

Representation and the Egyptian Black Bloc

The Siren Song of Orientalism?

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Much in the way of media coverage has highlighted the appearance of a Western-style Black Bloc on the streets of Cairo during the protests marking the second anniversary of the Egyptian uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian state, having perceived the formation as a distinct political organization, promptly outlawed it, and just as promptly accused its members of comically unlikely collusion with Zionist saboteurs. Islamist groups such as *Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya* called for anyone engaged in Black Bloc actions to be treated to the punishments enumerated for "hooliganism" in the Quran—chief among them, execution. If one takes the reception of Black Blocs in the United States since the tactic's initial coming out in the late 1990s as reference, the narrative unfolding in and out of Cairo is nothing if not regionally and culturally specific.

Well beyond such narratives, the media coverage suggests that somebody, somewhere, did their homework, drawing on Black Blocs as a *tactic* with origins not in ideology but rather in conditions faced by autonomist and antifascist movements in Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, these actions have been afforded something rarely allowed in coverage of such tactics in the United States: context. In other words, we have seen in recent media coverage considerably less of the usual, speculative accounts of (invariably, self-indulgent) motives or romance for redemptive violence. Rather, we have seen Black Bloc activity depicted as something of a mirror. What the state and Islamists indict in the torching of their offices, or clashes with their police (official or otherwise) reflects what they have willfully ignored, and what (not coincidentally) bares their fingerprints: gang rape; torture; breathtaking acts of brutality, often spilling over into outright murder. The bold and targeted actions of the Black Bloc have, in its participants' own scant accounts, a conspicuous preoccupation with triage and an unsurprising nod to utility. What we are seeing is concretely *responsive*. Its referent a tangible, lived set of conditions.

Given the association of Black Bloc tactics with anarchism in the United States and Europe, recent events have provoked discussion of anarchism's "arrival" in the Arab world, sending social media into something of a vicarious and lustful frenzy. Anarchist and ultra-left tendencies in the United States have taken to their blogs, waxing enthusiastic and projecting onto these events politics, objectives, and contexts for which little or no evidence exists. There are, quite obviously, a number of problems with this. There are contradictions that—much as the Black Bloc has done with the Egyptian state—hold a mirror up to Western representations at large.

First, there is hardly anything conclusive about the politics of Egyptian Black Bloc participants. Their messaging has been surprisingly reform-oriented, evocative of a constitutional liberal position, and has echoed what one finds coming from any number of revolutionary groups in Egypt. To the extent participants have granted interviews, that tone has persisted. Some have been quoted intimating support for reformist figures even such as Mohammed El-Baradei. Candor about this among anarchists in Cairo seems rather widespread. Ignoring or dismissing these facts, even out of a sort of rose-tinted desire for fraternity, ultimately shares in the sins of Islamophobia. It is a postcard to the Arab world—people engaged in life or death struggles at the moment—that reads: *Don't bother speaking. You are who we say you are.*

What the mainstream media in places such as the United State, Canada, and the United Kingdom seems to have gotten right is what many anarchists appear to have missed (or willfully forgotten). Black Blocs represent a *tactic*; not an organization, or an expression of a particular ideology. At that, they represent a tactic that did not even originate with anarchists. The only thing standing between young liberals and the smoldering remains of a political party's headquarters is a lack of imagination (one several time zones behind).

Second, a quick Google search makes rather plain that anarchists have been active in Egypt (and the Arab world more broadly) going back quite some time—whether anyone in the West noticed, or not. In 1882, celebrated Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta traveled to Egypt to assist in the struggle against British colonialism, during a period of history in which increased regional trade gave way to a radical cosmopolitanism, including anarchists appearing in places like Alexandria, Cairo, and Beirut. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi's work, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914*, puts the emergence of anarchism in Egypt roughly a century before anyone got word of Twitter deleting the Black Bloc's account. These histories, however, yielded little in the way of social capital for anyone in the West, prior to 25 January 2011. Thus, they effectively do not count.

Further still, there is the matter of form and content. Anarchism is distinct from other left traditions in that its authenticity is a matter of method. It is, as famed linguist Noam Chomsky has noted, an orientation *against* relations of domination, and *toward* relations of equality, democracy, and cooperation. We can observe efforts, undertakings, and struggles that reflect this orientation virtually everywhere. Ultimately, for any serious, critical, thinking person, that content trumps flags, fashion, or militancy. The fact that so many anarchists in the West have dialed in on the Black Bloc, as opposed to (for instance) the work of Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault in Tahrir, raises unflattering questions.

Generally, the most dynamic movements are quick to dispense with quasi-religious attachments to origins, in favor of *beginnings*—which renew and occur continuously. This is what Palestinian literary critic Edward Said, himself no stranger to anarchism, characterized as “the result of combining the already familiar with the fertile novelty of human work.” What has been happening all over the Arab world the last two years is indeed fertile, novel human work. It should be allowed to speak for itself. And it should be listened to, humbly.

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