

Revolution without Revolutionaries

Making Sense of the Arab Spring

ASEF BAYAT

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I happen to be an observer of two revolutionary episodes separated by roughly three decades. As a young activist in the late 1970s in Iran, I was engaged in a revolution that opened a new chapter in world politics, the effects of which continue to be felt even to this day. I am referring to the Iranian revolution of 1979, which unfolded almost in tandem with the Sandinistas toppling Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua, followed by Grenada's New Jewel Movement (NJM) led by the left-wing Maurice Bishop, which ended the pro-US Eric Gairy's regime. Not long before, a socialist insurgency had given rise to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the 1970s, while a Marxist-Leninist liberation front was seeking to alter the government in the neighboring sheikhdom of Oman. Arising in the midst of the Cold War, these revolutions spurred a powerful anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, radical democratic, and social justice impulse. I fervently followed these developments—intrigued by revolutionary politics, excited about the prospect of a better future for these nations that had endured repressive autocracies for so long, even though dispirited by their often authoritarian outcomes.

After a span of some thirty years, a new wave of political upheavals overtook the Middle East and beyond. Beginning with the Green revolt of 2009 in Iran, they peaked with the 2011 Arab Spring and were soon followed by a global wave of Occupy movements that raged in the heartland of the capitalist West and spread into some seventy countries. As a committed scholar and sometimes participant in social movements, I closely followed the events surrounding the Green revolt, experienced the political climate prior to the Arab uprisings as a longtime resident of Egypt, and observed the happenings associated with the Occupy movements in North America.

As I juxtapose these two revolutionary episodes, I cannot help sensing how remarkably different they are—not only in their modes of mobiliza-

tion and organization but especially in their meanings and broader visions. I find the speed, spread, and intensity of the recent revolutions extraordinarily unparalleled, while their lack of ideology, lax coordination, and absence of any galvanizing leadership and intellectual precepts have almost no precedent. But even more striking is that they lacked the kind of radicalism that marked the earlier revolutions and that the ideals of deep democracy, equity, fair property relations, and social justice paled or were more rhetorical than driven by genuine concern anchored on strategic visions or concrete programs. Indeed, it remains a question if what emerged during the Arab Spring were in fact revolutions in sense of their twentieth-century counterparts.

What did happen over the course of the past three decades that altered the nature of radical politics? How and why did the meaning of revolution and the nature of transformative demands change? This book, built on evocations from the earlier revolutions, notably the Iranian experience of 1979, focuses on the Arab uprisings to address the questions of their distinctions and associated implications. At its core, the book aims to offer a new comparative vantage point from which to observe and examine the meaning of the 2011 political upheavals.

Revolutions of the 1970s

On February 11, 1979, a powerful revolutionary movement overthrew the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last of Iran's twenty-five-hundred-year-old monarchy, replacing it with the first Islamic Republic in the modern world. The victory day followed some eighteen months of intermittent street protests, clashes with the police, labor strikes, and an eventual armed insurrection. The revolution toppled a regime that had emerged in 1953 from a coup engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against the secular democratic government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who championed the nationalization of Iran's oil industry. With his return to power the shah, backed by the United States, began to pursue an aggressive policy of modernization, Westernization, and socioeconomic development. Women gained the right to vote, a literacy campaign covered rural areas, and a land reform turned sharecroppers into smallholders and poor tillers into rural proletariat, all set to modernize rural life. But the shah maintained a despotic rule anchored by the notorious secret police, the Organization of Intelligence and National Security (SAVAK), suppressing democratic voices, civil associations, and labor and left movements. Thus, when in 1977, US president Jimmy Carter, following his

human rights agenda, called on the shah for openness, the opposition—college students, guerrilla insurgents, supporters of exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the intellectual Ali Shariati—seized the opportunity to express dissent.

A number of liberal secular lawyers, opposition leaders, and intellectuals began writing open letters to the authorities, including the shah, demanding a free press, rule of law, and human rights. The intelligentsia began to regroup, organize, and mobilize. The evenings of poetry reading at Goethe Institute and Aryamehr University in Tehran brought thousands of mostly secular and leftist youths, including myself, into what became a forum to lash out at the government's repressive practices. Moderate clerics and Islamic figures, such as Mehdi Bazargan, who would become the first prime minister after the revolution, then launched their own evening lectures. Students at Tehran University organized street demonstrations once the academic year began. With the protests in the Qom Seminary concerning a disparaging newspaper article against Ayatollah Khomeini, who was in exile in Iraq for his opposition to the shah, revolutionary protests entered a new phase. Each death in a protest entailed further mourning and marches, generating a cycle of protests that continued for eighteen months. Even the imposition of martial law on September 8, 1978, did not suppress the protests, and demands for the downfall of the shah were voiced as early as February 1978.

The strike of some forty thousand oil refinery workers and the ensuing nationwide general strike in the key sectors of the economy and state administration, including state radio and television, encouraged the revolution and disoriented the regime. By now, the intransigent Ayatollah Khomeini, deported from Iraq to Paris, had become the *de facto* leader of the revolution; he communicated his messages and directives through personal networks; international media, notably the BBC; and recorded tapes that were widely distributed in Iran. Revolutionaries formed the Provisional Revolutionary Council as an alternative organ of power to that of the shah. The United States and Britain then urged the shah to leave the country for "vacation." Before his departure on February 1, 1979, the shah transferred authority to a Regency Council and a new prime minister from the liberal opposition, Shapour Bakhtiar, who held little legitimacy on the streets. Only days after the shah's departure, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to a triumphant welcome. With the army in disarray and the revolution at its height, the ayatollah appointed an alternative government led by Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. It seized power following two days of armed insurrection led largely by the Marxist and Mujahedin guer-

rillas along with the air force cadets who had defected; they collectively defeated the notorious Imperial Guard, the last vestige of the regime's resistance.¹

The revolution enjoyed widespread support from broad constituencies—modern and traditional, men and women, middle class and laborers—who were connected to a charismatic leadership and a revolutionary organization through the networks of activists operating in the seminaries, mosques, universities, and neighborhoods. The revolutionary strategy and ideology had an intellectual precursor, a body of ideas and visions rooted in both Marxism and political Islam. Many activists had been inspired by the Marxist Fedaiian Khalq and Islamic leftist Mujahedin guerrillas, who like the Latin American guerrilla movements had established bases in the northern forests and urban cells. Islamists had sought inspiration from the revolutionary ideas of the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb as well as the Palestinian resistance movement. Ayatollah Khomeini had articulated his own vision of Islamic governance in the treatise *Islamic Government*.² But none matched the intellectual influence of Ali Shariati, a Marxian Muslim thinker whose ideas of “red” and “revolutionary” Islam garnered a widespread following among political youth and intelligentsia.³ Thus, when the protests in Iran unfolded, many participants had already formed ideas about revolution and revolutionary strategy, even if their meanings and expectations differed. Yet sentiments concerning anticapitalism, popular democracy, and social justice remained key components of both the secular and Islamic intellectual compendium; they came to occupy a central place in the postrevolutionary deeds and debates.

The victory of the revolution coincided with the collapse of authority in the state administration and economic enterprises. Police control had crumbled, many businesspeople had deserted their companies, managers had left factories, landlords departed their large estates, and the rich abandoned homes hurriedly, leaving thousands of lavish properties behind. Thus, landless peasants confiscated large agribusiness estates, factory workers took over hundreds of workplaces, and government employees began to run the ministries and departments. In the cities, ordinary citizens launched a spectacular takeover of mainly public lands and illegal construction of homes, contributing to the rapid expansion of Iran's urban centers, notably the capital. Some 150,000 housing units—palaces, hotels, villas, and unfinished apartment blocks—belonging to the elites of the ancien régime went to the newly established Foundation of the Dispossessed. The new grassroots organizations, notably the “revolutionary institutions” such as the Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards), paramilitary volunteers, rural Construction Crusade, and Housing Foundation, quickly moved to fill the

power vacuum.⁴ In the end, the Iranian revolution entailed a rapid and radical transformation of the old order; it opened a political future that embraced the republican ideals of popular sovereignty and distributional justice while paving the way for what was to be the long march of political Islam in the world.

Although dubbed “the last great revolution,” the Iranian experience was not the only radical revolution in the region.⁵ The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of a number of revolutionary movements in the Arab world that took their ideological cues from both Nasserite anti-imperialism and Marxism-Leninism. In Yemen, where Britain had forged a federal government run by the local amirs and sultans, a guerrilla group later called the National Liberation Front (NLF) began an insurgency in the early 1960s. Based in the port city of Aden with its militant trade unionism, these southern militants—including exiled workers, intellectuals, officers, and tribal leaders—fought British forces, mobilized the countryside and took territories, defeated the sultans and amirs who owned land, and inherited positions in the tribal hierarchy; by 1967 they had established the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen.⁶ The new government nationalized the economy, created central planning, limited ownership of housing for rent, and carried out land reform with some success, as the gross domestic product (GDP) rose by 25 percent by 1973. Yet the poor economic base, scarce foreign exchange, meager skilled labor and inexperienced administrators, and hasty nationalization also had an adverse impact.⁷ Nevertheless, social reforms proceeded with an impressive outcome. Income equality improved, corruption was reduced, and health and educational services expanded. Considerable efforts were made toward emancipation of women despite continuing conservative backlash—women became legally equal to men and were encouraged to work in public; polygamy, child marriage, and arranged marriage were all banned; and equal rights in divorce received legal sanction. Imams did continue their functions in mosques but lost their social power as education became secularized, religious endowment came under state control, and sharia was replaced with the state legal codes.⁸ On the whole, emphasis was placed on the egalitarian tenets of Islam.

Like the Cuban revolutionaries, the NLF had transcended its early nationalist position to embrace Marxist politics and armed struggle. During their campaign in the mountains of South Yemen, the rebels read, reflected, and strived to learn from the international socialist strategies—notably Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban experiences—while shedding their “petty bourgeois” Nasserism and tribal mind-set.⁹ But the more heart-felt inspiration came from

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the left-wing Arab intelligentsia centered in Lebanon, in particular those associated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), whose secular, pluralist, and progressive ideology had embraced such luminaries as the great poet Mahmoud Darwish, the author Elias Khoury, and the Marxist novelist and strategist Ghassan Kanafani, whom the Israeli secret police assassinated in 1972.

The victory of the NLF in Yemen boosted the insurgency in the neighboring Sultanate of Oman, where the nationalist youth in Salala had established the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman in the mid-1960s to free the southern province of Dhofar from the rule of Sultan Said bin Taimur and his British ally. Disenchanted by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's defeat in the 1967 war and emboldened by the departure of Britain and the NLF victory in Yemen, the Dhofari liberation movement adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology and aimed to liberate "all of the Gulf from imperialism."¹⁰ Political scientist Fred Halliday, who visited the liberated areas, reported that "wherever we went we saw people wearing Mao and Lenin badges, reading socialist works and discussing."¹¹ Works by Lenin and Bertolt Brecht and on Palestinian resistance and the Spanish civil war had special purchase, with discussions disseminated on the pages of the weekly *Sawt al-Thawra* and the monthly *Yunyu*.¹² The Dhofari revolutionary culture received its cue from the revolutionary movements in the Third World at the time, but it drew particularly on the nearby revolutions in Palestine and South Yemen, as well as the experiences of Cuban and Vietnamese revolutionaries.¹³ Among the insurgents were ex-slaves, shepherds, fishermen, migrant workers in the Gulf, and fighters from richer families. The insurgency exhausted the sultan and his British ally, even though the fear of Marxist revolutions had caused the conservative regimes in the region—Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Pakistan—to extend financial and military assistance to the sultan. But it was the shah of Iran who, by deploying thousands of troops, eventually forced the militants to consider a negotiated settlement.

The legacy of these liberation movements had become part of the intellectual universe of the Iranian revolutionaries—both Marxist and religious—who defeated the shah's Imperial Guards in their final push to topple the shah's regime.¹⁴ When the Iranian revolutionaries seized the radio and TV stations in Tehran, the leftist Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua were preparing to take the capital, Managua, in a popular uprising that would end the US-backed dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza on July 19, 1979. Established in 1961, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) undertook guerrilla operations against government installations, including the presidential palace, while building support

among the rural and urban poor, middle classes, and progressive faction of the Catholic Church aligned with the liberation theology movement. But the revolutionary conflict had cost some thirty-nine thousand lives. The popular mobilization intensified after the 1972 earthquake in Managua and the revelations that the authorities had embezzled international aid funds, which compelled the government to impose martial law. The subsequent pressure by President Carter on the regime to lift martial law emboldened the insurgency to grow into a wider national conflict that eventually forced Somoza and his officers to leave the country once the United States retracted its support.¹⁵

Having just experienced our own revolution in Iran, the events in Nicaragua had special meaning for us. There was something peculiar about this experience—a radical revolution that simultaneously embraced political pluralism. The Sandinistas formed a government of national reconstruction that included moderate businessmen, intellectuals, conservative parties, and Marxists. They pursued political pluralism, a mixed economy, and nonalignment. But at the same time, the Sandinistas embarked on an ambitious social revolution. Their literacy campaign reduced the illiterate population from 60 percent to just 13 percent; health care became available to the lower classes, worker participation plans allowed workers to take control of industry and farms whose owners had fled or were involved in sabotage, and the land reform program granted land to the tillers for the first time in the country's history.¹⁶ The Sandinista revolution represented an experiment to combine a project of national unity and the hegemony of popular classes: socialism and political pluralism.¹⁷ It was partially this extraordinary political project that overshadowed the events in the nearby Caribbean island of Grenada where the NJM of Maurice Bishop launched an armed revolution against the government of Eric Gairy, who had come to power in fraudulent 1976 general elections.

These extraordinary upheavals had followed a series of anticolonial revolutions in southern Africa—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau—after the Portuguese rose to dismantle their own colonial dictatorship in 1974. Led by charismatic leadership and organization, all of these revolutions espoused powerful radical impulses expressed in anti-imperialist sentiments, anticapitalism, and distributive justice, even though only Nicaragua embraced inclusive multiparty democracy. They were all breaking away from global power relations in which the United States had been dominant. Informed by a blend of socialist, nationalist, and left-leaning religious ideas (Islamic and Catholic political theology), these revolutions entailed fundamental transformation of

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the states and societies and involved radical practices of popular control, civic engagement, nationalization, land distribution, and some forms of worker control and self-management in firms and farms.¹⁸ Unfolding in the midst of the Cold War, however, they experienced deep hostility by the Western powers, led by the United States. Iran underwent economic sanctions that continued for some thirty-five years; the Persian Gulf revolutions faced a severe backlash from the conservative Arab regimes and the shah of Iran; the Sandinista strategy of socialist democracy was derailed by a devastating Contra War sponsored by President Ronald Reagan. And the US invasion in 1983 restored the old regime in Grenada after the four-year rule of the Marxist-Leninist NJM.

The Arab Revolutions

Some thirty years passed during which the Middle East went through a turbulent period of wars, globalization, economic restructuring, social change, demographic shift, religious revival, and technological innovation. Yet conventional wisdom deemed the authoritarian regimes resilient and stability was ensured.¹⁹ But it was only to take the self-immolation of a poor street vendor in the hinterlands of Tunisia to reveal the scope of mass discontent and the fragility of the elites.

On December 16, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the depressed town of Sidi Bouzid after the police abusively confiscated his scale and vegetables because he lacked a permit. Once the news spread, relatives and local youth poured into the streets in outrage. The clips of the protests found their way immediately into tweets and Facebook pages—one with seven hundred thousand participants—reaching the international media. Local activists and trade unionists quickly moved in to mobilize on the ground by helping organize more rallies. Within the following three weeks much of central Tunisia was involved in what came to be an uprising, with the citizens demanding jobs, dignity, and freedom. Bouazizi died in the hospital nineteen days later, and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's promise of jobs, reforms, and free elections went unheeded; if anything, his conceding tones emboldened the rebels, who now wanted the president to relinquish power. As the uprising stretched northward to the capital, Tunis, the trade unionists broke rank with the national leadership and staged labor strikes. The professional middle class that enjoyed a "comfortable" material and social life under Ben Ali's police state also joined in. The impressive march of eight thousand lawyers in support of the uprising sent a clear

message that the uprising had garnered a broad national constituency. When on January 14, 2011, the protesters filled Bourguiba Boulevard in the capital and the army refused to shoot to kill, Ben Ali and his wife left Tunisia for good. The revolution seemed triumphant.

Activists in Egypt received the news of the revolution in Tunisia with great excitement. The April 6 youth movement and the coordinators of the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” had already planned a protest for January 25, National Police Day, to protest the brutal torture and murder of a young man, Khaled Said, by the police for alleged drug use. To the astonishment of the security forces and the organizers, tens of thousands marched from some twenty different points in Cairo, including the poor neighborhoods of Boulaq, Shubra al Khaima, and Dar El-Salam, flooding the iconic Tahrir Square. All sorts of people gathered—young and old, men and women, Christians and Muslims, a blind man with stick, a man in a wheelchair. Security used teargas, clubs, and rocks, and the government blocked Twitter and the Internet, but the protests spread in the following days to provincial cities such as Alexandria, Suez, Mahalla, and Mansoura. Friday January 28 saw the largest crowd in the nation’s streets, where protesters fought the security forces, attacked police stations, burned government buildings, and chanted “bread, freedom, justice.” The conservative Islamic Salafi groups generally did not participate, while the Muslim Brothers joined later after initial hesitation. As the police retreated from the public scene, protesters occupied Tahrir Square and began to erect tents, while citizens formed Popular Committees to protect their neighborhoods from potential acts of crime. When the police disappeared, the military took to the streets but signaled neutrality. Now that the protest had grown into a full-fledged uprising, protesters wished to end the thirty-year rule of President Mubarak, who was grooming his son to replace him. Mubarak signaled concessions but reaffirmed he was not leaving. During the Battle of the Camels on February 2, the revolutionaries repelled the regime’s use of armed thugs riding camels, and when labor strikes escalated in the country, the balance of street power shifted. Eighteen days of spectacular uprising, which left 841 dead and thousands injured, forced Mubarak to step down on February 11, 2011; he transferred power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to run the nation’s affairs and preside over the “transition” process—to hold parliamentary and presidential elections and prepare a new constitution. Egyptians celebrated the victory of the revolution with ecstatic jubilation.

The demise of Ben Ali and Mubarak marked a new episode in the politics of the region—a region that had remained captive to the whims of autocratic kings, despotic sheikhs, and lifelong presidents for decades. As if Tunisia and Egypt had shown the path, popular revolts spread like wildfire to some seventeen other Arab states, notably Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Jordan, and Morocco. In Yemen, where sporadic demonstrations over jobs and the economy had already been under way since 2007, more widespread protests targeted the corrupt president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled in opulence the poorest Arab country for thirty-three years. The opposition brought together diverse constituencies, ranging from the southern oil secessionist movement, to northern Shia Houthis who already controlled territories, youth and women's groups, and moderate Islamist groups such as the Islah Party. The mass rallies in the key city centers invoked the image of Tahrir as hundreds of thousands of protesters marched, clashed with police, and called for the end of Saleh's reign. After months of mass protests, during which top officials from the military and the ruling party defected, Ali Saleh eventually agreed on November 23, 2011, to a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to cede power to his vice president, Mansour al-Hadi, in exchange for immunity. Another dictator was forced to abdicate. In August 2011 Libyan Muammar al-Qaddafi was the fourth Arab despot deposed, following a bloody revolt in which NATO forces effectively determined how things should proceed.

In Bahrain only three days after the fall of Mubarak, tens of thousands of both Sunni and Shia responded to a call to protest unemployment, inflation, and repression in the center of Manama. But a deep-seated feeling of discrimination by the working-class Shia majority against the Sunni elites, chiefly the ruling clan, remained a key factor.²⁰ Thus, demands for more representative political reform faced the fury of the monarchy, who charged the opposition with being the fifth column of Iran. Playing the sectarian card, the regime asked for the military intervention of the GCC on March 14. Saudi Arabia was only too ready to dispatch thousands of army personnel and weapons to crush the uprising. The three-month Emergency Law declared on March 15 dampened the opposition, which was suffering from discord and dissension. The United States was inclined to keep both the monarchy and its naval base in Bahrain.

The speed and spread of these popular uprisings were truly extraordinary. Within six months they deposed four entrenched autocrats and seriously threatened others. With unusual bravery, persistence, and sacrifice these non-violent rebels withstood the brutal violence of the adversarial regimes. As revo-

lutionary movements, these were certainly spectacular. But the politics, vision, and broad trajectories of these revolutions showed remarkable difference from those of the 1970s. First, the Arab revolutions lacked any associated intellectual anchor. Revolutions usually both inspire and are informed by certain intellectual productions—a set of ideas, concepts, and philosophies—that come to inform the ideational subconscious of the rebels, affecting their vision or the choice of strategies and type of leadership. English revolution was associated with the political theories of philosophers such as John Milton on free speech, Thomas Hobbes on social contract, and John Locke on natural rights. The American Revolution was informed by the ideas of Thomas Paine; and the thinkers Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire informed the republican facet of the French Revolution. Figures like Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia), Adam Michnik (Poland), and György Konrád (Hungary) symbolized the intellectual face of the Eastern European revolutions; while the Iranian revolutionaries drew on Marxist-Leninist literature, Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, but above all the popular revolutionary intellectual Ali Shariati. But no visionary intellectual current seemed to accompany the Arab Spring.

Second, the Arab revolutions lacked the kind of radicalism—in political and economic outlook—that marked most other twentieth-century revolutions. Unlike the revolutions of the 1970s that espoused a powerful socialist, anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, and social justice impulse, Arab revolutionaries were preoccupied more with the broad issues of human rights, political accountability, and legal reform. The prevailing voices, secular and Islamist alike, took free market, property relations, and neoliberal rationality for granted—an uncritical worldview that would pay only lip service to the genuine concerns of the masses for social justice and distribution. Finally, and most important, there was no fundamental break from the old order. Except for Libya, little changed in the structure of power and the governing modes of the old regimes. The incumbent elites and their networks of patronage, along with the key institutions of governance such as the judiciary, police, intelligence apparatus, and the military, remained more or less unaltered.

In Yemen, the ruling families and tribal leaders mostly kept their status, as did the political networks and structure of power controlled by Ali Saleh. What the Saudi-led GCC had initiated was little more than an exit strategy for Saleh without any meaningful alteration in state power. Even Saleh's son retained his prominent position in the military. In the end, a civil and proxy war rattled the status quo when the Houthi rebels marched through the capital to unseat

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President Hadi in September 2014, thus prompting Saudi Arabia to deploy its own massive forces to unleash a civil war to protect the president. In Egypt, President Mubarak's downfall opened the way for a new parliament, president, and constitution. But the institutions and the power base of the Mubarak regime, even though challenged, remained mostly immune; in fact, they harbored the forces of counterrevolution that ultimately took power from President Mohamed Morsi in a military coup on June 3, 2013. Only in Tunisia did a peaceful transition entail a political shift from the old autocratic rule into a pluralist democracy, which ensured a democratic constitution. Yet some key operators of the Ben Ali regime returned to power after the 2014 presidential elections, presiding over an economic system that inherited its neoliberal prerevolution legacy. More important, the old "parallel state," the *de facto* authority before the revolution, composed of the security sector, certain business elites, and local mafia, made a comeback.²¹ Only a vocal opposition—vigilant civil society organizations, a powerful trade union movement, and a prudent post-Islamist current, *al-Nahda*—tilted the balance of power in favor of democratic transition.

Occupy Rebellion

The monumental uprisings in the Arab world, especially their remarkable politics of the square expressed in the Tahrir episode, inspired a series of Occupy movements whose rapid spread in the world reinforced the idea that we have entered a new age of popular politics. On May 2011, tens of thousands marched in Madrid to initiate what came to be known as *Los Indignados*—the movement of the indignant subalterns who camped out in the *Puerta del Sol* for a month; six million Spaniards joined in the protest in their support. In Athens one hundred thousand Greeks took to the streets, putting out tents in *Syntagma Square* for weeks. Protesters in Tel Aviv made some four hundred encampments on *Rothschild Boulevard*, protesting joblessness and the high cost of living, along with four hundred thousand demonstrators marching throughout the country. In the United States, the *Occupy Wall Street (OWS)* movement began with the occupation of *Zuccotti Park* in New York City in September 2011 and soon spread across hundreds of cities. Within the next few months, the global Occupy movements had found echo in Britain, the Netherlands, Mexico, Chile, Russia, India, and later in Turkey's *Gezi Park*.²² Even Brazil—a country that under a center-left government had enjoyed, according to *Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva*, "the lowest unemployment rate in our history, and unparalleled ex-

pansion of economic and social rights”—was not immune to the indignation of the citizens who wished to protect decent social services, demanding elite accountability and transparency.²³

In the Western world, the Occupy movements emerged primarily to express outrage against the dominance of corporations in government, to “separate money from politics.”²⁴ But almost all expressed dissent against the effects of neoliberal policies, notably staggering inequality, unemployment, precarious work, and uncertain life that had gripped a large segment of ordinary citizens, including the educated and professional middle classes. At the same time, it was a clear distrust of the liberal democracy in which the political elites aligned with money and business had drained democracy from its substance. A study by the political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page of some eighteen hundred policy initiatives from 1981 to 2002 confirmed that the US political system had descended from a democracy into an oligarchy, rule by the business elites.²⁵ Having lost confidence in the institutions of liberal democracy, protesters took to the streets to play politics.

Yet the Occupy movements refused to focus on any particular demand or put forth any “reasonable” alternative. Indeed, “no demand, every demand” summed up the movement’s deliberate ambiguity. They lashed out at the rich 1 percent but left capitalism that produced it unconstrained. Activists were distinctly against any “ideology” and militantly disdained solid organization, recognizable leadership, not to mention any blueprint of alternative programs. Such a postideological posture and horizontalism did have the advantage of flexibility, “direct democracy,” and a measure of innovation in mobilization. But they also incurred a precarious operation, uncertain commitment, vague message, blurred strategy, and quick breakdown of mobilization.²⁶

Sociologists Manuel Castells and Sidney Tarrow suggest that the achievement of the Occupy movements was their very operation. Considering the process as the product, Castells and Tarrow focus on the way in which the movements conducted themselves as democratic, communal, horizontal, and without hierarchy.²⁷ This partly reflects the views of anarchists who saw the value of the Occupy movements in their very egalitarian operation. Suspicious of any engagement with the state and hierarchy, they put their hope in these movements as the possible model for the future—“future in the present.”²⁸ My own observations in Toronto’s St. James Park in October 2011 confirmed the communal, innovative, and egalitarian aura of Occupy assemblies. People sat down and sang, discussed politics, and shared food and water. Strangers connected, and bound-

aries of race, gender, and ethnicity seemed to dissipate. The occupied square appeared like a liberated enclave, free from the state, money, and greed. Earlier on Cairo's Tahrir Square had experienced a similar but more intense community of solidarity as well as sacrifice; it had offered a space where the revolutionaries were not only engaged in an ad hoc egalitarian community but also involved in barricading and battling the police, tanks, thugs, and teargas. Here was a place where ordinary daily lives—those of street traders, shoe shiners, or tea sellers—merged into extraordinary struggles for the revolution.

Such utopian order of solidarity and salvation would expectedly exude awe and passion; and the fascination with the romance of the square was not new. Inspired by the appeal of agora in the eighteen days of Tahrir Square, philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek imagined in these revolutionary arenas the prospect of a new social order that could serve as the foundation for a different future. But in truth square life of this sort, the Tahrir moments, is a liminal reality, a kind of fleeting egalitarian life that lies between the real and the unreal. These are exceptional episodes in great political mobilizations from which invaluable lessons can be learned, but they should not be mistaken for what activists can or cannot do in larger structures and national spaces after the dust settles and they all go home. Public squares of this sort can be cradles for democratic movements, but as the author Matt Ford points out, one cannot live in a cradle forever.²⁹

The Occupy and similar movements were in a sense the child of our media-driven globalization—with half of the adults in the world carrying a supercomputer in their pockets—where the effects of an event may dramatically exceed its intent and the astonishing unforeseen effects may come not only as blessing but also as curse, since the initiators remain unequipped to manage them. Those in New York City who occupied Wall Street probably did not anticipate the explosion of similar concerns around the world, nor could they foresee the dynamics or offer remedies to alleviate the anxieties.³⁰ On a greater scale, such was the paradox of the Arab Spring—blessed by the startling response to the protest call and baffled by how to proceed with what had transpired.

Novel Revolutions?

Why did the revolutions of 2011 turn out to be so different from their earlier 1970s counterparts? What happened in the course of the past three decades that altered the nature of radical politics? How do we characterize the 2011 revolutionary episode and its distinct trajectory? Not everyone attributes anything dis-

tinct to the Arab revolutions, except perhaps their civil character, which avoided war and destruction as seen in the “classical” revolutions. Commenting on the Egyptian experience, the sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim argues that the remarkable revolt that overthrew the Mubarak regime opened the way for far-reaching social and political changes, including three free elections, a new government and parliament, and under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi new economic projects, notably the new Suez Canal.³¹ Yet most revolutionaries saw the post-Mubarak Muslim Brotherhood government as a barrier to rather than facilitator of deep democratic change. And only a few considered General Sisi, who forcefully seized power from the government on July 3, 2013, as the incarnation of the revolution; if anything, General Sisi’s regime embodied a drive toward restoration.

From a broader perspective, the political scientist Jack Goldstone likewise suggests that the Arab Spring followed the same pattern as any other revolution, beginning with socioeconomic strain and elite opposition, followed by popular anger, shared views, and benefit of favorable international relations.³² He predicted that they “will unfold as all revolutions do” with “ongoing struggles for power between radicals and moderates.”³³ It is true that the Arab uprisings had similar preconditions, which tell us about *revolution as movement* or the way a revolutionary *mobilization* develops. They do not tell us about *revolution as change* or the *outcome*, nor do they reveal the ideology, vision, or choice of organization that has a crucial bearing on the outcome. Did the notion of radicals and moderates have any meaningful relevance in the experiences of Egypt, Tunisia, or Yemen? Where were the radicals, and was the role they played similar to those in the French, Russian, or Iranian revolutions?³⁴ In *Why Occupy a Square*, a book on the Egyptian uprising that builds on Goldstone’s perspective, Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Baron express doubt whether Egypt’s was in fact a revolution at all because there was little shift in the structure of the state and distribution of power.³⁵ But the question remains: Why was there no significant shift in the structure of power and state institutions or economic vision, even though a spectacular uprising did succeed in toppling an entrenched dictator? *Why Occupy a Square* does not address the question; its intended focus is on the causes and tactics of revolutionary mobilization rather than on strategic visions about how to wrest power from the incumbents.

Others consider the Arab Spring as true revolutions that were hijacked, manipulated, or stalled by the counterrevolution. What occurred in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya was no less than a “political revolution” in Gilbert Achcar’s assessment, because “the emergence of the people freed from the shackles of

servitude, the assertion of collective will in public squares, and success in overthrowing tyrannical oppressors are the unmistakable works of a political revolution." Unfortunately, however, these revolutions "left the state apparatuses of the fallen regime intact," thus rendering themselves defenseless against the "conservative coup" or appropriation by such free riders as the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶ In the view of Jean-Pierre Filiu, revolutions in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen were stalled not simply by the free riders but by the very counterrevolutionary "deep state"—that is, the secretive and extralegal apparatuses of the states, such as the police and intelligence service, which see themselves as the custodians of "saving" these nations at any cost.³⁷

As I show in this book, the question is not whether the counterrevolution was responsible for stalling or hijacking the Arab revolutions; all revolutions carry within themselves the germs of counterrevolutionary intrigues. The question is whether the revolutions were revolutionary enough to offset the perils of restoration. The idea of "deep state" may be useful in highlighting the continuity of the old order after the revolutions.³⁸ But an overemphasis on its exceptional, "deep" character underplays the failure of the revolutionaries to address the question of state power per se, as if things would have been different had the revolutionaries confronted "normal" states. The shah's state also enjoyed a powerful military and the intelligence apparatus SAVAK yet was overturned by the Iranian revolution. Why were the Arab revolutions particularly more vulnerable in the face of the forces of restoration? As I discuss in Chapter 10, the geopolitical exceptionalism of the Middle East, shaped by oil and Israel, did play a part in undermining the revolutions, but the analytical lens deployed in these narratives allows little room to go beyond the notions of manipulation or hijacking to see something novel about these political upheavals.

Interestingly, those insiders to the upheavals seem to sense, even though in retrospect, something new about what they experienced. Tunisian novelist Kamal Zaghbani views his revolution as something "unique," one that "opens new horizons in human history."³⁹ According to the Egyptian revolutionary Wael Ghoneim, "Revolutions of the past have usually had charismatic leaders who were politically savvy and sometimes even military genius." Those were the "revolution 1.0 model." But the revolution in Egypt, according to Ghoneim, belonged to a new model, "revolution 2.0," a "truly spontaneous movement led by nothing other than the wisdom of the crowd."⁴⁰ In an attempt to give meaning to such particularities, the political scientist Ivan Krastev finds in the recent global protests, from Tunisia and Egypt to the Occupy movements, a clear de-

parture from the twentieth-century experiences. The past protests were “about emancipation—advocating rights of workers, women, or minorities—and their street marches were aimed at gaining access to and representation within state institutions.” The protests of 2011, however, were neither for revolution nor for reform; rather, they expressed a rebellion against the institutions of representative democracy, “without offering any alternative.”⁴¹ The recent revolts, according to Krastev, were not against government but against being governed.

This is an intriguing argument but raises important questions. Were the Arab revolts and the Occupy movements of the same breed? Were the rebels not truly interested in politics? The Arab revolts and the Occupy movements did share certain common roots—neoliberal economies, unprecedented inequality and precarity, unresponsive governments, and the use of new communication technologies for mobilization. But their different political settings—electoral democracies versus autocracies—entailed different political trajectories. Where neoliberal policies operated under an electoral democracy, as in the United States, Spain, Brazil, and Turkey, dissent took the form of Occupy movements; however, in places where neoliberal economies were mixed with autocratic rule, the outcome became revolutions. Yet Krastev, focusing on the centrality of social media, lumps all these together as the expression of a historic shift from politics to protest.⁴² But in truth these activists seemed to be departing not from politics *per se* but from a particular kind of politics, the conformist party politics that had failed to offer a way out of malaise. On the contrary, the Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and Aam Aadmi Party in India garnered mass support because they were seen as political parties and programs that articulated unorthodox policies against neoliberal onslaught and corruption. In the Middle East, Iran’s Green revolt of 2009 targeted those who deprived the citizens of participation in fair electoral politics, while the emergence of some one hundred new political parties in Tunisia and dozens in Egypt just after their uprisings pointed not to aversion from politics but a desire for meaningful politics.

“Revolutions”

What transpired in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, I argue, were neither revolutions in the sense of the twentieth-century experiences (i.e., rapid and radical transformation of the state pushed by popular movements from below) nor simply reform (i.e., gradual and managed change carried out often from above

and within the existing structural arrangements) but a complex and contradictory mix of both. In a sense, they were “refolutions”—revolutionary movements that emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves, to carry out meaningful reforms on behalf of the revolution.

Revolutionaries held enormous social and street power but failed to assume governmental authority; they did not actually rule. Revolutions stayed relatively peaceful and orderly but brought little structural change. The political and social realms remained relatively open and pluralist, favoring electoral democracy, but became susceptible to the danger of counterrevolution. The protagonists were rich in tactics of mobilization but poor in vision and strategy of transformation; they adopted loose, flexible, and horizontal organization but one that suffered from fragmentation; they espoused civil opposition but overlooked the danger of restoration; they were concerned more with democracy, human rights, and rule of law than reallocation of property and distributive justice. What came to fruition then looked like revolution in terms of mobilization but like reform in terms of change. These revolutions were reformist in the sense that the protagonists who spearheaded masterful mobilization were unable to imagine forms of organization and governance that departed from those against which they were rebelling; they were unable, unwilling, or uninterested in directing the process of change within state institutions; they conceptually separated the economy from those aspects of the political order that they sought to topple; and they hardly offered any exploration of how state power worked or how to transform it. In fact, most seemed to hold little preconceived ideas about revolution when they began their street protests and found themselves overwhelmed by mass revolts they never expected or had any clear idea how to handle.

The Arab revolutions occurred at an ideological time in post-Cold War history, when the very idea of revolution had largely disappeared from social thought and political struggles, when the three major postcolonial ideologies—anticolonial nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, and militant Islamism—that vigorously advocated revolution had vanished or been undermined. In their place was the powerful neoliberal paradigm and its normative frame. Thus, instead of the ideas of egalitarian ethos, fair property relations, welfare state, and popular control that marked the revolutionary discourse of the 1970s Cold War times, there developed in this postsocialist era an upsurge in the notions of the individual, freedom, rights, civil society, free market, and legal reform. The spread of postmodern thought in academia had further constricted efforts to

imagine grand ideas, utopian orders, and universal values in a world in which the old utopias (communism, Islamism, national liberation, and revolution) were collapsing, while the postmodern preoccupation with fragmentation, ambiguity, and relativism ultimately served to depolarize. Unlike Frantz Fanon, who was invested in “genuine historical change,” Michel Foucault emphatically rejected any preconceived “vision” for political transformation.⁴³ Foucault’s idea of entrapment in disciplinary power, as Edward Said contended, ended up replacing “insurrectionary scholarship” with “quietism.”⁴⁴

If there was anything “grand” in these critical thoughts, it was the identity politics, the “politics of recognition” that transcended the politics of redistribution, with status and identity substituting for class politics. Even though scholars like Nancy Fraser wished to combine the two, according to sociologist Zsuzsa Gille, “identity politics came to dominate both the intellectual as well as in many places practical politics.”⁴⁵ In the meantime, the new anarchist trends that had emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century—to join dissent against globalization and the US-led wars in the Middle East—continued disdaining the state and revolution as detrimental to democratic transformation, and organization as the harbinger of structure and authority; instead, anarchists, with their latent or explicit individualism, revered horizontalism and practices of self-rule on the margins of society, as though “structurelessness” was in reality free from internal authority.⁴⁶ Even though labeled “leaderless revolution,” this horizontalism was “more evolution than revolution, for it is drawing on people across the world that in order to fix our problems, there is no one to look to but ourselves.”⁴⁷

Ironically, while movements became more fluid, open, horizontal, and ephemeral, the adversarial states turned more organized, secretive, “intelligent,” and entrenched. Consequently, states came to possess far more knowledge about the dissenting movements than movements knew about the states.⁴⁸ Even though under neoliberal regimes the states lost much of their infrastructural power, they opted to monitor bodies, disrupt formal collectives, and atomize citizens more than before.⁴⁹ In these conditions of imbalance it seemed that only contentious acts of surprise, innovations, indefinable collectives, or sheer “people’s power” could win political concessions; otherwise, movements were likely to fall prey to the manipulation or repression of the states if they did not disintegrate by their own inertia. For unlike ideological movements—such as nationalism, socialism, or Islamism—which cemented enduring loyalty and identity, postideological movements tended to vanish as rapidly as they came

to fruition. Even the revolutionary heroes, if they ever emerged, fell from grace with the same speed as products traded by consumers in the aggressive markets.

In the end, none of these intellectual and political trends seriously challenged the neoliberal paradigm; if anything, some of their ideas—such as aversion of the state and class politics, flirtation with the market, and marketization of politics—found a selective affinity with the neoliberal normativity that came to inform much of the political field in the post-Cold War era; it simultaneously generated dissent and deradicalization.

Neoliberal Effect

There is a contention that “neoliberalism” is hard to grasp because, from its original coinage in 1938 by the German Alexander Rustow as a modern economic system with state intervention, it has come to refer to many different things—certain economic policies, an economic philosophy, or philosophy of society, describing at once “social market economy,” “market fundamentalism,” and “hyper-capitalism.” Some even suggest that it is nothing but a bundle of ideas.⁵⁰ I understand neoliberalism both as an economic rationality that solicits contention and a form of governmentality that cultivates compliance.⁵¹ Since the 1980s, the world has experienced an economic rationality that is distinct from its postwar economies, which were marked in varied degrees by an interventionist state, regulated economy, trade barriers, social subsidies, protectionism, unionized workers, and welfare provisions; these were known broadly as the New Deal in the United States, social democracy or Keynesianism in Europe, socialism in the Eastern bloc, and developmentalism in the Third World.⁵²

The 1974 military coup in Chile against the socialist president Salvador Allende, however, inaugurated a new era in the world, where governments embarked on reversing most of the earlier trend in the economy and governance through deregulation, elimination of trade barriers and price control, privatization, shrinkage of the welfare state, and imposition of austerity.⁵³ Pushed by a relentless ideology couched in “human dignity” and “individual freedom,” powerful agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and ruthless state policies or “shock doctrine,”⁵⁴ this hypercapitalist rationality came to be known as “neoliberal.” As a consequence, a staggering disparity in wealth and life chances ensued.⁵⁵ An Oxfam study presented to the Davos 2015 economic forum found that the richest 1 percent in

the world owned almost 50 percent of the world's wealth. In other words, eighty individuals owned as much wealth as 3.5 billion people.⁵⁶ In the United States, according to *Forbes* magazine, four hundred Americans possessed more wealth than half of the entire population; and one hundred British owned more than 30 percent of the wealth of the total populace. Countries as diverse as Canada, China, India, and even the social democratic Sweden also experienced a rise in the share of the national income taken by the top 1 percent. At the same time, almost half the world population, over 3 billion—according to the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank in 2013—lived on less than \$2.50 a day, and 80 percent on less than \$10 per day.⁵⁷

The Arab world went through a similar process. As early as 1977, President Anwar Sadat's policy of *infitah* and its economic liberalization in Egypt had led to the first mass bread riots in the cities of the region. Before the arrival of liberalization, most countries in the Middle East were ruled by either nationalist-populist regimes (such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Turkey) or pro-Western rentier states like Iran and the Arab Gulf States. Funded by oil income or remittances, these mostly autocratic states pursued state-led development strategies, often attaining remarkable growth rates.⁵⁸ Most sponsored massive projects of state building, urbanization, industrialization, and educational development that by the 2000s had generated an increasingly urban, educated, and youthful citizenry. The rentier states were able to provide social services to many of their citizens, while the populist states dispensed significant benefits in education, health, employment, housing, and the like.⁵⁹ For these postcolonial regimes, this "social contract" served to build support among the peasants, workers, and middle strata at a time when the states were struggling against both the colonial powers and old internal ruling classes. The state acted as the moving force of economic and social development on behalf of the populace.⁶⁰

The social contract, however, dwindled as the Arab states went along with the World Bank and the IMF from the 1980s to implement liberalization and structural adjustment policies. Even though Arab governments, weary of popular unrest, slowed down aspects of liberalization and facilitated safety nets such as social funds, welfare nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or even Social Islam (Islamic charity), the strategy continued ceaselessly.⁶¹ The *Arab Human Development Reports* of 2002–2009 invariably highlighted the Arab developmental deficits, underemployment, and mounting disparity gripping the region.⁶² By 2008, food prices rose, increasing inflation to more than double

the global rate; unemployment (11 percent average), especially among youth, reached the highest in the world (30 percent in Tunisia); exports declined because of the drop in global demand (7.7 percent in Tunisia; up to 22 percent in Yemen); workers' remittances plunged sharply (17 percent in Egypt) while income inequality grew.⁶³ By the early 2000s, 0.3 percent of citizens in Lebanon controlled 50 percent of the national wealth; of these just six men from two families (Hariri and Miqati) held most of the wealth.⁶⁴ In Tunisia in 2012, only 70 people held 20 percent of the national wealth, and in Egypt 490 individuals controlled 25 percent of national wealth.⁶⁵ Most of the new money went to powerful businessmen who, enjoying favoritism and monopoly, increasingly influenced governmental policies.⁶⁶

As the old social contract collapsed, the new disparity found vivid expression in, on the one hand, a minority of globalized super rich with visible wealth, conspicuous consumption, and snobbery enclosed in the gated communities and, on the other, a majority of marginalized constituencies spreading across the urbanizing villages and ruralizing cities. Despite pushing for liberalization, the Arab states continued to remain at the center of economic activity, managing the neoliberal policies by facilitating, sharing its benefits, and attempting to handle its social costs.⁶⁷ It is no wonder that these autocratic states would become the prime target of any discontent triggered by developmental deficits, social problems, political repression, or corruption. An early popular reaction to austerity policies, notably cuts in consumer subsidies as the states tried to reduce their deficits, included a series of mass urban riots that extended from Morocco (1983), Tunisia (1984), and Sudan (1982, 1985), to Lebanon (1987), Algeria (1988), and Jordan (1989).⁶⁸ Following a decade in the 1990s of safety nets, welfare NGOs, and Islamist involvement in social provisions for the needy, dissent assumed different dynamics and diverse forms during the years preceding the uprisings; the cost of living and social services protests merged with those of labor, democracy advocacy, and regional politics to form a single episode of mass street politics.

In the meantime, the neoliberal restructuring turned the Arab large cities into what I term "cities inside out," where a large number of urban subalterns were compelled, by necessity, to resort to the outdoor subsistence economy to survive and to public spaces to perform social and cultural rituals such as funerals or weddings. This then turned the urban space into a site of constant contention between the urban subaltern (the poor, youth, socially excluded, and politically marginalized) and the authorities. In Egypt between 2004

and 2009 there were some nineteen hundred protest actions, including labor strikes, social service unrest, and political protests.⁶⁹ Tunisia, under Ben Ali's police state, had seen a dozen large protests in the depressed central provinces within the few years prior to the uprising.⁷⁰

A plethora of observers have confirmed that the neoliberal restructuring was at the root of the popular dissent that eventually burst into remarkable Arab uprisings. Some have detailed how these policies in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and the Arab Gulf States caused crony capitalism, extraordinary inequality, urban segregation, and deprivation along with unprecedented opulence.⁷¹ What is missing, however, is an examination of how the neoliberal framework simultaneously deradicalized dissent. Neoliberalism does not just entail contention; it also structures compliance. The political clout of neoliberalism lies in its ability to serve as a form of governmentality, in its ability to structure people's thinking to internalize the methods of the market society, considering them to be a commonsense way of being and doing things, against which no concrete alternative is imagined or needed.⁷² Treating it as "natural" is a key power of neoliberalism; when it is not talked about as a problem or as an ideology such as, say, communism, it becomes the natural way of life.⁷³ Indeed, the change in people's mentality is so crucial for neoliberal thinking that, in the view of Naomi Kline, it deploys the psychiatric method of "shock treatment" to erase memory and break resistance.⁷⁴

In its ideal form, neoliberal normativity considers almost every social institution as if it were a business enterprise. Universities, schools, hospitals, art centers, and even the very state itself are expected to behave like corporations—with internalized hierarchies, working toward unlimited growth and efficiency to produce measurable products for their exchange value and in which individuals compete fiercely for self-interest.⁷⁵ In this perfect market society, the collectivist ideals of solidarity, common good, equality, and real democracy (rather than elections) are dismissed because they are deemed antithetical to the norms of such a society.⁷⁶ The neoliberal paradigm flatly discards talk about refiguring property relations, fair distribution of wealth and opportunities, or the welfare state as outmoded legacies of "failed socialism" and antithetical to individual freedom while it simultaneously incorporates the ideals of freedom, the common, caring, sharing (economy), or hospitality into its logic. It commercializes activism, human rights, civil society, gender equality, sustainable development, and poverty reduction, draining their radical intent.⁷⁷ Even the idea of "revolution" is up for sale.

Of course, the extent to which people in different societies have in reality incorporated and internalized neoliberal ideas differs. Certainly the degree of neoliberal norms practiced in the United States differs from those, for instance, in Latin America, which is considered to be an exception. The region, once at the forefront of neoliberal experiment, seemed to move toward a postneoliberal phase in which despite the indelible structural imprints of neoliberalism, many of its core principles have been cast aside.⁷⁸ This is quite a departure from the early 1990s when the region saw a dramatic process of deregulation, privatization, and decline in state traditional responsibilities toward its citizens. Thus, in the 2000s when neoliberal projects in the Middle East looked unstoppable, Latin America experienced a “left turn” as a number of elected “new left” governments came to construct development policies that rejected neoliberalist dogma.⁷⁹ Beginning with the Zapatista movement that galvanized the grassroots dissent in Chiapas against the Mexican government, these countries saw the rise to power of radical leaders such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and José Mujica in Uruguay. Explicitly rejecting neoliberal orthodoxy as the source of slow growth, poverty, environmental degradation, and inequality, these governments were deemed to represent the socialism of the twenty-first century. Correa’s government changed the constitution to grant rights to nature; it aimed to develop the oil industry but also to preserve natural resources, to improve economic growth but reduce inequality. Correa campaigned to put an end to the “long and sad night of neoliberalism.”⁸⁰ Evo Morales was reelected in 2014 for the third term for his rigorous socialist reform that has elevated Bolivia from an “economic basket case” into a country of both growth and equity. It is “one of the few countries that reduced inequality” while it attained “growth much faster over the last eight years than in any period over the past three and half decades.” But along with growth there has also been redistribution: under Morales, poverty declined by 25 percent and extreme poverty by 43 percent; social spending rose by 45 percent and minimum wage by 87 percent.⁸¹ José Mujica, the president of Uruguay and former socialist guerrilla leader, was described as the world’s “poorest” president because of his austere lifestyle and his donation of around 90 percent of his twelve thousand-dollar monthly salary to charities that benefited poor people and small entrepreneurs. Broadly, leftist governments in Latin America strived to renationalize industrial and financial companies and take over those in crisis; they resumed government investments, established joint ventures, and returned to dispensing social services.⁸²

Even though some remained skeptical about the actual achievements of these efforts, describing the new left turn as the “fashionable incarnation of dictatorship,”⁸³ or at best no more than an “intent” to transcend the core principles of neoliberalism,⁸⁴ regional experts such as Arturo Escobar acknowledged that Latin America had been the only region in the world where “some counter-hegemonic processes of importance” may have taken place at the level of the state.⁸⁵ Otherwise, neoliberal orthodoxy continued to gallop through the rest of the world, where its normativity became, in Doreen Massey’s words, “part of our common sense understanding of life.”⁸⁶

In the Middle East, in the past two decades significant elements of neoliberalism have spread among the Arab elites, professional groups, and the political class, influencing their thinking about activism, change, and the image of a good society. This has had an undeniable deradicalizing effect. The political class, both Islamist and secular activists, took free market and neoliberal rationality for granted; their concerns, if any, became limited to some of its policy outcomes, such as unemployment. Any radical vision about redistribution, change in property relations, expropriation, or popular control was instinctively discarded. Thus, class politics and concern for the poor, workers, or farmers were largely sidelined in favor of the politics that centered on human rights, corruption, fair elections, and legal reform. Concerns for rights—human rights, women’s rights, or personal rights—certainly had genuine relevance in the contemporary Arab societies. However, because the realization of rights is so deeply entangled in class, status, and political position, a disregard for class politics would strongly undermine the genuine struggle for such rights. Thus, against the real desire of the subaltern groups, “social justice” was reduced to no more than a phrase to be uttered without much clear political vision or programmatic backing. Youth activism centered largely on NGOs engaged in charity, development, poverty reduction, or self-help, often in conjunction with international donors or corporate funding. Such engagement, despite its civic values, was preoccupied with amending the existing order instead of one that devoted itself to political work—envisioning, strategizing, and working toward a different social order. “Civil society” activism then proved to be very different from forging social movements (such as labor, farmers’, or student movements) for change. The most visible women’s activism drew on the “gender and development” frame that was intimately linked to development aid, international NGOs, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), whose “developmentalist” discourse has been described as an “anti-politics machine.”⁸⁷

Chapter 1

This kind of deradicalization was not limited to liberal or secular citizens. The Islamist movements—which during the Cold War had adopted strong elements of revolutionary strategy, distributive justice, and collectivist values—moved to embrace neoliberalism by being at ease with the free market, inequality, and consumption. As I discuss later, the postsocialist conditions shaped a neoliberal Islam that promoted a cozy cohabitation of fervent morals and free markets, piety and profiteering. Thus, by the time the uprisings arrived in the Arab streets, few radical visionaries were planning in terms of revolution—a fact that differentiated the Arab Spring from the 1970s revolutions and their powerful anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, radical democratic, and social justice urge. Only the radical claims of the grassroots gave a revolutionary impulse to these otherwise nonradical revolutions.

In the following chapters, I elaborate on these propositions and discuss their implications for the way in which the Arab revolutions ensued. I show in Chapter 2 how the revolutions of the 1970s, unlike the Arab Spring, were informed by an intellectual component of which socialist ideas were a major element. Here I focus on the Iranian revolution of 1979, in which revolutionary ideas were articulated by the Marxist and Islamic leftist guerrilla movements, as well as the “ideologue of the revolution,” Ali Shariati. The revolution saw radical strategies and repertoires to which revolutionary ideas lent support. Chapter 3 elaborates on these repertoires by examining the widespread (*shura*, or council) movements for grassroots democracy and self-rule in the neighborhoods, colleges, farms, and workplaces, focusing on the occupation of factories. With the fragmentation of labor and the end of actually existing socialism, radical ideas began to lose their clout. Chapter 4 examines the deradicalization of political Islam, showing how the Islamist opposition evolved from its strong anti-imperialist and social justice propensity to embrace reformist politics and neoliberal economy. By the time the Arab uprisings occurred, most Islamists and secular counterparts alike had been conditioned by the neoliberal climate. Despite the decline in revolutionary projects, popular dissent grew, as neoliberalism transformed the Arab economies and shaped an increasingly contentious urbanity. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss how the Arab large cities became the spaces of popular discontent and how dissent found expression in the Arab squares, exploring what the urban setting of the uprisings tells us about their origin and dynamics. While the urban setting was by no means unexpected, the sudden and fierce eruption of the uprisings surprised observers and protagonists alike. Chapter 7 explores the way in which under the shadow of the authoritarian

polity and neoliberal economy, the Arab subaltern were involved in discrete forms of everyday struggles to enhance their life chances; and in doing so, they had created their own opaque and illegible realities outside the radar of the state and scholars. Their struggles, often in the form of “nonmovements,” assumed collective voice once the protests began and merged into what came to be known as the Arab uprisings. But the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt had serious limitations in transforming into full-fledged revolutions. What transpired in the Arab world, I argue in Chapter 8, were not revolutions in the sense of their twentieth-century counterparts but a mix of revolutionary mobilizations and reformist trajectories. Yet I show, in Chapter 9, that the extraordinary acts of claim making by the poor, women, lower-class youth, and social minorities in pursuit of equality, inclusion, and recognition radicalized these otherwise nonradical revolutions. Indeed, as I demonstrate in Chapter 10, these subaltern struggles, in part, rendered the postrevolutionary transition acutely contentious, reinforcing the painful and paradoxical postrevolutionary moments. Defenselessness against the domestic and regional counterrevolution was one such anomaly; it left a devastating impact on efforts to achieve a just and free social order in Arab societies, feeding into the rising disenchantment with the experience and idea of revolution. The final chapter discusses the question of despair that came to afflict so many activists in postrevolutionary moments; it concludes by exploring grounds for hope and the renewal of revolutionary spirit in the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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