



NOTES ON THE ARAB SPRING

*2 essays on the recent rebellions
across North Africa and the Middle East*



NOTES & INTRODUCTIONS

This zine presents two articles and a timeline regarding the Arab Spring of 2011. The first article was written while street battles were still raging and the Egyptian dictator Mubarak was still in power, by a comrade temporarily “exiled” in the country. It provides a snapshot of the potentials and pitfalls of the rebellion, along with others that have struck the Arab world in the Spring of 2011. The second text, by an Arab anarchist named Mohammed Bamyeh, presents a broader theoretical breakdown of the different ideological trajectories behind this movement, drawing on competing tendencies within “enlightenment” ideas as well as the specificities of the Arab context.

As pointed out by the original publisher of the first article,

“As usual, the most striking thing is how familiar everything is: the young man with the prestigious degree working at a coffee shop, the unemployment and bitterness, the protests set off by police brutality—for police are to the unemployed what bosses are to workers. These details cue us in that what is happening in Egypt is not part of another world, but very much part of our own. There are no exotic overseas revolutions in the 21st century. Make no mistake—though these events dwarf the riots in Greece and the student movement in England, they spring from the same source.”

Initially ignited by the mar-

tyrdom of a poor Tunisian street vendor in the face of police harassment, and eventually dubbed “Arab Spring” by the media, this series of uprisings spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and many other countries. Shortly after the first article here was written, the revolution in Egypt was successful in bringing down the hated Mubarak regime. Though media has been eager to highlight the “political” and “democratic” character of the revolution, the rebellion has had many anarchist aspects as well, ranging from a mass hatred of the police and attacks on political party headquarters to wildcat strikes and the formation of neighborhood councils. These struggles still continue in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak, and uprisings have continued elsewhere in the Arab world as well.

In Libya, in the face of brutal crackdowns by “anti-imperialist”-turned (former) US ally Muammar Gaddafi, the situation progressed from popular uprising to civil war. Armed Libyan rebels, consisting of everyone from ex-generals to guest workers and the unemployed, faced a brutal massacre by the much better supplied Libyan Army. Eventually, NATO agreed to establish a no-fly zone protected by Western air support.

This was a “deal with the devil” of sorts: though the rebels succeeded in ousting the hated dictator, the “Tran-

sitional Council” of ex-generals and other elites that now runs the country is clearly loyal to many of the same oil corporations that had links with Ghaddafi. Massive protests and street-fighting against the Assad regime continue in Syria, but crackdowns have been brutal. Mubarak is no longer in power in Egypt, but a temporary government of his one-time supporters still exists.

To summarize, much has changed in the Arab world, but much remains the same. We would do well to remember what revolutionaries once wrote upon the walls of Paris: “Those who make half revolutions dig their own graves.”

Editor’s Note: As this zine goes to print, the connections between the Arab Spring and the Western world are becoming more clear. The “encampment/plaza occupation” style protest of Cairo’s Tahrir Square has been emulated in Athens, Madrid, Barcelona, London, and New York, and is now spreading to other parts of the US after a diverse group of radicals occupied a park near Wall St. to protest financial corruption and autocracy. Similar to much of the Egyptian revolution, these protests have been characterized by an incoherent and even contradictory jumble of political narratives, ranging everywhere from various nationalisms or a reformist focus on corruption and money in politics, all the way to a typically anarchist anti-capitalism and critique of political parties. At least in the West, the political moment remains up for grabs.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Though by no means comprehensive, the following timeline gives a basic idea of the spread of the Arab Spring throughout the region. Regime changes have occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, while movements continue to grow in both those countries as well as Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen.

December 17th, Tunisia - Poor street vendor Muamad Buazizi sets fire to himself to protest police confiscation of his vegetable cart. The action catalyzes frustration with the police, and waves of youth begin rioting.

December 29th, Tunisia - After ten days of protests, the Tunisian head of state Ben Ali goes on air to promise both reforms as well as crackdowns on protesters.

January 1st, Algeria - Riots occur over unemployment and food prices.

January 9th, Tunisia - Protesters clash with police and set fire to cars as protests continue in Tunisia. Security forces respond violently.

January 14th, Tunisia - Ben Ali finally bows to protests and flees to Saudi Arabia. An "interim government" is established.

January 23rd, Yemen - Yemen is hit by fresh protests after the arrest of 19 opposition activists. Inspired by Tunisia, the protests grow into the thousands over the next few days.

January 25th, Egypt - Over a week after the self-immolation of an Egyptian man protesting economic conditions, Egypt erupts into nationwide protests in what is called the "day of anger." Mubarak blocks twitter, mobile and internet networks in a failed attempt to block the protests. Hundreds are killed by security forces over the coming week. Streetfighting with police spreads throughout Cairo, political party headquarters are burned, protesters form neighborhood councils, and thousands occupy Tahrir Square in what becomes the symbolic heart of the movement.

January 28th, Jordan & Palestine - Protests spread to the capital of Jordan, where people demand political change, and Gaza, where people are angered by recent leaks exposing the collaboration of Palestinian authorities with Israel.

February 11th, Egypt - After 18 days of protests, Mubarak finally steps down. Much of his cabinet and political supporters remain. Egypt celebrates.

February 12th - 17th - Over the following week, protests spread to Bahrain, Algeria, Iran, and Libya, all demanding change in the face of economic problems, cor-

we already knew from Frantz Fanon, often expressed lack of knowledge by the vanguard, who eventually become ruling elites, of their own society. In its later phase, vanguardism became pure paternalism: distance of governing elites from the people became lack of interest in knowing the people. Amidst this disinterest the old vanguardist authoritarianism is expunged of its anti-colonial, progressive, Third Worldist claims; and out of its ashes there emerges a cold, paternal authoritarianism, disinterested in any form of peoplehood, and governed openly by an avowed marriage of business and state elites.

Enlightenment as a goal could be approached using different techniques. In the grand revolutions of the Arab spring, the liberal interpretation of the enlightenment fights an authoritarian interpretation, with the aid of an anarchist method—that is to say, with the aid of familiar civic traditions, now discovered again to be natural venues for expressing the organic and embedded nature of the enlightenment. This is why these revolts are entirely against the authoritarian state, but not against any old cultural tradition.

The liberal state that is now on the horizon is not the end of the story. Revolutions themselves establish new traditions. They provide a grand reservoir of memory of what is possible, and that memory tends to be employed in future contests. In the final analysis, the state itself is neither the most rational vehicle of any enlightenment nor even its necessary goal. But now that the authoritarian enlightenment is being demolished, enlightenment becomes everyone's project. The expectation from a liberal political order is that the citizen has enough breathing room outside the tutelage of the state, so as

to overcome one's own "self-imposed immaturity," as Kant famously defined the condition of enlightenment.

But in the revolutionary processes themselves one demonstrates an accomplishment that required only a revolution to be experimentally verified: in overcoming not one's own but state-imposed immaturity, one demonstrates that the overcoming of a self-imposed immaturity has already taken place, inaudibly, and long before any revolution. The method of the revolution itself verifies the propositions of the enlightenment, now taken to earth and entrusted to ordinary mortals, directly.

revolutions is the establishment of a liberal state—explicitly, a civic state—not an anarchist society.

It is not unusual in revolutionary histories for revolutions to produce an unintended result. Max Weber already suggested that such disjuncture between the intention and result of revolutions was inevitable, when in the midst of the 1919 revolution he gave his famous lecture *Politik als Beruf*. But in the case of the Arab spring, we witness a rare likelihood that revolutions are reaching precisely their intentions: even governing orders now agree openly with virtually all revolutionary demands, except moving out of the way of the revolution. The intention is so widely shared in society, and so simple, that no organization at all is required to express it. A revolution here is an expression of social consensus: consensus on both method and intention. The liberal outcome is promised precisely by the anarchist method. Neither is a product of any party plan, but both are the foundation of the social consensus out of which the revolutions are emerging. So here the entire revolution is rational, from beginning to end, since intention and result seem to cohere, even though method (anarchy) and theory (liberal) appear to have no connection at all.

Yet they are connected, in the sense that both anarchism and liberalism are part of the heritage of the enlightenment and describe different dimensions of it. They do so not because they had been described as such in enlightenment thought, but because their communion expresses older social realities, which we would not suspect if we confine our perspective to European history. In Islamic history, for example, what would later be called “anarchism” or “liberalism” occasioned old realities

in which a substantial part of the civic order either lived independently of the state or generated serious limits to the reach of the state in society.

Elements of that old civic order appear to have sustained themselves even after, in the name of the enlightenment, modern, authoritarian states devoted all their resources to magnifying state power over society. Yet, the persistence of elements of the old civic ethics can be evidenced in revolutionary styles themselves: spontaneity of the revolutions is an extension of the already familiar spontaneity of everyday life; revolutionary solidarity, out of which emerges the will to sacrifice and combat, is an extension of common, convivial solidarity in neighborhoods and towns; distrust of distant authorities is part of an old, rational and enlightened common attitude, based on the simple thesis that a claim to help or guide is unverifiable in proportion to the power and distance of the authority that makes it; and finally, non-violence as a strategy is not learned out of manual written at Harvard, but out of familiar and old habits of protest. In recent years, we were made to forget the ordinary salience of those habits, as our attention was galvanized by spectacles of “terror” and “counter-terror” (a game with no political result other than feeding the power hunger of the authoritarian order and serving as its last *raison d’être*).¹

The crumbling authoritarian enlightenment, with its vanguardist and paternalist propositions, lies in a number of dynamics: vanguardism, as

¹ Editor’s note: A qualifier should be made here – none of the uprisings in the Arab world have been nonviolent. From armed rebels in Libya to attacking police and burning down political party headquarters in Egypt, violence and self-defense have been a constant feature. Though civil disobedience and peaceful occupations have occurred, they have been only one element in a larger picture.

ruption, and political repression. Former US ally Muammar Ghaddafi institutes a media blackout in Libya.

February 24th, Libya – Activists increase pressure on the Ghaddafi regime, shutting down oil exports, burning police stations, and mobilizing armed rebel groups in western Libya.

March 8th, Yemen – 2,000 prisoners stage a revolt and take guards hostage to show support for anti-government protesters.

March 14th, Libya – In the face of brutal suppression, rebel leaders ask for Western air support.

March 18th, Libya – NATO’s security council votes to create a no-fly zone to protect rebels in Benghazi.

March 19th, Syria – The unrest spreads to Syria, as the Assad regime kills 5 protesters and seals off the city of Daraa.

March 26th, Libya – The strategically important town of Ajdabiya falls to rebels, in their first significant victory since the beginning of air support. The city changes hands several times throughout the course of the conflict.

April 5th, Lebanon – Thousands of prisoners riot at Lebanon’s biggest prison in Roumieh, burning mattresses and smashing windows in protest of conditions. Guards’ retaliation was brutal as family members rallied outside.

April 12th, Syria – Syrian soldiers are shot by security forces after refusing to fire on protesters. Throughout April and May violence escalates, as tanks are called in to the city of Deraa, and fought off by rebels with molotov cocktails and small weapons fire.

May-July, Libya – Through spring and summer months Libyan rebels continue to make inroads on Ghaddafi’s forces with the help of NATO air support. Crackdowns in Syria become increasingly violent.

August 14th, Libya – Rebels advance on the Libyan capital of Tripoli from three fronts.

August 26th, Libya – Rebel forces oust Ghaddafi, as the “National Transitional Council” does its first press conference in the capital of Tripoli.

September 16th, Egypt – Protesters return to Tahrir Square to protest the reinstatement by military junta of Mubarak-era “emergency laws.”

September 24th, Yemen – At least 40 are killed in fierce fighting between the Army and pro-democracy activists in Sana’a.

EGYPT TODAY, TOMORROW THE WORLD

notes from a dissident in exile

What is happening—first in Tunisia and now in Egypt—is the beginning of the wave of full-scale revolutions that will inevitably follow the global financial crisis of 2008. Taking place in the wake of the failed “War on Terror,” these revolutions combine the latent force of massive numbers of unemployed youth with the dynamism of modern communication networks. They signal the conclusion of the decade of counter-revolution that followed September 11, 2001. Although they continue the exploration of new technologies and decentralized forms of organization initiated by the anti-globalization movement, the form and scale of these new revolutions is unprecedented. Largely anonymous groups are using the ubiquitous World Wide Web to spark leaderless rebellions against the pharaohs of the global empire of capital.

The self-styled rulers of the world are truly at a loss as to how to understand the new social and technological forces at play; the aging dictator Mubarak is a perfect example of this, but he is hardly the only one of his kind. One can almost smell the fear, not only amongst the despots of China and Saudi Arabia but also the supposed leaders of representative democracies. The contortions the US government has been going through are the most grotesque of all; it isn’t lost on the Egyptian people that the bullets striking down their comrades came

from the USA. Egypt receives \$1.3 billion dollars of military aid from the US every year. The suppression of “democracy” in the Middle East has been a deliberate policy of the US government: they know popular sentiment would never support their agenda as the military enforcer of global capitalism.

The best efforts of Mubarak’s dying regime to put its fingers in the ears of the world have not silenced the people on the streets of Cairo. Even blocking cell phones and trying to turn off the entire Internet have proved futile. For generations, Arabs and Africans have been silenced, represented by various colonial governments and portrayed as “primitive” and “terrorist” in Europe and the US. Now the people of Egypt are speaking in thunderous unison for freedom—not for political Islam, as demagogues from Iran to Israel would have the world believe. In doing so, they are realizing the ideals to which the US government pays only hypocritical lip service.

Today, the common condition from Egypt to Tunisia is approaching universal unemployment—especially among the younger generations, which comprise the vast majority of population. This is increasingly the case in the United States and Europe as well. Unemployment is no accident, but the inevitable result of the last thirty years of capitalism. Capitalism reached its internal limits at the end of the 1970s;

needs. The two other techniques, by contrast, tend to set power and knowledge as substitutes rather than allies. The authoritarian techniques assume that having power furnishes the best means to accomplish any good, in which case there is less compelling need for knowledge, since power alone will do. Whereas in anarchist techniques, suspicion of the merit of power as means to ends, highlights the compensatory value of knowledge alone as the best means.

In the current Arab context, revolutions are the means of testing, again, the philosophical propositions of the Enlightenment. As such, these revolutions constitute part of the Enlightenment’s ongoing global history. They are certainly not the first encounter by the Arabs of Enlightenment propositions; the story of such propositions themselves is indeed very old, and much of their underlying bases can in fact be found in indigenous philosophical and social traditions, rather than simply as recent importations from Europe. As critiques of despotism, as enactments of popular will, as acts of liberation, as progressive demolitions of frozen reality, these revolutions express the failure of an earlier, authoritarian experiment. From a contemporary revolutionary perspective it is easy enough to recognize the two basic failures of the now exhausted authoritarian path to enlightenment: 1) that path has more magnified the authoritarian than the enlightened aspect of the state; 2) the authoritarian path hid from view a crucial social fact being asserted now openly in Arab streets everywhere, namely that enlightenment comes from below, not from above; that society has already become far more saturated with ethos of enlightenment than has its government.

The Arab revolutionary experiments seem to be based on the newly shared presumption that ordinary individuals are capable of enlightenment without leadership or guardianship, without even organizations in the common sense of the word; that their enlightenment entitles them to undo the tyrannies under which they have languished in recent decades; and that acts of enlightenment are practical and not simply contemplative, world transformative rather than narrowly pragmatic. The agent of this revolutionary enlightenment is the little person, not the historical figure, the hero or the savior.

It is in this sense that the current Arab revolutionary wave is closest to anarchist ideals, which highlight spontaneous order and posit the principle of unimposed order as the highest form of a rational society, and which like all revolutionary currents in 19th century Europe had clear roots in Enlightenment thought. Obviously, few of the current Arab revolutionaries call themselves “anarchists.” And in any case, none of the revolutions so far intend to replace the state itself with a self-governed civic order, only to modernize the state so that it respects citizen’s rights and becomes more accountable.

Thus in these revolutionary experiments we encounter a rare combination of an anarchist method and a liberal intention: the revolutionary style is anarchist, in the sense that it requires little organization, leadership, or even coordination; tends to be suspicious of parties and hierarchies even after revolutionary success; and relies on spontaneity, minimal planning, local initiative, and individual will much more than on any other factors. On the other hand, the explicit goal of all Arab

ANARCHIST, LIBERAL, AND AUTHORITARIAN ENLIGHTENMENTS

by *Mohammed Bamyeh*

The Arab spring, as far as we can see, appears to require no guardian intellectual authority, no political leadership, no organized parties. In fact even after revolutionary success, those elements still fail to materialize: there is no party of the revolution anywhere, no leader emerges to embody its historical spirit, and intellectuals still ponder the meaning of revolutions that most of them endorsed but none expected. Furthermore, these apparent absences—political, organizational, intellectual—were not due to any unfamiliarity with parties, leaders, ideologues or ideologies of revolt, for all of those have been tried before.

A revolution is an experiment in enlightenment. Experiments, as we know, may succeed, fail, or suggest revisions in their method, sometimes a reconsideration of what they are supposed to discover. 19th century revolutionary thought in Europe is often traced to the Enlightenment critique of the arbitrariness of absolute power, and to the Enlightenment's elaboration of the creative capacity of human will, reason, and freedom. Since these philosophical propositions were social in their implications, they could only be verified (or amended, or abandoned) only with the aid of grand experiments

in the political, cultural and economic realms.

Those experiments have followed different techniques. In reflecting on the Arab revolts underway I would like to propose three basic techniques of enlightenment. 1) An authoritarian technique, in which an enlightened elite, using the state, takes it upon itself to modernize an immobile, unruly mass presumed to be governed by arcane traditions; 2) a liberal technique, in which a modern state is seen to be crucial, but its elite is neither presumed to have monopoly over enlightenment nor power to make such a claim; 3) an anarchist technique, in which enlightenment is seen to come most reliably from below, through transformations of civic traditions rather than through state power or social engineering.

The common presumption that enlightenment has generated an alliance of knowledge and power describes in fact only one of those three techniques, namely the liberal technique, in which knowledge complements the otherwise partial power of the state. Knowledge here organizes a civic link between state and society, and in the process reduces for the liberal order the costs of policing and repressive

now the factories of every industry produce ever more commodities, while increasing automation renders workers less and less necessary. The only way to make profits off these commodities is to eliminate workers or pay them next to nothing. To discipline the skyrocketing unemployed population and prevent revolt, the police wage a never-ending war on the population. We live in a world overflowing with cheap shit, in which human life is the cheapest of all.

In these conditions, people have nothing left to lose. Nothing, that is, but their dignity—and it turns out they will not surrender that. It was precisely this innermost core of dignity that led Mohammed Bouazizi to light himself on fire rather than face humiliation at the hands of the police, who in seizing his fruit-selling cart took away the only way he could feed his family. The blaze lit by Mohammed Bouazizi has spread, carried by other unemployed people who thereby transform themselves from abject beggars into world-historical heroes. The people of Egypt are not only burning police cars, they are organizing popular committees to clean the police and other trash off the street, and the streets of Cairo have never felt safer.

It is not surprising that a wave of revolutions should begin now. Not since the days of pharaohs and monarchs has the world been controlled by as senseless a force as the global financial market. As capitalists became less and less able to produce profit from industrial production over the past decades, they had to invent means of profiting based on expected future returns. But in a world of increasingly cheap commodities and poor consumers, how could capitalists keep people buying stuff and still make a profit? They had

to invent a way for consumers to continue buying even when they weren't paid living wages: thus the invention of mass debt. When the sale of real goods can no longer produce profit, profits must be made on increasingly fantastic expected future returns—in other words, on finance.

Yet like any house of cards, debt cannot be built up forever. Eventually, someone wants to be paid back—and so the entire house of cards collapsed under its own weight in 2008. The financial crisis signals a deeper metaphysical crisis of our present order: capitalism is unable to provide for the real material needs of the global population. The high poverty rates in Egypt are not simply the result of mismanagement by Mubarak, but the inevitable consequence of the contradictions of our era.

Their eyes hopelessly clouded by their own ideology and lack of vision, heads of state can only stand dumb and surprised as the crisis goes on and on. They lamely hope to re-start the financial markets through “austerity” or “green” capitalism, refusing to consider systemic change despite the fact that the system cannot even deliver jobs and affordable commodities to people—much less a good life. Just as it took an era of revolution to overthrow the divine right of kings, it will take new revolutions to overthrow the divine right of things: the power of financial capital and its puppet dictators.

Revolutions are never brought about by technology, but rather by the collective action of human beings who radically transform their relationships with each other and the world they share. However, one cannot deny what an important role the World Wide Web has played in Egypt and Tunisia. Especially among cybernetically skilled and

predominantly unemployed youth, it enabled people to call for and participate in mass mobilizations without any need of leaders. The demonstrations in Egypt on January 25 were called for by a Facebook page called “We Are All Khaled Said,” named for a victim of police brutality much like Alexis Grigoropoulos in Greece. The page itself was set up by the anonymous “El-Shaheed”—that is, “martyr” in Arabic. Meanwhile, youth throughout the world are mobilizing as Anonymous; in the battle over Wikileaks and more recently in actions against the Tunisian government, Anonymous has showed itself to be a potent new international with an awakening political maturity beyond the message boards of 4chan. Demonstrators’ ability to communicate with large numbers of people and react immediately to events via mobile phones, Twitter, and Facebook is swiftly making previous forms of Leftist and industrial-based political organization obsolete, along with other hierarchical formations such as political Islam.

This revolutionary use of social media should come as no surprise. In the hands of an elite few, expensive communications technology will naturally be used for self-aggrandizement and consumerism. In the hands of unemployed youth and other excluded classes, this technology can be repurposed to organize revolution. The Internet is the new global factory floor, and we are seeing its first workers’ councils form—a new kind of collective intelligence that enables people to organize themselves directly without representation.

The blank confusion of global capitalists as to who is “really behind” the mysterious resistance in Egypt and Tunisia is revealing. It’s obvious how desperately US politicians wish they

had anyone, such as Mohamad ElBaradei, with whom to negotiate. These revolts are anarchist in form if not content—and even the content is becoming increasingly radical. The absence of any organized group or leader in the early days of the protests speaks volumes: increased information technology has not only destabilized the old Leftist forms of organizing, but also the justifications for having hierarchical government in the first place. When people can communicate, they can organize their own lives. Expanding such horizontal structures to a global scale no longer seems impossible, even if it is not yet well thought out.

To make things even worse for capitalists and nation-states, the massive secret apparatus of the state has been revealed in all its incompetence by sites such as Wikileaks. While Wikileaks had nothing to do with the Egyptian revolution, the cables describing Ben Ali’s pet tiger being fed a luxurious diet while Tunisians starved further stoked the flames in that country. Wikileaks has produced paranoia in the global state apparatus itself, as the state cannot function without the subjugated population believing that it is necessary and according it the right to exercise violent force. Now the empire has no clothes—and its naked corrupt power is disgusting to behold. There is a growing consensus that the state apparatus is an archaic holdover no longer worthy of respect.

The Mubarak regime made the classic mistake of conflating technological structures with the people using them, an error typical of Silicon Valley and certain theorists as well. In a poorly thought-out move, the regime shut down all four ISPs in the country, effectively turning off the Internet. In addition, cell phones have been inter-

analysis necessary for insurrections to become genuine anti-capitalist revolutions. What does it take for people to realize that the true potential of their neighborhood defense committees is not as a means of temporarily replacing the police, but of prefiguring the abolition of all police, in every country?

No event occurs in a vacuum; events originate in concrete conditions, and consequently they tend to come in waves. The events in Egypt show that the center of revolutionary impetus is no longer “the West”; this new age of revolution will culminate first in areas where the living conditions are becoming unbearable and the ways of life are not yet completely colonized by capital. However, it would be a mistake to see this as merely the conclusion of an unfinished anti-colonial revolt. It is something much bigger and deeper. The financial crisis is a sign that capitalism is on a declining trajectory. The conditions that precipitated the events in Egypt are rapidly becoming universal across the globe, spelling another cycle of revolution and possibly war. Eventually these same forces will hit Saudi Arabia, Europe, China, and finally even the United States with the strength of a tidal wave.

Make no mistake about it, we are entering an era of revolt. These revolts will reject and attack capitalism in their concrete practice, even if the systematic destruction of earlier revolutionary currents has left a vacuum. Hopefully the participants will realize that freedom is impossible without the destruction of capitalism and the state, and a new generation of revolutionary thought will update the concept of revolution for the dawning era. We are at a point now where it should become clear to all that we can direct our own

lives—that the state is a historical fossil holding us back. As shown in Egypt, the stranglehold of the state and capitalism must be broken in the streets; over the coming decades the results of this ultimate struggle will likely decide the fate of humanity itself.

All Power to the People!

-A dissident exiled in North Africa,
with assistance from the CrimethInc.
Workers' Collective

mittently blocked before major demonstrations. If anything this only enraged the Egyptian people more. It may even have interrupted their spectatorship—it is easier to watch a demonstration over the Net than to participate—and driven more and more people into the street. The lesson here is clear: the supposedly decentralized Internet is quite centralized, and while it may be useful, it is a mistake to depend on it as long as it remains in capitalist hands. Yet rulers such as Mubarak face a no-win situation. If they keep communications technologies up and running, these will be used to organize against them—but if they take them down, it will provoke worldwide outrage.

How do you organize without the Net? You might start with existing social institutions; in Egypt, this meant the mosques. The “Days of Wrath,” characterized by street-fighting with the police far more intense than the Greek insurrection of 2008, culminated in the torching of the headquarters of Mubarak’s party. Afterwards, in a brilliant move, the protesters called for people to gather after prayer at mosques—where most Egyptians would be gathered anyway. In this regard, the mosques served the same purpose that social centers and squats did during the Greek insurrection, only for a much greater part of the population.

So while communications technology may be advantageous in the early stages of organizing, a movement must become powerful enough not to need the Internet once it takes to the streets. In Egypt, the revolt actually grew in intensity after the Internet was shut off.

If there is one regard in which the Internet is indispensable, it is in spreading the news of disorder elsewhere. As the Empire’s power has be-

come increasingly spectacular, it has become more vulnerable to being damaged on the terrain of the spectacular. Obama’s first response to the uprising was to call for the “violence” to cease—even though his government routinely administers violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan and inflicts it on US citizens through the world’s largest prison system. He and Mubarak are not against violence, but they appear to be afraid of images of violence. If these images escape, they undermine the state’s cover story about maintaining order.

At the same time, the state desperately needs people to distrust and fear each other. This explains why Mubarak released undercover police in civilian uniforms to pose as looters in order to justify his crackdown. When that failed, he turned off the Internet and denied media access in order to prepare the conditions for the kind of massacre it would take to restore his control. Yet now it seems doubtful that the army is willing to carry out such a massacre.

The insurrection that began by burning down police stations then shifted to massive peaceful demonstrations intended to win over the army. Pamphlets that have circulated indicate that Egyptian organizers planned from the beginning to pit the army against the police. Insurrectionists in Europe and the USA should take note of this clever strategic move. After the front line of the party of order was effectively defeated, the Egyptians clearly understood that the only force capable of stopping them was the army. Instead of attacking it directly, which would surely have resulted in a massacre, they undertook to win over the hearts and minds of the soldiers. Thus far they have been successful in

this, demonstrating that they can self-organize and maintain a leaderless yet disciplined rebellion that makes the streets of Cairo safe and clean for the first time in years.

This leaves the army without a reason for existence, let alone any excuse for a massacre. Once an insurrection has reached a certain phase, as a friend has said, weapons are unnecessary. For a revolution to succeed in overthrowing the state, the army must refuse to shoot its own people and instead join them in revolt. In Egypt, the army is at least paralyzed enough right now not to start shooting; it may yet join the people, or more likely attempt to broker a transition to representative democracy.

All this shows that billions of dollars of military equipment can't stop a revolution. Once things reach a certain point, military force is no longer the determinant factor. If the Egyptian people persist in revolt, the military can hardly bomb its own cities.

Yet even if a military defeat is avoided, the insurrectionary process begun on the "Days of Wrath" is more likely to be side-tracked into representative democracy than to end in a genuine communization of society—that is, in the immediate sharing of all production for the survival of the people. This is not to be pessimistic—already the neighborhood assemblies and defense committees resemble nothing more than the Paris Commune. But Mubarak is a dictator, and the youth of Egypt have not yet tasted the bitter fruits of representative democracy. They may have to learn about them the hard way. Even if a representative democracy is established, it will not be the end of the story—witness the continuing protests in Tunisia. There would inevitably be another insurrection sooner or later,

although that could take years or decades.

In this context, it is promising that many young Egyptians seem aware that representative democracy will only limit their movement and redirect into yet another form of enslavement. This is visible in many ways—for example, in the message sent to self-appointed leaders like ElBaradei, "Shall we just call your mobile when we have finished the revolution for you?" The insurrection has also seen unparalleled action and power of the Egyptian women, who will not go back to being subservient under the Muslim Brotherhood after these upheavals.

Yet the popular occupation of Tahir Square cannot last forever; there must come a moment when food will be produced, train lines reactivated, and the Internet turned back on. These are the real keys to the success of the insurrection and to preventing the return to capitalism, even under the mantle of representative democracy. It seems that the steps in this direction have not yet begun.

Let's step back now and ask larger questions. If Egypt is not fundamentally different from Europe and the US, why haven't such insurrections happened there as well? First, let us not be too hasty—the dominos are already falling, with massive protests in the streets of Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, and Mauritania. One reason the insurrection has such popular power in Egypt is that, as many Arabic-speaking countries, the Egyptian form of life has not yet been fully subsumed into capitalism. For example, in many cases one only pays as much as "one feels" one should pay for goods. Hagglings are not so much a way to maximize micro-profits as to ascertain an affordable and ethical price for an exchange.

The commodity exchange itself is often less important than the social relationships that the commodity symbolizes. The collective responsibility and power of the family knits people together over generations, in contrast to the alienated individuals of the United States and most of Europe. The vibrant and public street life of the Middle East is a natural fomenting ground for insurrection.

Yet are there not dark forces waiting in the wings? This seems unlikely, as the protest is clearly focused on "freedom" rather than Islam, with those wanting to lead religious chants being shouted down on occasion. This is not to say that Egyptians are not Islamic—indeed they are—yet there are subtle distinctions. Political Islam is effectively the Tea Party of Egypt, a hierarchical religious movement mostly of the older and conservative generation; but Islam exists in other variants, binding social relationships and promoting a collective ethics. One can even interpret the giving of alms in Islam as a ritual to avoid excessive centralization of wealth. "Allah" does not necessarily denote a commanding deity; the notion may also point to the ineffable, the invisible excess of life that denies reduction and resists the catastrophic harnessing of all to the imperatives of profit.

Of course, currents far older than Islam hold sway in Egypt as well. Unlike many in Europe and America, many Egyptians are profoundly aware of their history from antiquity onwards, and feel deep shame at their present state of impoverishment. The dignity and respect they show each other in the streets in midst of the insurrection attests that this revolution is not abstract, but rooted in everyday lives; it is the deep metaphysics of these forms of life that provide the subjective condi-

tions for transformation.

Communism is older than Marx, just as anarchy is older than Proudhon. The age of revolutions did not begin with the Paris Commune, nor did it end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. As capitalism now encircles the earth, the one thing that could unite the world would be a common rejection of it and the police that defend it. The communism of Marx was trapped in the abstract metaphysics of economics and poisoned by a misunderstanding of the danger posed by the state; this sabotaged the revolutions of the early 20th century, bringing about the catastrophe of Soviet-era state capitalism.

But the age of revolutions is not over; on the contrary. In a song of the Tuareg—"the desert is our mother, and we will not sell her"—we can glimpse a form of communism far more alien and hostile to capital than anything imagined by Lenin. Many of the calls for "freedom" in Egypt have little to do with the freedom to elect a president or choose among commodities on the market, but resonate with a common desire to live with their heads high and not cowed to any ruler. For this they are ready to die, whether by self-immolation or in the streets together.

Yet one can sense a profound need at this time for a common international revolutionary purpose that resonates outside of the Middle East, for something truly universal to fill the void left by capitalism. The nationalist flags of the protesters were tactically effective at confusing the army, but they also reflect a lack of critique of the conceptual apparatus of capital and the state. While the conditions are right for revolution, over the last thirty years revolutionaries have largely failed to create and spread the organization and