

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson

The Arab Spring between Three Enlightenments

Mohammed Bamyeh

Mohammed Bamyeh  
Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson  
The Arab Spring between Three Enlightenments  
2013

Retrieved on 2024-03-23 from  
[https://victoriananarchistreadingcircle.ca/download/  
bamyeh-anarchist-method-liberal-intention-authoritarian-lesson-  
the-arab-spring-between-three-enlightenments/](https://victoriananarchistreadingcircle.ca/download/bamyeh-anarchist-method-liberal-intention-authoritarian-lesson-the-arab-spring-between-three-enlightenments/)  
From *Constellations* Volume 20, No 2, 2013

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

2013



lightenment. That was why these revolts have been entirely against the authoritarian state, but not against any old cultural tradition.

The civic 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 business. The expectation from a liberal political order is that a relatively sovereign subject emerges, sometimes called "citizen," endowed with a confident sense of entitlement to be freed from state harassments, impositions, and irrationality; she sees herself to be the source of the state. But with the aid of this newly acquired sense of sovereignty, she confronts directly the question of overcoming one's own "self-imposed immaturity," as Immanuel 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. These are now the custodians of this gnosis, until the next grand cultural experiment, whose shape will invariably have to flow in some way out of and in response to how the memory of the current moment will be deposited into civic culture.

*A highly condensed, earlier version of this article appeared in the online magazine Jadaliyya, entitled, "Anarchist, Liberal, and Authoritarian Enlightenments: Notes From the Arab Spring" (2011).*

## Contents

How Revolutions Decide? . . . . .	6
Knowledge out of Presence . . . . .	13
Dialectics of Three Enlightenments . . . . .	19

national memory was being formed, revised, and contested. The most important dynamic of this memory, sociologically speaking, was one in which collective lessons from recent historical experiences were distilled and deposited in *intuitive* forms into civic culture, whereafter they became organic to it. For example, the *intuitive* resistance to a unified or charismatic leadership in the Arab revolts must be rooted in recent adjustments in collective memory, since this resistance so clearly contradicts earlier experiences: revolutionary episodes in the colonial and postcolonial periods, from the Wafd Party to Nasser to Khomeini down to Nasrallah, have invariably highlighted the central role of the charismatic leaders and, more generally, presumed a central role, broadly accepted in society, for some unique vanguard group.

In other words, historical memory here is essentially a condensed verdict on the successes and failures of various experiments of a single enlightenment project. The contemporary revolutions express in their method the disastrous failure of the authoritarian technique and thus are intuitively suspicious of a method whereby a revolution produces leadership that is immediately prepared to take over when the head of the old regime falls. There was no Nasser or Khomeini to be seen anywhere in the Arab revolutionary landscape, in spite of the messianic, heroic, high emotional and sacrifice-laden environment of revolutions. Nor was there a unified or solid organization anywhere. The anarchist method has been at the very heart of these revolutions, even though anarchist society as such was not an expressed goal.

Enlightenment, whether conceived as an ultimate achievement or as already existing *gnosis*, could be approached using different techniques. In the grand revolutions of the Arab Spring, the liberal interpretation of the enlightenment fought an authoritarian interpretation, with the aid of an anarchist method – that is to say, with the aid of familiar civic traditions, discovered again to be natural venues for expressing the organic and embedded nature of the en-

*familiar* and old habits of protest and conflict management. In recent years, we were made to forget the ordinary salience of those old traditions, 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*).

The downfall of the authoritarian enlightenment can be traced to dynamics latent to it. One earlier proposition of such an enlightenment was based on a left vanguardist position that, as noted by Frantz Fanon long ago, usually expressed lack of knowledge by the vanguard of their own society. In its later phase, when this vanguard had long become accustomed to being the ruling elites, their vanguardism was transformed into pure paternalism: distance from the people became lack of interest in knowing the people. Amidst this disinterest, the old vanguardist authoritarianism was expunged of its anti-colonial, progressive, Third Worldist claims and, out of its ashes there emerged a cold, paternal authoritarianism, disinterested in any form of peoplehood, and governed openly by an avowed marriage of business and state elites. Although it occurred in many places earlier, this transformation was complete in most of the postcolonial Arab world (with the exception, of course, of Palestine<sup>18</sup>) by the mid-90s.

The decomposition of this vanguardism revealed the dead-end of the authoritarian approach to enlightenment. In pre-revolutionary literature, this dead-end was invariably portrayed as some sort of impasse without end.<sup>19</sup> How such portrayals represented a broadly felt, pre-revolutionary search for an alternative path to the earlier promises of enlightenment can only be properly treated in a full-length exploration. But these portrayals were unquestionably part of a larger cultural project, in which a modern

---

<sup>18</sup> On the exceptional nature of the question of Palestine, see Mohammed A. Bamyeh, “On Humanizing Abstractions: The Path beyond Fanon,” in *Theory, Culture and Society* 27:7 – 8 (2010).

What do social and scientific revolutions have in common? Those who study scientific revolutions have been familiar enough, at least since Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, with the proposition that a revolution is a new paradigm displacing an old one. In other words, a revolution is a radical transformation in world perspective. More pointedly: a revolution is an experience of *enlightenment*. It is at this level that I wish to explore one aspect of the ongoing social revolutions that we have come to know as the Arab Spring. In the process, I hope that something more may be learned about the relationship of revolution to enlightenment, that is to say, to a *gnosis* of a new type.

In what follows, I would like to illustrate the proposition of revolution as enlightenment with specific emphasis on the Arab revolutions. The argument is made in three steps. First, I want to stress the notion of revolution as a product of *decisions* made in environments that spontaneously produce the knowledge needed to make such a decision—in other words, how revolutionary decisions are themselves means to new knowledge, rather than products of old knowledge. Second, I ask how this new knowledge emerges out of pure presence, which is to say, an unwavering mental focus, that characterizes the revolutionary climate, on the present *alone* – not the future, the past, the consequences of one’s actions, or any other distracting thought. Third, I reverse course at the end and ask how this knowledge, however new it may appear to be, has been born out of the past, that is to say, how previous experiments in enlightenment have deposited their lessons into memory, so much so that the “new” knowledge appeared so intuitively true and immediately accessible, without authorities, leaders, organizations, mediators, or complex intellectual work. This latter mode of knowledge may be defined as an anarchist path to enlightenment. This anarchist enlightenment is contrasted to an older authoritarian enlightenment, although the former possesses unexplored affinities to a third

path that is also part of the character of the current moment: the liberal enlightenment.

## How Revolutions Decide?

A revolution is produced by countless decisions made by millions of individuals. Wherever one is able to identify key leaders or organizations, the equation appears simpler, since analyzing decisions could largely be an analysis of the decisions that such identifiable agents make. But when we encounter, as in the Arab Spring, largely leaderless, loosely structured movements in which spontaneity and lightness are important features, and where even after initial revolutionary success, as in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or to an extent Yemen, no leaders or parties could be identified as standing in for the revolution as whole, discovering how revolutions have “decided” what to do next becomes quite an analytic challenge. Does it even make sense to speak of a revolution deciding? Does it matter?

The question is difficult, but unavoidable. Outlining how a largely spontaneous revolution<sup>1</sup> decides where to go next may help us understand part of the dynamics of transitional, post-

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of these revolts, I have heard several commentators argue, often with highly partial evidence or with the aid of an inattentive social science, that the Arab revolutions were not spontaneous or at least more organized than suspected. Examining all these claims, which I think are profoundly mistaken, requires a separate article. Here, I only want to point out that viewpoints dismissing spontaneity seem to be based largely on a profound misunderstanding of what spontaneity means. For me, spontaneity does not imply the absence of any organizations whatever. Rather, spontaneity becomes a necessary dynamic whenever existing organizations are too weak, small, or reformist in character to be capable of engineering a revolution by themselves. This point is not contested by any pre-revolutionary organization. The one exception is Bahrain, where the continuing debacle of revolutionary effort may be traced precisely to the *existence* of an organization (Wefaq) that has become identified with the upheavals. I have argued this point in a different context elsewhere; see Mohammed Bamyeh, “The Arab Revolutions and the Making of a New Patriotism,” *Orient* 52:3 (2011).

appears meaningful, to the extent that its author or audience has at least an empirical hint of its validity. And thus some connection between innovation and rootedness must be suspected even where it is emphatically denied.<sup>16</sup>

The traditional systems of multiple loyalties (which integrated in practical and useful ways the multiple resources available though tribal belonging, guild membership, religious order affiliations, urban patronage, and mutual help networks) supplied the sufficient basis of a self-organized civic order for centuries, while insuring that no specific group intruded too much upon another – until the emergence of the modern state.<sup>17</sup> Elements of that old civic order appear to have sustained themselves even after modern, authoritarian states devoted all their resources to magnifying state power over society in the name of enlightenment. Yet, the persistence of elements of the old civic ethics can be evidenced in the revolutionary styles themselves: the spontaneity of the revolutions as an extension of the already familiar spontaneity of everyday life; revolutionary solidarity, out of which emerges the will to sacrifice and combat, as an extension of common, convivial solidarity in neighborhoods and towns; distrust of distant authorities as 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 learned not out of a manual written at Harvard, but as rooted in

---

<sup>16</sup> This point is explored in more details in my “The Social Dynamism of the Organic Intellectual,” in *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East*, ed. Mohammed A. Bamyeh (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012)

<sup>17</sup> Few scholars have paid attention to elements of continuity in these civic traditions, and most preferred to explore their disintegration and replacement by statist logics, which are easier to document. For an example of the former, which shows how older civic traditions creatively adjust to more contemporary transformations in civic life, see Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); as well as Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics*.

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 intention: old Arab orders that have survived the revolts thus far, as in Jordan, Algeria, or Morocco, and even Syria, now officially agree 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 emerged. 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 at least two ways. First, both anarchism and liberalism are part of the heritage of the Enlightenment and describe related though different principles within it. Second, this relationship precedes the Enlightenment and expresses facets of older, less controlled but quite orderly and very old social realities. This symbiosis becomes more obvious if we do not confine our perspective to European history. For example, while “anarchism” or “liberalism” are traceable to the intellectual history of the Enlightenment, part of what they express may already be rooted in older pluralist communal traditions and customs of local governance and autonomy. These customs and traditions themselves facilitate the emergence of a distinctly self-conscious intellectual experience (“Enlightenment”) as a means of systematizing or “bringing reason to” an older *gnosis*. Indeed, rather than invent it *ex nihilo*, one may find it much easier to intellectualize an idea that one has already sensed in some concrete social experience. One is more likely to accept an intellectual conception if one is already familiar with some living dimension of it. An idea becomes thinkable, and

revolutionary periods, where a new system is not yet in place even though much of the old system has crumbled; where earlier revolutionary unity gives rise to multiple agendas; where the possibility of “losing” the revolution or having it “stolen” surround the environment with a sense of anticipation, danger, and dynamism; and where the revolution itself appears frequently to be on the verge of producing nightmarish sectarian or other kinds of civil strife worse than the old dictatorship. Those are all moments of decision. And in many cases, these issues appear even before revolutionary triumph and appear to threaten the entire revolution – as when the revolutionary military commander in Libya, Abdul Fattah Yunus, was assassinated by his own comrades or, more generally, when a morally pure revolutionary climate begins to be contaminated with intimation of civil war, as in Yemen or Syria. How do revolutions decide at those junctures, how do they respond to dangerous moments?

One of the most fundamental characteristics of a revolutionary decision is that it is the sort of decision that most clearly foregrounds human agency and creativity. No revolution was ever predicted and nothing in a previous oppression prepares one for revolution by any force of necessity. The fact that one is oppressed or has great grievances does not in itself lead to a revolution and, as we know, oppressive conditions may be tolerated for decades, even for life, without protest, without hope in the possibility of an alternative, with belief in fate, or in oppressive life as being the nature of the world, or with the aid of mind altering substances, thoughts and rituals. Before January 25, 2011, few expected change of any kind in Egypt, including the hard-core revolutionaries themselves, even though a wish for a revolution could be easily documented now throughout pre-revolutionary literature. When the Tunisian revolution began five weeks before, the initial goals were not to unseat an entrenched regime but to protest a gruesome local event. The first revolutionary tremors in Libya, beginning three weeks after Egypt, took first not the form of a revolution but that of a

local gathering in Benghazi that protested the arrest of a popular lawyer. The genesis of the revolution in Syria, shortly afterwards, again first appeared not as a revolution but as local elders protesting the arrest of their children in the marginal town of Der'a. And for historical comparison with an earlier revolt with similar spontaneous dynamics, namely the first Palestinian intifada beginning in 1987, that too was triggered and became relentless following a traffic incident that, while fatal to four Palestinian workers, would on another day have been swallowed up as yet another proof of unassailability by a mighty regime of occupation.

That massive revolutions broke out so quickly from such innocuous beginnings belies the fact that the indignities suffered or witnessed in Sidi Bouzid or Der'a somehow seemed to require extraordinary decisions, decisions that differed substantially enough from how one had responded to similar incidents in the past – after all, Mohamed Boazizi was not the first person to immolate himself in Tunisia and arresting children and adults at will and without any charge had been little more than a mundane activity for the Syrian regime. There was no force of necessity that mandated that, when a popular lawyer is arrested, for example, a collective street protest would ensue nor that, when one's children are arrested, the best course of action was to storm the police station. In all these cases, however, there seems to be a common psychological thread: revolutions were caused not by an act of tyranny, since such acts were common enough and quite expected. Rather, they began by an unusual reaction to such acts, a reaction that itself gave participants a sense that what they were doing as a reaction (and not the original event itself) was *extraordinary*. Extraordinary, that is, in the sense that it expressed a decision to respond to an insult in a different way than had been customary. The fact that one does not today simply swallow up an indignity the same way he had done for decades, means that a subject of a new type has emerged. That emergence is experienced as such an extraordinary event that it greatly discourages stepping away from it afterwards; to the con-

than hierarchical guidance; and 3) a notion of peoplehood devoid—*in spite of its abstract nature*—of any demand for it being embodied in a charismatic or other type of leadership.

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 them “anarchists.” And in any case, none of the revolutions so far intend to replace the state itself with a self-governed civic order. They want 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 revolutions is the establishment of a liberal state – a civic state<sup>15</sup> –not an anarchist society.

It is not unusual in revolutionary histories for revolutions to produce an unintended result. Max Weber already suggested that this disjuncture between the intention and result of revolutions was inevitable when, in the midst of the 1919 revolution, he gave

---

<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that the “civic state” (*dawla madaniyya*) has been endorsed even by the religious parties that had won the elections in post-revolutionary Tunisia (Nahda) and Egypt (Freedom and Justice Party). Even where a religious interpretation of this concept has been given (e.g. civic state as the goal of Islam), the notion of a civic state represents a broader social consensus on the desired character of the post-revolutionary state. This consensus has itself compelled the broad-based religious parties to disavow any claim for an “Islamic state,” which is no longer their expressed goal.



and social traditions, rather than simply as recent importations from Europe.<sup>13</sup> 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 more saturated with ethos of enlightenment than has its government.

The Arab revolutionary experiments seem to be based on several newly shared presumptions. First, that ordinary individuals are capable of new *gnosis* without leadership or guardianship, without even organizations in the common sense of the word. Second, that their enlightenment entitles them to undo the tyrannies under which they have languished in recent decades. Third, 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. In an earlier article,<sup>14</sup> I identified three features of this anarchist *gnosis* as evident in the Arab revolutions: 1) emphasis on the simple and intuitive nature of truth, which in a revolutionary climate appears as “revelation;” 2) conversation and debating circles alone as means of discovery, rather

---

<sup>13</sup> See for example Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798 – 1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Mustafa al-Tuwati, Muhammad ben Ahmouda, and Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, *Athar al-Thawrah al-Faransiyyah fi Fikr al-Nahda* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1991); and, most originally, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, *Taba’i al-Istibdad* (Beirut: Dar al-Nafaes, 2006 [1899])

<sup>14</sup> See my “Anarchist Philosophy, Civic Traditions and the Culture of Arab Revolutions,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5:1 (2012).

trary, it encourages most further exploring the new revolutionary possibilities unveiled by its very emergence.

The moment of a revolutionary decision thus mark the emergence of a new subjectivity at some locality, which then replicates like a virus throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> This subject feels like an agent of revolution because he is not an “individual,” but a particular expression of the general will, and a personal condensation of “the people” – an otherwise abstract and rarely felt concept. A revolutionary subject of this nature is not simply an “individual” – expressing only a private will, acting alone, or with a specific group that cannot be imagined as coterminous with “the people.”

While a revolutionary subjectivity in this form acts as a new form of self-disciplining that sets one up as the appropriate recipient of revolutionary, that is, extraordinary, knowledge, we cannot speak of any “completed” subjects with final shape, so long as the revolutionary process is underway. The revolution itself, in fact, can only be experienced as such only to the extent that this revolutionary subject is constantly looking for and acquiring extraordinary new stimuli, so that she could go on. The revolution is over, psychologically speaking, when this emerging revolutionary subject realizes that she has sufficiently mastered the general guiding principles of the new paradigm and determined that no substantially new knowledge is forthcoming for the time being. She may be said to be a more complete subject at that point, albeit of a new type. And like all completed subjects, she feels free to base her new world perspective, even her identity, on an event that is now perceived to have been concluded successfully enough: the revolution slowly transforms from an extraordinary experience into an ordi-

---

<sup>2</sup> The emergence of a new subjectivity has been noted by other observers, who highlight its tentative though reflexive and anti-neoliberal character. See Benoît Challand, “The Counter-Power of Civil Society and the Emergence of a New Political Imaginary in the Arab World,” *Constellations* 18:3 (2011), 271 – 283; and Sari Hanafi, “The Arab Revolutions; the Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5:2 (2012), 198 – 213.

nary heritage, from acts of shattering an old paradigm into routines of familiarizing oneself with the contours of the new paradigm.

But in the heat of the revolutionary moment itself, when a new paradigm is not yet in place, one can only make situational decisions with little guidance, from either old or new paradigms: the old paradigm has just been demolished, but not yet replaced with anything other than one's own revolutionary activity. And the outcome of this activity lacks any guarantees; it possesses no support mechanism other than the evident will of so many others to go along. Thus it is easy to understand why the decisions that bring out and propel this subjectivity forward follow a non-deterministic path, since all decisions in the revolutionary climate have to be *original*, in the sense that no prior script exists that tells one how to revolt if one has never personally done it before.

The notion of a non-deterministic path to new subjectivity in general and a revolutionary decision in particular explains perhaps why revolutions have never been expected and why no theory has ever successfully predicted them. For a revolutionary decision consists precisely in rejecting what is offered up as immutable and unchanging reality, that is, the world that has been *determined* for the person confronting it. And the greatest proof of the completely subjective and creative, that is, undetermined, logic that makes all revolutions possible is precisely that one decides to embark on a revolution before one knows whether it has any chance of success at all. After all, none of the revolutions of the Arab Spring were premised on any guarantees of success. Quite the opposite, the obstacles facing them seemed so gargantuan, that the least credible story that one participant could tell another on the very eve of all these revolutions was that a revolution would happen the following day.

It is especially evident in spontaneous uprisings that the most fundamental decision out of which the entire uprising begins concerns rejecting the very idea of a determined reality, even as the alternative is not yet obvious and where no known dynamic has

ing and repressive needs, increasingly prohibitive in light of nineteenth century revolutionary history, for the liberal order.<sup>11</sup>

To simplify, whereas the liberal enlightenment takes the position that power and knowledge ought to be natural allies and specifically in such a way as to reduce the cost of power while maximizing the *instrumental* benefit of knowledge, the authoritarian and anarchist enlightenments tend to set power and knowledge as opposites rather than allies. The authoritarian technique is premised on the Hobbesian presumption that since power is the best means to accomplish any goal, the more one has of it the less compelling need there is for knowledge, since power alone will do. Moreover, power will transform any existing social knowledge in any desired direction. The anarchist technique, by contrast, is defined by suspicion of the merit of power as means to ends. This standpoint highlights the compensatory value of knowledge alone as the best means. I have explored this idea at length elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> here I would like to focus on its reemergence in the context of the Arab spring.

In the current Arab context, one dimension of the contemporary revolutions consists of them serving as means of testing, once more, the philosophical propositions of the Enlightenment. As such, these revolutions constitute part of the Enlightenment's ongoing global history. They are certainly not the Arab's first encounter with 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

---

<sup>11</sup> Nineteenth century Islamic enlightenment may be seen as a variation of the liberal genealogy, at least according to some interpretations. In more recent times, Rachid Ghannouchi, one of the main contemporary progenies of that tradition, explicitly argued that claims to local rootedness of any enlightenment reduce the authoritarian impulse of its undertaker. He was trying to explain why modern secular forces in the Arab World had to be authoritarian, since they were weakly rooted in the societies they ruled.

<sup>12</sup> I have addressed these transformations at length in my *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowan & Littlefield, 2009), esp. 71 – 117.

recalcitrant traditional preference for the old and familiar ways. Experiments along these lines cover the ideological gamut, from state socialism to European colonialism to Kemalism to Baathism, even though such ideologies seem to be so different from each other. But common to all was the centrality to social modernization of coercive power, usually represented in a modern state that intruded upon society in ways rarely seen before, even under the worst tyrannies.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, this tradition of authoritarian enlightenment reached its limits, as it became increasingly clear how once youthful vanguardist powers, whether “free officers” or those who claimed to stand for a dictatorship of the proletariat, had given rise to increasingly frozen, exclusive kleptocracies whose elite ruled more and more openly on behalf of their own interests.

The liberal enlightenment represented an alternative solution to the problem of identifying the agent of enlightenment, a solution that has enjoyed more longevity than the authoritarian enlightenment, although it too had lost much credibility by the end of the last millennium. Michel Foucault’s extensive critique of the power/knowledge alliance may be said to apply specifically to the liberal genealogy of the enlightenment, in which knowledge complements the otherwise partial power of the state. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Foucault addressed primarily post-revolutionary transformations of state science in Europe, where revolutions had delegitimized authoritarian structures and also undermined the prospects of an enlightened despotism. Central to the project of the liberal enlightenment was how knowledge may organize a civic link between state and society and in the process reduce the costs of polic-

---

<sup>10</sup> On the decreasing ability of modern authoritarian regimes to use enlightenment discourse effectively, see Mona Abaza’s highly useful study of this theme in pre-revolutionary Egypt, “Social Sciences in Egypt: The Swinging Pendulum between Commodification and Criminalization,” in *Facing an Unequal World: Challenges for a Global Sociology*, Vol. 1, eds. Michael Burawoy, Mau-kuei Chang, and Michelle Fei-yu Hsieh (Taiwan: Academia Sinica, 2010), pp. 187 – 212

offered an assurance of revolutionary success. Such revolutions could not therefore be borne out of any “rational” calculation, which discourages the very idea of a revolution without clear prospects and in the face of a determined and powerful tyranny. To the contrary, spontaneous uprisings arise precisely out of a large number of individuals reinforcing each other’s subjective *decision to ignore realism*. How “realistic,” for instance, was the revolution in Syria? In its first seven months, between March and mid autumn of 2011, demonstrators throughout the country have known that they would be met with live fire, and yet they continued to turn up everyday for what they knew to be a potentially deadly encounter with a verifiably murderous regime apparatus. One can do so only if the revolutionary decision is experienced as such an extraordinary epiphany that all seemingly solid, immobilizing realities in the world disappear from view, revealing a far more interesting feature of one’s humanity – that is, the capacity to become a revolutionary subject – a feature rarely encountered in pre-revolutionary decisions.

This new humanity, experienced first at personal and local levels, gives birth to revolution when it is assumed, with some evidence, to be capable of being the property of ordinary persons. The emerging conviction, which characterizes revolutionary consciousness, of the ordinary and thus broadly distributed nature of this hitherto unseen humanity, makes it the basis of a new collective subjectivity – although, as I will explore later, a collective of a more anarchist than fascist character in this case.

The consequences of this epiphany are immeasurable. An oppression under which one has been languishing without a tremor for decades suddenly appears so thoroughly undeserved and intolerable at a moment when a small local confrontation with the old authority, common as it may be, is experienced as a profound revelation: “the people” are infinitely more noble than their government and that unaccountable thuggery and grand theft, the only consistent attributes of the pre-revolutionary Arab governmental

order, are no longer accepted as simply mirror images of a peoplehood defined by its weakness, fragmentation, and dysfunctionality (and thus *deserving* the system of rule under which it languishes). In this refashioned (and usually temporary) iteration, the idea of “the people,” *al-sha’b*, again becomes proper material for revolution. “The people” was therefore quickly elevated to ever higher realms in Arab revolutionary discourse and acquired more significant agency than ever before since it registered a discovery of profound self-worth that stood in sharp contrast to underserved rule by petty thieves, dour autocrats, and visionless, ineffective functionaries. More remarkably still, the idea of “the people” never seemed to require being embodied in a charismatic leader, vanguard party, or any grand structure that would stand in for peoplehood as a whole. Even where elements of such structures have emerged before revolutionary success, as in Libya, Syria, or Yemen, the structures remained diffuse and minimally coordinated.

In that way, the revolutions drew sustenance, energy, determination, and the will to sacrifice largely out of a broadly distributed moral fire in individual psyches than out of organizational or hierarchical command structures. For “the people” appeared as a macrocosm of the single revolutionary person, who then experienced herself *directly* as the agent of a grand moment in history. And once that standpoint was arrived at through a single action of protest, it could not be abandoned, just as one who had been forced to live under refuse for life cannot imagine leaving the summit of the world after he had suddenly realized that it had always been much closer at hand than ever thought before. So one has to stay there, since one has to understand more what this precious perspective was revealing to one’s sensibilities and intellect. The Arab revolutions seem to have emerged, at least in so far as the dynamics of this new subjectivity is concerned, out of this will to understand the world as it appeared from an unusual location: a world that appeared unexpectedly open to grand human action rather than closed off by immutable laws of nature

engineer modern transformation but its elite is neither presumed to have monopoly over enlightenment nor the power to make such a claim; 3) an anarchist technique, in which enlightenment is seen to come most reliably from below, by discovering the revolutionary character of familiar civic traditions rather than through state power or social engineering.

The conception of three enlightenments here is not meant to describe the full scope of meanings and experiences of enlightenment, but only to sketch preliminary types of relations between strategies of enlightenment and revolutionary activity. The sketch above is based less on what enlightenment is supposed to accomplish than on the identity of its designated agent. In the history of Enlightenment, identifying its agent has often proved to be the most vexing question. For example, during the course of the nineteenth century Islamic, Chinese, or Japanese Enlightenments, intellectual arguments in favor of “Enlightenment” were often couched in the language of anti-colonialism, even though colonial powers themselves were making all kinds of civilizational claims. This disjuncture shows how it was important to not simply express Enlightenment’s intellectual arguments in terms of logical coherence, but to identify clearly *who* was the right and wrong agent of Enlightenment. That had to be done since both colonial and anti-colonial powers could make the same claims.

But the colonial world was only an example of a larger modern global problem concerning the proper relation between authority of knowledge and that of power. Everywhere, the question of enlightenment became a question of who had the legitimacy to make claims on its behalf. One approach to answering this question, which gave us the authoritarian enlightenment, highlighted the centrality of vanguardist power. The argument here posited as a central assumption the proposition that enlightenment signified something foreign to local or antecedent tradition, which meant that enlightenment required being introduced by a force that operated outside of such a tradition and had the power to overcome

stability; or as refocusing old practices of solidarity from the local kin or communal level to national or other macro levels (e.g. one defends a homeland with the same zeal and sense of duty that previously had been employed only in relation to one's local community).

The connection between enlightenment and revolution is a quite familiar theme in European revolutionary history<sup>8</sup> as is the connection between the European Enlightenment and revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world.<sup>9</sup> Nineteenth 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, I would like to propose three basic techniques of enlightenment, all implicated in different styles of revolution: 1) An authoritarian technique, in which a vanguard sees itself to be uniquely enlightened and, out of that feeling, entitles itself to eventually use the state 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 to

---

<sup>8</sup> See for example Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975); David W. Bates, *Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790 – 1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (Lafayette: Cornerstone Books, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); or Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

and garrisoned by brute force. In that way, the revolutions became the means for further ascertaining one's worthiness for this grand mission against an erstwhile closed and immobile system. This ascertainment could be accomplished only in constant action. The largely amateurish nature of the Libyan revolutionary military campaigns, which were one reason why the war lasted as long as it did, was itself the point: "the people" learned who they were and what they were doing, as they were doing it, and the revolutionary process was something to be learned by experiencing it – there was no manual on how to do it, and certainly no prior plan to guarantee success. But in the process of doing it, one learned what the revolution meant: the revolution, above all, was a *decision* without guarantees of success. And as such it could happen only because knowledge of a new type replaced old, "realistic" ways of thinking. The new knowledge informed the little person that he was the agent of history, but also that in being so he was not alone. It created him out of equal doses of heroic thoughts and modest sensibilities. In other words, it was an anarchist *gnosis*.

## Knowledge out of Presence

It could easily be said that these revolutions captivated the imaginations of the millions of actors who made them because their goals were so sensible. But more interesting is how the revolutions themselves became tools of discovery, of both new knowledge and new sensibilities. These novelties appear to me at least as significant, in terms of generating mobilization and energy, than well-known grievances that had been festering for decades.

Concepts that had been previously unimaginable or abstract became in the revolutionary climate concrete. That which was immeasurable as the manifestation of a collective became felt as the property of the person. One of the those concepts, "the people," was

used so profusely in ways that suggest that it was felt to be a natural and organic extension of one's own sense of truth and justice. The novelty (as well as rarity and passing nature) of *feeling* an abstraction as "the people" was evident in how it was used everywhere and without compulsion as a namesake of what everyone assumed to be intuitively true: "the people have decided..," "the people want..," "the people will not be humiliated..," "the will of the people is..," and so on. These usages were never expressed in terms of any precise mechanisms – i.e. *how* the people might translate its will into a policy, or even whether a revolutionary committee ought to be formed, somehow, so as to express this peoplehood efficiently. In Tahir Square, where I spent the majority of my time during the first five weeks of the Egyptian revolution, I saw that peoplehood was usually used to express what were commonly regarded as intuitive propositions about which there existed a presumed social consensus. It was never used to express complex or presumably divisive theories of social order. Even "Islam" was never used *then* in any way that was synonymous with peoplehood.

The concept of the "civic state," for example, emerged precisely in that way, as a new popular concept expressing popular unity. The first usages I saw of the notion of a "civic state" in Tahrir Square were not vague, but explicitly explained what it meant by stating what it was not. The first sign I saw in Tahrir Square about the concept, explained that a "civic state" was one that was neither religious nor military. In other words, it was a state not ruled by *identifiable* agents known to be likely candidates for ruling the post-revolutionary state.<sup>3</sup> Only in excluding such identifiable

---

<sup>3</sup> The principle of "civic state" was so broadly accepted that even the Muslim Brotherhood adopted it, precisely in the form it was formulated in Tahrir. In the debates leading to the final text of the Egyptian Constitution ratified in December 2012, the group continued to endorse that vision, refusing to support calls for defining the state as "Islamic," as well as other calls to designate "God" as the ultimate source of sovereignty (in the preamble and Article 5, ultimate sovereignty belongs to "the people").

to be a reason for them to last. New knowledge appeared more significant than final conclusions or the imperatives of consensus. This anarchist type of knowledge flowed most effortlessly out of a fixation on the present, which typifies the revolutionary period itself; in the post-revolutionary or transitional periods, this type of knowledge requires an extra effort.

## Dialectics of Three Enlightenments

A revolution as described above may be regarded as an experiment in enlightenment. By this I mean that a revolution is a name we give to an environment in which radical new knowledge appears, usually in the form of a revelation or epiphany, and then gradually becomes established as a form of political or social culture during the post-revolutionary phase. Experiencing "enlightenment" is an indispensable attribute of any revolutionary culture, since without this experience it is impossible for a revolutionary subject to feel entitled enough to alter the status quo, nor motivated enough to place oneself in conditions of danger and preparedness for sacrifice that could only be sustained by a *gnosis* of a new kind, that is, non-traditional and non-customary *gnosis*.

However, two provisos are needed here: first, "enlightenment" does not necessarily imply a radical break from past traditions or a complete discontinuity, but at least the *appearance* of such a radical break – so long as appearance is good enough for sustaining revolutionary mobilization. Second, and related to the above, "enlightenment" is knowledge experienced as such. This is to say, enlightenment is not merely a European philosophical tradition. Rather, what we call enlightenment may emerge out of radical reinterpretation of an already familiar tradition (as in religious hermeneutics); as a way of employing familiar social traditions (e.g. hospitality, solidarity, everyday spontaneity, and so on) for purposes of revolutionary activism rather than for maintaining social peace and

into elucidating the meaning of unclear concepts, advancing new ones, testing conspiracy theories, exchanging stories of personal encounter with the regime, lessons from tactics practiced the day before, and generally testing ways to systematize knowledge about the general structures of politics and society. Everything required a meaning, including, as I frequently saw in debating circles, defining what a “regime” was, since that was what “the people” wanted to topple.<sup>5</sup> For example, the “regime” was for some mainly the head of the regime, a position supported by the proposition that if the head was rotten it will corrupt everything else in the body.<sup>6</sup> For others, the “regime” was a small circle of high officials and rich businessmen, who colluded in order to plunder the country and for whom the *head* of the regime only offered coordinating services. But others defined the “regime” in vastly broader terms that included lower officials, the vast security apparatus, municipal and village councils, many intellectuals and artists, and virtually everyone associated with the quite common practices of patronage and corruption that had become a way of life for millions through the decades of dictatorship.

Debates on meanings of other relevant terms (for example, “civic state,” “liberalism,” “revolutionary legitimacy,” and so on) rarely, as far as I could see, required consensus on a single definition. In any case, there was no one who could enforce consensus on any meaning or define a certain debate to be more worthy of being pursued than another.<sup>7</sup> Knowledge was solicited and produced anarchically, and debates lasted as long as there seemed

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, I never saw a debate on the meaning of “the people,” which may have to do with the fact that this abstraction was actually felt for the duration of the social consensus that defined the revolution in its early phase.

<sup>6</sup> That proposition seems quite easy to believe in when one confronts a personalistic and dynastic dictatorship (“sultanistic” as it is sometimes called)

<sup>7</sup> Except for circles that formed around specific intellectuals who visited the crowds occasionally and around whom a temporary circle was formed for the duration of their visit.

agents could the future state assume a “civic” character, i.e. express peoplehood as *the concept felt during the revolutionary moment*. *Al-sha’b*, an abstract formulation, did not appear to require being made concrete by being embodied in a savior leader, an organized party, or any concretely identifiable entity, since *al-sha’b*, at that rare revolutionary moment, felt so concretely close to earth, so directly present: “the people” was experienced as a direct outgrowth of what the little person was doing.

If a revolution of this kind could not be abandoned after it began, one likely reason is that it became an appealing form of life that was exceptionally effective in revealing the hitherto unsuspected sources of self and others, sources that in the revolutionary climate appeared infinite. In that light, pre-revolutionary life appeared to mimic death, frozenness, separation from others, and suspicion of all – i.e. the exact counter-ethics of the revolutionary moment. Much clearer to the revolutionaries than to outside observers was how the revolution itself was lived as such a profound experience in its own right, *rather than simply as means to an end*.

Nothing illustrates this disjuncture between how the revolution was lived and how the outside world perceived it better than how each sphere experienced the relevance of the question “what will come next?” When I was back in Europe and the US, I was initially surprised by this question, even though it was to be expected. I realized only outside of the revolution that I rarely heard anyone asking the question as to what would come next in the middle of the revolution (apart from various utopias, none of which answered a question to which outsiders sought more precise and definite answers). The revolutionary perspective then seemed entirely fixated on the present, which appeared as such an exceptionally rich moment that one could not look away from it, without a sense of betraying the present, which completely saturated all senses. This observation seemed to me to justify a strict separation, in terms of social analysis, between the revolutionary moment proper and the post-revolutionary or transitional period. The psychology of

the one is not that of the other. The proportion of practical, everyday political calculus to a sense of world transformation is not the same across the two periods, neither is the degree of social consensus. Most importantly, knowledge in the revolutionary moment is produced by an unwavering fixation on the present moment, which in transitional or post-revolutionary climate is replaced by a more normal orientation to the future and to the calculus of likely consequences of each action.

The focus on the present was evident in a number of dynamics that are probably typical of many other revolutionary moments in history, especially where there is no leading vanguard, no hierarchical guidance, and no plan as to what to do next when the “regime” refuses to step down. None of the Arab revolutions had any “plan B” or a clear roadmap as to how, exactly, the revolution would compel a regime to fall when that regime resisted the initial waves of the uprising. The Libyan revolution was certainly not intended at first to become the bloodbath it became, and the large defections by senior officials and ambassadors in that case may suggest that they had thought the task to be easier than it turned out to be. The revolutionaries in Yemen did not anticipate they would need an entire year of occupying public places, immobilizing the entire country, and bringing it to the brink of civil war before Saleh’s regime would very reluctantly agree to a transitional period governed by a compromise. Nor is it clear at all that the Syrian revolution would have even been attempted had its horrible human price, complexity, and duration been known in advance. And even the relatively faster paced Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions had no clear prospects at the beginning: before February 11, 2011, no one in Egypt was certain how long it was going to take for the revolution to compel Mubarak to fall, and there was no plan to do much else in case he refused to do so other than more of the same. Even proposals to do something beyond occupying Tahrir Square—for example, marching on the presidential palace (as was eventually attempted in Yemen) could not materialize, since the ab-

sence of leadership favored occupation over marching as a style of physical protest.

In that case, like Yemen, occupation was the favored strategy not simply because it better expressed realities such as the lack of an alternative plan or absence of strong or unified leadership. More than anything, the tactic of occupation highlighted presence as something to be contemplated and in a way that delivered the greatest possible epiphanies out of the focus on the present moment. One did not move from either space or time because presence revealed itself to be the greatest means of discovery.<sup>4</sup> Life in Tahrir Square during the first weeks of the revolution, for example, was characterized by debating circles everywhere, and it was virtually impossible to be left alone, to not be talking to someone else, usually a complete stranger, for a significant amount of time. Talk was in fact the most frequent social activity and it was reinforced by countless other communicative attempts in that space, such as handmade signs, impromptu theater performances, songs, mini demonstrations, and humor.

These communicative acts were aimed in one part at generating new meanings, in another at performing an erotics of agreement. The two are not necessarily different activities, but if we focus on the meaning-generating part of the equation for now, it is easy enough to document how a vast amount of conversation went

---

<sup>4</sup> It is possible to trace these arts of presence to earlier experiences or traditions of resistance, although that requires a more extended treatment than is possible here. Asef Bayat had earlier described what he called the arts and politics of presence as he explored contemporary Muslim intellectual thought and movement practices during the pre-revolutionary period. He also described more general tactics of establishing presence, “quiet encroachment,” that were the tools by which new urban poor managed to carve for themselves a permanent space, in spite of legal prohibition and in a way that did not require forming any formal organizations or movements with explicit goals. See Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford University Press, 2007); and *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2009).