Introduction to the special issue on Arab uprisings

SAGE

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The uprisings in the Arab World started out in a marginal town in Tunisia toward the end of 2010; travelled like wildfire throughout the Arab region in 2011; inspired various protest movements around the world that same year; then gradually assumed different trajectories that are still underway. As is often the case with revolutions, these events continue to supply us with a repertoire of surprises, counter plots, setbacks and successes. Where did these movements come from? How do they relate to older movements in the region? What do they tell us about how to study social movements and revolutions? What are their distinctive features? What features do they have in common with older movements and revolutions worldwide?

The one certain fact about the Arab uprisings is that they were surprising. Sometimes one hears in public discussions voices that reject the notion that the uprisings were surprising, and insist that there were clear signs of them all along. But none of the experts on the region saw such signs, and even local intellectuals who had sincerely wished for revolutions never saw them coming. In fact, whenever they had sought, before 2011, to describe how a revolution would happen, their frame of reference was a variety of Leninism – that is, the model of organization that is least relevant to the study of the Arab uprisings. In any case, there is nothing more common that after-the-fact reconstructions of events, so that they appear to have been destined all along to put us on a revolutionary path. The fact that large numbers of Arabs, from different classes and demographics, had great grievances against most of their governing orders for decades does not suggest that a revolution was imminent. We do not know revolutions to be inevitable, since we still have no science that proves to us that they are. But we know them to be products of human decisions. Sometimes these decisions are taken without any assurance of success – that is, without pre-known resources, opportunities, frames, facilitating conditions, or any of the factors that sociologists typically associate with mass mobilization in general.

Revolutions, therefore, are opportunities to learn something new. The worst analytical insult to a revolution is to use it as an opportunity to apply mechanically an existing theory or model. This is because when a revolution had not been anticipated – as is usually the case – then it cannot be assumed to be part of our current knowledge system. In that case, we must begin from the assumption that the knowledge that is needed to understand the revolution comes with the revolution, and does not precede it. So the question

is not what grievance or misery generates a revolution. Rather, it is at what point, and in which ways, does one cease to live with one's grievance or misery, and embark on revolutionary action. Who decides that now is time for revolution? And how do others come to take this call seriously, when only yesterday they had mocked it?

The Arab uprisings took place in different contexts and assumed different trajectories, even though they clearly inspired each other – suggesting thereby a similar frame of consciousness and a willingness on the part of the actors to see different societies as sharing similar problematics, as well as similar governing orders that were assumed to have similar vulnerabilities. And this observation becomes all the more significant if we expand our perspective and consider mobilization elsewhere in the world around the same time, such as the *Indignados*, the Occupy movement, the Russian protests, eventually the Ukraine, and elsewhere. As for the Arab uprisings specifically, we note that they happened in poor countries, like Yemen and Egypt, but also relatively rich ones, like Libya and Bahrain. They took place in countries that suffered from high youth unemployment, but other countries that had a similar condition witnessed no uprisings. They were attempted in republics and kingdoms. They touched countries that had a relatively open public sphere and relative freedom of association and press, as well as countries that were very tightly controlled. Sometimes they capitalized on the technologies of social networks, but sometimes they evolved without them and in regions that were least connected.

General characteristics

The list of dissimilarities can be long, but there are certain similarities that the Arab uprisings, interestingly, share with the global protest movements of the same period, in spite of vast differences in the character of the local contexts, the size of mobilization and its outcomes. Initial observations (Bamyeh, 2012) suggest that the 2011 movements shared six attributes worldwide, mostly at the level of ideology but also organizationally. First, their target was 'corruption', understood as the presumption that the 'system' was more answerable to powerful special interests than to the common good. Second, the 'little person' was presented as lacking effective representation, even in democracies. Third, the movements tended to prefer loose networks and experimental structures over political parties, formal organizations, or leaders. Fourth, they tended to view politics as an arena of choices rather than inescapable determinations. Fifth, they all spoke in the name of the 'people' as a whole, or some imagined, comparable super-majority (99%), rather than as agents of a specifically aggrieved class or group within this general peoplehood. Finally, beyond their general indignation at 'the system', these movements were characterized by vagueness of common objectives, a vagueness that was useful for allowing experimentation and engendering temporary unity among otherwise distinct agendas.

One can also list other attributes that may appear to be more specific to the Arab uprisings, even though one sees elements of them throughout the global protest movements. For example, the sense that the little person was the maker of a new historical epoch, precisely at a time when ordinary political life had ground to a halt and began to produce 'no alternatives' signs everywhere. In the Arab World, where political elites and especially the top leaders had been frozen in power for several decades, little change was expected and no alternative appeared realistic on the eve of the revolutionary wave. It

toppled regimes, forced others to embark on reforms or at least to pretend to be interested in them, generated counter-revolutions, and in some places civil wars or the fragmentation of countries. This revolutionary wave goes on in various ways, and we are not yet in a position to deliver an analytical verdict on it. But it is already clear that the Arab World is witnessing, with mixed results, some of the most dramatic events since the end of the colonial era in the middle of the 20th century.

In addition, to many observers, one of the most obvious common denominators of the Arab uprisings in their early days was their slogans, which called for a departure from something that everyone called 'the regime', even though in retrospect it appears that the 'regime', as a concept, did not denote the same meaning for all participants. In addition, there were other common slogans that seemed to have more clear ethical or economic meanings. These included dignity, freedom, social justice, bread, as well as hostility to corruption, nepotism, and the sum total of self-seeking, anti-society behaviours that we call neoliberalism – although the word itself was rarely used. Yet again here, we do not see within the revolutions a more specific consensus that specified how, exactly, we would arrive at such values.

Then there is the question of a new type of reflexive individualism in the Arab revolutions (Challand, 2011; Hanafi, 2012) which, in contrast with the Eastern and Central European cases, has made it difficult for a unified opposition leadership to emerge. None of the existing structures outside the state – civil society, political parties wherever they existed, tribal networks, religious structures, intellectual communities and so on – served as incubators for the leadership of *any* revolution. Rather, we seem to be witnessing post-Leninist revolutions (Badie, 2011) (à la the French Revolution), a sort of fragmentation without organization; although over time organized structures began to reluctantly assume a greater role such as in Tunisia, and so far partially as well in the militarized uprisings in Libya and Syria. This absence may be due to two sources (Bamyeh, 2013): long-standing local traditions of autonomy, mutual help and 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2013) outside the state, and historical memory: we did have saviour leaders in the past, and leadership seemed essential both as a symbol of a unified struggle and due to organizational imperatives in the immediate postcolonial era. But we learned from that period, and thus now we witness an almost intuitive rejection of charismatic leadership.

Scholarship

The scholarly analysis of the Arab revolutions continues to take shape. This special issue, which is certainly part of the phenomenon, includes a bibliometric study (AlMaghlouth et al.) of the global hierarchies of knowledge and networks that are generating this scholarship. The authors discover that political science has hegemony over the study of the Arab uprisings, and that the English language, including the networks and perspectives that are dominant through it, serves as the vehicle for most analysis of the uprisings. The consequence is a predominance of geopolitical and international relations perspectives over those that analyse what the uprisings themselves seem to focus on, namely questions of social justice and accountability. This confirms other findings (Makdisi, 2009), which show that influential international relations journals reveal a notable absence of voices and research from the Arab region when they discuss that region, and their

'conversations' dealing with the Arab region routinely eschew Arabic sources, let alone oppositional Arab voices.

Beyond that we make no effort here to review this large body of writings, which will no doubt continue to evolve as mobilizations and their aftermaths continue to inform our perspective and generate new facts. We can only say a few words about the most relevant approaches. Chief among those is social movements theory, which had evolved thus far on the basis of rich and detailed case studies in European and US histories. The fact that each significant development in social movements theory involved an empirical tracing of a movement somewhere, suggests that new movements also include in their complex dynamics the promise of further theoretical developments. And if this is the case, we expect social scientists to be hesitant to apply an already formed theoretical perspective on a new reality, before they have had a chance to closely inspect the specific as well as generalizable features of such reality. We believe that the most worthwhile learning emerges when one is deeply interested in the social phenomenon itself, and in the real humans that make it, flesh and blood, and not in the social phenomenon being an 'opportunity' (POMEPS, 2012) to feed a discipline or a perspective.

In addition, while there is an emerging body of literature on the structural conditions that drove these revolutions, much of it requires combination with other perspectives so that the analysis is sufficiently robust to explain a fuller range of these complex and ongoing events. However, more work is needed here. One of the earliest attempts to interpret the revolutions in terms of cultural and symbolic power (Alexander, 2011) suffered from a common attitude that privileged the employment of a theoretical perspective from a distance over knowledge of local nuances. This means that the role of culture and symbols requires much more careful analysis given the clear part they played in the spread and also in the organizational character of the uprisings. The mass drama that unfolded in Tunisia generated a domino effect in other Arab countries, and eventually elsewhere. In this setting, the revolutionary youth that spearheaded the uprisings (before they became multi-generational), were versed in contemporary technology but also in street art, combating the police, informal networking and light movement. The carnivalesque character of the Arab uprisings in their early days, especially in main squares in Egypt, Yemen and Syrian cities such as Hama, were replete with chants, music, comedic acts, humour and sarcasm. Here we see the 'public sphere' being conceptualized as a rational, moral-practical discourse that facilitates free deliberation, precisely as Jürgen Habermas has described it. In this case, it was the physical and not simply virtual space that assumed most visibility and centrality. This reality seems to be spawning a growing interest in the role of space in revolutionary mobilization (e.g. Ersoy, 2015, as well as Said in this issue). Such spaces provided material conditions for public assembly and public speech, and they remind us of the centrality of space in accommodating and nurturing political debate and protest.

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