rayes Lebled" [Head of State] by Tunisian El Général began circulating online in 2010, one month before the self-inflicted death of Mohamed Bouazizi, and very quickly became a banner of the uprisings in Tunisia; while in Egypt, in 2012, rapper MC Amin recorded the piece "El Thawra Mostamera"[2] [The Revolution Continues] (see, among others, Laachir and Talajooy 2013; Sabry 2012).[3] Numerous anthologies and an immense volume of online and offline articles were and are still today published on the narrative of the 'revolutions' in the region (al-Zubaidi and M. Cassel 2013, for example). With regard to Egypt alone, novelist and public intellectual Ahdaf Soueif's chronicle of and reflection on the days of the ousting of Hosni Mubarak are recorded in her book *Cairo, My City, Our Revolution* (2012),[4] while Mona Prince's chronicle of those same days is titled *Revolution Is My Name* (*Ismi Thawra*) (2012).[5]

In his 2013 review of Mona Prince's chronicle, scholar Elliott Colla wrote, on the independent online platform Jadaliyya, that

> [r]evolution and its stories happen at the same time. One of the great strengths of Egyptian activists has been the way they have been able to narrate the story of their revolution as they make it. Without

> stories of revolution, the events in Egypt would not be called by that name. And as it turns out, giving the name, capturing various events under a name both singular and definite – "the Revolution" – has mattered quite a bit, giving scale and scope to the chaos of a mass and variegated social uprising. The degree to which revolutionaries talk about their projects in a coherent way, the degree to which they can make their revolution coherent, rests on their ability to tell their own stories in the way they see fit. And so, while revolutions are not primarily textual, we can admit that stories, like cobblestones, are part of the Midan [the Square]. (2013, n.p.)

Stories, in this sense, are fundamental, and in this perspective it is particularly useful and interesting to look at the narratives of revolution, and therefore to revolution as a discursive practice. This does not mean distancing 'theory' from 'practice', or not attending to the concrete actions and events; rather, it means attending to narratives as discursive and therefore social practices, and looking at the meanings that are produced and that circulate. Practices produce meanings, they produce sense, and such practices, such events (the days of Tahrir, for example, but also the demonstrations in Tunisia) produce meanings in their narration, whether through literature, poetry, visual arts, music, but also – and undoubtedly it will always be increasingly so from now on – in the exponential multiplication and circulation of information, news, debates and so on through social media: a form in itself, if you will, of hyper-narration, with its highly interesting volatile character, in a way akin to oral narrative, where author and authority are possibly con-fused and perhaps collectivized.

In Egypt, in particular, at least part of those who participated in the days and months of Tahrir, the youth – the *shabab* – who organized the protests, and the intellectuals, now speak of "thawra mustamirra," the revolution that continues / the permanent revolution, as in the song by MC Amin (Soueif et al. 2016). The 18 days of Tahrir – from 25 January to 11 February 2011, when Mubarak stepped down –, in this sense, are particularly interesting to look at, as a spatial and temporal site for the catalyzation of that revolutionary energy. It must be registered, in an analysis of the youth movements that organized and led the protests in Egypt, that there is speculation as to what (if any) part was played by a later-revealed strategy of the US State Department to facilitate, through the internet, youth organization and uprisings in a region fostering a growing anti-American sentiment. A 'soft' type of political intervention strategy, through what was called the "Alliance of Youth Movements" implemented first by the Bush and then the Obama Administrations, was supposed to push the potential of Muslim youth to bring political change in their countries, through the appeal of American culture and values communicated through social media. The plan was designed and spearheaded by a State Department Policy Planner – later turned head of "Google Ideas" after having left his political office (Saadi 2012). This affair, to me, appears to tell us more about the US interests and strategies in relation to the Middle East and about the varying politics of military interventions of the past three US Presidential Administrations, rather than detract from the oppositional force, which, in fact, was at work in Egypt well before the West began to take notice in January 2011. Furthermore, the events in Tunisia of a few weeks

earlier, as well as those of the following months in other parts of the region, compose a much more complex picture of both local and regional dynamics. The picture is one of collective, national, but also transnational openings of "horizons of possibility" that may have been, in a small percentage, affected by the multiplication of communication (and, to a certain extent, of freedom) through the internet, but have also followed other forms and processes of 'contagion', fuelled by specific, pre-existing situations and underlying social and political movements.[6] The same facts also tap into the debate on what role the internet played in the uprisings in the MENA region, itself an interesting and widely discussed issue, but, again, appearing to me to speak more of the changing nature and temporality of communications and human relations, and of the unprecedented outbreak of direct "crisis reporting" (Bebawi and Bossio 2014), than to detract from the transformational moment (again, whether a 'short' or 'long' moment) of revolution (see, among others, Howard and Hussein 2013; Joffé 2013).

Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif is one of those intellectuals who have spoken of "thawra mustamirra," the revolution (that) continues (Soueif et al. 2016, n.p.).[7] In her account of the 18 days of Tahrir, titled *Cairo, My City, Our Revolution* (2012), Soueif builds a sort of "immediate myth" (Jondot 2014), in a narrative that is located all over the city, but converges unmistakably in Midan el-Tahrir, both as a physical place, and as a symbolic place.[8] Indeed, as Mohamed Elshahed writes, "*Cairo [My City, Our Revolution]* invites readers into an ongoing event, the revolution" (2014, 109), echoing in a way the same relevance of narrating and naming the events 'as they unfold' observed above in the case of Mona Prince's *Revolution is My Name*, and confirmed in the diary-form chosen by Soueif. Soueif's narrative reveals very clearly the relevance of *place* in its materiality and at the same time of the *imagination* of the place. Indeed, the writer inscribes the places and their imagination inside the revolutionary practice, and, vice versa, the revolutionary practice is deeply inscribed in the places. Elshahed further observes that "[s]ites of memory and locations of historical events past and present are narrated in unison, drawing a personal map for us, the readers, to be able to navigate a city inhabited by millions" (2014, 109).

Cairo, My City, Our Revolution begins its narrative not only with an actual map, hand-written and included in the very first pages of the book, but most importantly, with immediate territorial (but also emotional, or affective) coordinates:

> Friday 28 January, 5:00 p.m.
>
> The river is a still, steely gray, a dull pewter. Small scattered fires burn and fizz in the water. We've pushed out on the shore below the Ramses Hilton and are heading into mid-stream. My two nieces, Salma and Mariam, are on either side of me in the small motor boat. As we get further from the shore our coughing and choking subsides. We can draw breath, even though the breath burns. And we can open our eyes –
>
> To see an opaque dusk, heavy with tear gas. Up ahead, Qasr el-Nil Bridge is a mass of people, all in motion, but all in place. We look back at where we were, just minutes ago, on 6 October Bridge, and see a Central Security Forces personnel carrier on fire, backing off, four young men chasing it, leaping at it, beating at its windscreen. The vehicle is reversing wildly, careering backwards east, towards Downtown. Behind us, a ball of fire lands in the river; a bright new pool of flame in the water. The sky

too is grey – so different from the airy twilight you normally get on the river at this time of day. The Opera House looms dark on our right and we can barely make out the slender height of the Cairo Tower. We don't know it yet, but the lights of Cairo will not come on tonight. (Soueif 2012, 5)

The narration of the revolution thus opens not from the motivations or the conditions that have brought to the revolt (which Soueif does explain later in the book), but from the territory, from the map; in particular, from the river (and always, as underlined, in convergence to the Square, for the entire book). The above-quoted passage continues, with Soueif recounting how she asked the boat-taxi driver to turn around and go back towards the battle, because they had changed their minds, they wanted to go where everything was happening; and so they enter, she and her nieces, and us with them, into the revolution:

A great shout goes up from Qasr el-Nil. I look at Salma and Mariam. 'Yes, let's', They say. I tell the boatman we've changed our minds: we don't want to cross the river to Giza and go home, we want to be dropped off under Qasr el-Nil Bridge.

[...] We stood on the island in the middle of the road and that was the moment I became part of the revolution. (Soueif 2012, 5-6)

On the construction of revolution as intimately linked to places, and in particular to Cairo and Tahrir in Soueif's text, Jacqueline Jondot writes:

[I]n Arabic Cairo is "Masr": "'Masr' is Egypt, and 'Masr' is also what Egyptians call Cairo" (Soueif 2012, 9). This suggests a strategy of closer and closer focus with a *mise en abyme*: the author is in India when the Revolution starts and the focus then concentrates on Egypt, then Cairo and finally midan el-Tahrir. As Cairo is Egypt, Tahrir will stand for Cairo then for Egypt which in turn will stand for the world at large, as other revolutions spring up in other parts of the region. So, through the Arabic polysemy 'Masr=Egypt=Cairo', the narrator embeds meanings and superimposes meanings which overlap. (Jondot 2014, 175-176)

In the continuous movement of this polyphony, "from the personal to the collective and also from a large space to a small one," Tahrir being deemed "our small city," Jondot underlines the "centripetal and centrifugal directions [that] create tensions that are used to represent the tensions of/within the Revolution itself" (Jondot 2014, 177).

The places of the revolution are thus at the same time physical, material, and imagined places. They are, furthermore, sites for the material anchoring of bodies – and the death of hundreds of demonstrators is the most materially anchored fact in this sense – and at the same time they are sites of collective imagination.

Connecting the discourse of revolution with that of 'place' deviates in a way from the revolutions as tied to the grand narratives of the ideologies of so-called modernity, in the sense that this connection suggests the irreducible specificity of the revolutionary moment; of the claims that produce it and that are in turn produced *in the places* of revolution. This specificity destabilizes the ideological structures inside which modern revolutions have been read and narrated, underscoring the fundamental character of place, and materiality, as well

as the desire to access the places/sites of the imagination of the revolutions of 2010-2012. The implication, then, is a critical move somewhat away from the almost exclusive attendance of 'classic' political theory to the pre- and post-revolutionary moments and systems. An interesting contribution to the interpretation of the revolutionary moment in itself comes from Bronislaw Baczko, in particular with reference to the role of utopia in the collective imagination of revolution. His analysis refers specifically to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and its role in shaping the modern horizon of democracy (in the West), underlining the importance of the symbolic sphere as necessary for the representation of a radical break with the (pre-democratic) past (Baczko 1978). More generally, indeed, the study of utopia offers a very interesting insight into the connection between the symbolic sphere and revolution, addressing the relevance of 'names and words' in 'making possible what is not yet real', thus attending to the revolutionary moment itself as a key instance in which imagination (the symbolic) and politics (the real) not only converge, but are actually reversed in order: "the symbolic anticipation is [...] that mental process that reverses the chronological order and assigns words and symbols the function of ensuring that a desired reality is already present and active" (Comparato 2005, 171; my translation).

The idea that words and symbols make "a desired reality" present before it materially takes form strongly recalls the "horizons of possibilities" mentioned in the beginning of this article in relation to Appadurai's work, and thus the role of the imagination in the revolutionary moment, with its potential to open up the possibility of transformation. Such (collective) horizons, I argue, are deeply tied to the specificity of places, not only, however, in terms of the symbolic charge held by such places, but also as localities, "intended as a work of the imagination as much as a work of material social construction," where, it is worth reiterating, the imagination is "a collective tool of transformation of the real, of creation of multiple horizons of possibility" (Appadurai 2002, 34).

The localities of the revolutions of 2010-2012 in the MENA region *produce sense as sites for the creation of horizons of possibility*. As already mentioned, Appadurai himself offers a fundamental key to understanding the revolutionary drive: he speaks of "the right to access the work of the imagination" (Appadurai 2002). In a way, during the days of the revolution, a 'locality' in Appadurai's sense was created: a place where the access to the work of the imagination was for everyone. Or better, and perhaps this is the imponderable element of the revolutionary moment, the collectivity produced the access for all to the work of the imagination, which in turn produced a form of "spatial solidarity" – as will be argued in the conclusions of this article in a more Foucauldian frame –, or the places (Tahrir) in which to create the multiple horizons of possibility. It was possible, during those days in those places, to imagine oneself, collectively, in a different way, different and elsewhere: in the elsewhere of the revolutionary place/location.

A strong symbolic narrative of the 'place' of the Egyptian uprisings is construed,

similarly as in Soueif's case, in the 2013 film by Jehane Noujaim, *The Square [al-Midan]*,[9] a documentary film that, again, tells the story of the revolution 'as it happens'. It was re-edited as events took new and dramatic turns in the two years following the days of Tahrir, and works very much on and with symbolic spaces and places. An additionally interesting fact is that the film received wide international echo, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature, and is now distributed by Netflix. This confirms the interest and also the re-emergence of the idea of 'revolution' in the international (or, certainly Western) public debate, which, in my opinion, does not lose its relevance despite the underlying strategic interests that may direct specific public spotlights on the unrest (and subsequent containment) in the MENA region.

In a touching scene in the first part of Noujaim's film, a young protester smiles blissfully after Mubarak has stepped down, and says "thawra, revolution...," both in Arabic and in English. The square, Tahrir Square, speaks simultaneously to and from itself, to the world and to the people of Tahrir, in the concentric and concurrent focus and wide-angle Jondot writes about. In the same manner as Noujaim's filmic diary, Soueif's account moves across the map of Cairo, but always converges to Tahrir. Here, geography takes on highly symbolic meanings in the meticulous descriptions of the cartography of the square itself, with all its symbols concentrated inside or around it: the Interior Ministry, the Mugamma,[10] the Arab League Building, the building of Mubarak's Party, the American University in Cairo, and the Egyptian Museum. The museum itself becomes a sliding signifier of place that preserves/is to be preserved, and then also from which to save oneself:

> [a]round the Egyptian Museum, the young people, the shabab, have linked arms and are surrounding the building, cordoning it with their bodies. When the fire broke out next door even young people who had left the Midan came back to protect the Museum. At this point none of us knows that the regime's snipers are concealed on its roof. (Soueif 2012, 27)

Places are, then, symbols and at the same time slipping signifiers, and Soueif's entire text is construed like a map of the battles, street by street, meter by meter, symbol by symbol, but also, materially, occupation and physical presence inside what she calls, as already mentioned, "our small city," Tahrir.

The 'places of the revolutions' speak of specificity and locality – of Cairo, of Tahrir Square in this case –, and at the same and by virtue of such specificity, they interrogate us, elsewhere, on many levels; they are charged with discursive and material practices that are irreducible to any universal, and they challenge the category itself of radical change that circulates in Western thought, proposing new and complex discourses of 'revolutions', always in the plural. Certainly, these plural narratives speak, or have spoken, to the borders of Western liberal and liberalist democracies, in a way somewhat similar to how the pressures of human migrations speak to the borders of Europe (Tazzioli 2015). They also speak of the complicities of the European and US governments in the predicaments of those nations and

areas that are construed as marginal, and subaltern; in this specific case, in the MENA region.

In this sense, in relation to how the narratives of these revolutions speak to European modernity, and to the possibility/need to look at contemporary revolutions *while* they are happening, it is interesting to read, today, the observations that Foucault made at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Foucault became notoriously fascinated with the 1978-79 Anti-Shah Revolution, stating that the "political spirituality" that animated the people in revolt was the only means to a radical change in their existence: "a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shi'ite Islam" (Foucault 2005, 255). As Navid Pourmokhtari observes in his interesting proposition of the necessity for a Foucauldian approach to the uprisings in the MENA region,

> far from constituting some kind of 'irrational resurgence' of a peculiar and/or regressive type, which Foucault is at great pains to clarify, [this 'political spirituality'] is a function and at the same time a by-product of Iran's history, and by implication, that of the Pahlavi 'governmentalizing regime'. (2017, 202)

Pourmokhtari underlines that for Foucault the idea that the revolutionaries in Iran were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity implied that "there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully [rather, it was] the desire to renew their entire existence," (Foucault 2005, 255): to reject, in short, the Shah's design of "archaic modernization." Foucault suggested that what was happening in Iran was a "revolt of subjectivity," "that cannot be explained solely in economic terms," as in European revolutionary ideology (McCall 2013, 29 in Pourmokhtari 2017, 203), thus deviating from the universalizing project of development and progress embedded in the dominant narratives of "modern" revolutions. As Pourmokhtari notes, in his analysis of the 1979 revolution and the emphasis on 'political spirituality', Foucault aims to indicate that "modernity [constitutes a set of] multiple practices" (McCall 2013, 28 in Pourmokhtari 2017). In this sense, crucially, "it is also tied to, and must be understood in relation to, trajectories of people outside Europe." (Pourmokhtari 2017, 203-204)

Also looking at Foucault's approach to the 1979 Iranian Revolution in relation to the possible readings of the Arab uprisings, scholar Anthony Alessandrini, observes that

> [t]o attend to the coming of particular kinds of subjectivity into history is not to advocate for those particular forms of subjectivity. But it is to insist that a full respect for the singularity of such moments demands new forms of thinking. [...] [R]evolutions change things, and among the things that they change, or should change, are the categories through which we view such changes. (2014, n.p.)

The challenge of endeavouring to "read" revolutionary events as they take place, Alessandrini underlines, is shared by Foucault and Frantz Fanon, within their respective contexts and times, in "an attempt to write what Foucault famously called 'the history of the present'

without relying upon already-existing categories to define the new events unfolding before them" (2014, n.p.).

For Fanon, the revolutionary community would be able (or forced?) to come together under the common oppression of colonization. It is interesting, in this specific context, to note that indeed Fanon was concerned with 'the revolutionary moment', in the sense that, foreseeing (mistakenly, we now know) the oncoming African Revolution, of which the Algerian Revolution was just the beginning, he read, and experienced, the Algerian liberation as a template, possibly, or the unleashing in any case, of the making of 'new' revolutionary subjects. In this sense – and the parallel with the MENA region uprisings of the past years is here particularly interesting – revolutions would shift the focus dramatically from European political and cultural power to the dispossessed of the Third World. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, in particular, Fanon addresses the issue of the location of revolutionary change and the shift that he saw as taking place in the mid-twentieth century. As Homi Bhabha observes in his 2004 foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, though Fanon's use of a universalizing notion of 'the Third World' has been widely and rightly criticized, there is also the idea of a *project*, a construction of 'the new' embedded in his vision:

> [T]he coming into being of the Third World is also a *project of futurity* conditional upon being freed from the "univocal choice" presented by the cold war. Fanon's invocation of a new humanism – "Let us endeavour to invent a man in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving" (Fanon 1964, 236) – is certainly grounded in a universalist ontology that informs both its attitude to human consciousness and social reality. The historical agency of the discourse of Third Worldism, however, with its critical, political stance against the imposed univocal choice of "capitalism vs. socialism," makes it less universalist in temper and more strategic, activist, and aspirational in character. (2004, xvii; emphasis in the text)

The "aspirational character" that Bhabha underlines points to a revolutionary project, unmistakably both political and cultural, that would "[invent] something which Europe has been incapable of achieving"; the shift in location, in other words, is embedded in Fanon's revolutionary vision, famously marked by a decolonization not only of organizations and institutions, but also of minds. In his concluding exhortations in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon unequivocally invokes the need for new subjectivities:

> Come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else. We can do anything today provided we do not ape Europe, provided we are not obsessed with catching up with Europe. (2004, 236)

Clearly, Fanon writes in a specific historical moment, but, again, it is useful, as with Foucault, to note the urgency claimed in 'decolonizing' the idea and practice of revolution itself. Returning to the idea of the 2010-12 MENA revolts as not 'encased' in the univocality of European discourse, Iain Chambers observes:

> [W]hat occurred in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East cannot be divorced from the global relations of power that have consistently sought to define and displace popular revolt and social change.
>
> In fact, the Arab word for revolution – Al-Thawra – does not follow the trajectory of failed liberal ideas, but is deeply entrenched in the semantic field of anti-colonial struggle. The idea that there can be an Islamic radicalism, breaking with the revolutionary model of a Western order and leading in all sorts of directions (just as the slave revolt in Haiti necessarily uncoupled itself from Paris 1789 in order to deepen its revolutionary imperative) is perhaps something that the West is not willing to comprehend. (2017, 65)

Resonating in this sense is also the above-quoted study of the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa as processes of "transformation" and not "transition": in a very useful contribution to the debate on the political dynamics at play in the Arab uprisings published as an issue of *Mediterranean Politics* in 2016, the editors and authors contend that it is far more useful, in this case, to speak in terms of "transformation" rather than "transition." As Steven Heydemann notes,

> [t]he distinction between these terms is important. The term *transformation* captures the notion of systemic change yet without implying directionality or some form of democratic teleology. It emphasizes the fluidity and unpredictability of transformational settings [...]. Like much of the early transitions literature, it provides considerable scope for contingency and agency. (2016, 195)

The context of Heydemann's observations and the debate he taps into fall more strictly into a political science analysis, focusing on what actors and what factors should be taken as effecting the radical change (or subsequently failing to). However, it is interesting to note that, by shifting the focus to the idea of "transformation" rather than "transition," the discussion opens up to elements such as "the various actors' identities – including sectarian, tribal, class, urban-rural and geographic – and how these intersect with and complicate efforts to establish stable, legitimate forms of government," as well as on "the resources that actors can mobilize as they struggle to advance their interests, including material, institutional, symbolic, coercive, reputational and relational resources" (Heydemann 2016, 195).

The anchorage to "contingency and agency" (Heydemann 2016, 195), or the localities of revolutions, can also be read in the Foucauldian perspective of spatial politics, again following Pourmokhtari, in his reasoning that "spatial solidarity" arises in communities that share a space of specific governance, especially in the case of oppressive regimes, in which "open political channels simply do not exist" (Pourmokhtari 2017, 205) and public spaces very often become *loci* for transformation. Looking at the events in Egypt, but also at the 2013 uprisings in Turkey, or the 2009 Green Movement in Iran, it appears indeed fundamental to note that the taking over of "public" (disciplined) spaces by the masses challenges that very notion of "public," through the "political" dimension of subversion. In other words,

> [public spaces] have been turned into spaces of resistance and sites of political contestation and social negation of the status quo. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Iran's Azadi Square (2009), Egypt's

Tahrir Square (2011-2012) and Turkey's Taksim Square (2013) should emerge as chief signifiers for mass discontent during the recent spate of uprisings in which each figured prominently. (Pourmokhtari 2017, 185)

'Spatial politics' is yet a further set of meanings to think about the 2010-2012 uprisings, but it, too, speaks of the specificity of the spatial constructions at play in mass revolts, of the symbolic charge held by spaces and places, but also of their materiality and of the way the bodies inhabiting specific spaces transform/perform the political meaning of such spaces.

In short, we could say that the community that 'made' Tahrir Square in the 18 days of the revolution produced counter-practices inside a new, powerfully transformative locality.[11] Or, that it performed a revolutionary spatial politics. The imagination, even the utopia if you will, of change bears its own possibility within specific sites of narrative.

This is where this article returns to, by way of conclusion, and in a circular movement: to the very circularity of the square itself, to Tahrir. A short film – that is also a visual poem – was produced in the months following the days of Tahrir by Eskenderella, an Egyptian band that accompanied the Revolution, playing at demonstrations and sit-ins.[12] In the film, various artists recite verses by poet Ahmed Haddad.[13] The film is titled *Hikayat al-Thawrah* [The Story of the Revolution], and starts, sadly, politically and emotionally, with a young man who "has gone to Tahrir, but has not yet returned."[14]

Notes

[1] The journalistic definition of "Jasmine Revolution" was contested in Tunisia, especially because the same term had been used in 1987 by Ben Ali to refer to his own takeover. An interesting comment on the issue comes, among others, from writer Issandr El Amrani: https://arabist.net/blog/2011/1/17/why-you-shouldnt-call-it-the-jasmine-revolution.html (accessed June, 9 2017).
[2] More often spelled, as elsewhere in this article, "mustamirra."
[3] A wide and articulated overview of Arabic hip hop and rap music during and after the Arab uprisings can be found at http://revolutionaryarabrap.blogspot.it/ (accessed June, 9 2017).
[4] Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian writer who lives in London and Cairo. She has published two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (Bloomsbury, 1992) and *The Map of Love* (Bloomsbury, 1999), as well as collections of short stories and essays, and regularly writes for various newspapers in English and Arabic; she is the founder of the Palestine Festival of Literature (PalFest), which takes place annually since 2008 in cities across the West Bank and Gaza. In 2014, Soueif published an updated edition of *Cairo, My City* in the US, with the title *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed* (Pantheon), adding a new section on the events between October 2011 and May 2012. This article refers exclusively to the UK edition *Cairo. My City, Our Revolution* (Bloomsbury, 2012).
[5] Mona Prince is an Egyptian writer, academic and activist. She provokingly decided to run for the first democratic elections in Egypt in 2012. She has published a number of short stories and the novel *Inni Uhaddithuka li-Tara* in 2008, published in English as *So You May See* (AUC Press, 2011).
[6] I am thankful to Paul Gilroy for a brief but illuminating conversation on this issue.
[7] A darker perspective on the 2011 Revolution, its declared failure, and the youth who gave their life for it, is offered by the 2017 debut novel by Omar Hamilton (incidentally, or perhaps not really so, Ahdaf Souef's son), *The City Always Wins* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).
[8] I have developed part of the analysis on the narratives of the "days of Tahrir," in Italian, in Cariello 2017.
[9] Jehane Noujaim was born in Egypt in 1974; she has directed a number of documentary films, among which *Startup.com* (2001), *Control Room* (2004), *Rafea* (2012); see www.noujaimfilms.com and www.thesquarefilm.com.
[10] The Mugamma is the enormous State Administration building erected in Tahrir Square in the 1940s.
[11] For a reflection on counter-discourses as counter-publics see Lazzarich 2015.

[12] Eskenderella is an Egyptian band founded in 2000 by Hazem Shahine with the aim of reviving the songs of Sheikh Imam and Sayed Darwish. The band's repertoire includes music to lyrics by a number of Egyptian poets from different generations. Many songs were written by the band in Tahrir Square, during the uprisings.
[13] Ahmed Haddad has published five poetry collections, directed seven short movies, and is also known as an actor. He is the grandson of renowned Egyptian vernacular poet Fouad Haddad (1927-1885) and son of Amin Haddad, also a well-known colloquial poet.
[14] The film is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcwQYb_BJ0E.

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