IT IS NOT OVER YET: THE ARAB REVOLUTION BETWEEN CULTURE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Giuseppe Tassone

Abstract: In their assessment of the recent revolutionary turmoil in the Middle East, Hamid Dabashi and Tariq Ramadan argue that the Arab Revolution has opened up for the Arab peoples the possibility of reconnecting themselves with their own history. In their view, there is a creative potential in the Orient itself to question, from within its own tradition, the practices and conceptual categories by which the West has objectified it, so as to produce something new and original. In this article, I contend that Dabashi’s and Ramadan’s appeal to the Arab cultural tradition as a source of meaning for reconstructing Arab societies is a form of culturalization of politics that blots out the role played by political economy in the Arab Revolution. To gain a theoretical grip on this question, I suggest that the ties between culture and politics be severed and, in their place, the connection between the political and the economic be restored.

Keywords: Arab Revolution, culture, political economy, Dabashi, cosmopolitan worldliness, Ramadan

Arab Revolution and the Recovery of the Arab Memory: Dabashi and Ramadan

Reviving Marx’s claim in the Communist Manifesto that, historically, the bourgeoisie played a revolutionary role in bringing feudalism and the Middle Ages to an end, The Economist celebrated the social and political discontent of the Middle East and other buoyant emerging markets as middle-class activism denouncing political corruption and demanding a more transparent and democratic governance of public affairs. Quoted by the British magazine, Vali Nasr, former adviser to Barack Obama’s administration, stated in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions that “[t]he people [who] are inspiring the new language of politics in the Middle East [are] the people who are better off, who want more opportunities.”1 The Economist’s exuberant mood was echoed, on the other side of the political spectrum, by Hardt and Negri, for whom the Arab uprisings represented a new laboratory of freedom and democracy.

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1 Giuseppe Tassone, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Balamand, El-Khoura, Lebanon.

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participants, they saw the protesters as being organized around the horizontal network of a self-managing multitude. Of course, by freedom and democracy, *The Economist*, on the one hand, and Hardt and Negri, on the other hand, do not refer to the same thing. Whereas for *The Economist* democracy means liberal democracy coupled with an unbridled free market, for Hardt and Negri, the concept of democracy converges with a new demand arising from the uprisings for a constituent process that would reinvent “a common plan to manage natural resources and social production.” Yet, despite their substantial political differences, both *The Economist* and Hardt and Negri are quite eloquent as to what the Arab Revolution is about.\(^3\)

The same clarity of judgment seems to evade Dabashi, who, in his assessment of the revolutionary turmoil in the Middle East, resurrects the defunct postmodern language of indeterminacy. Dabashi rejects both genealogical accounts of the Arab Revolution that, retrospectively, assimilate it to some historical antecedents—Robert Fisk’s, for instance, establishing a causal nexus between the revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt and the 2005 demonstrations in Beirut demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon—and psychopathological explanations à la Bernard Henry Levy, according to which the Arabs are not ready for democracy. For Dabashi, the Arab Revolution is a promise, the promise of a world yet to be named. It reconfigures the falsifying binary of “Islam and the West.” Following Hardt and Negri’s theory of Empire as having lost its metropolitan center and being dispersed across a network of peripheral and deterritorialized rule, he argues that the West has always been a chimera, a figment of the imagination. He goes beyond what he detects in Hardt and Negri as a residual Eurocentric view of globalization to claim that there are “multiple worlds that have existed prior to and alongside” the West. The Arab Revolution reveals one of these worlds, which postcolonialism “promised but failed to deliver, and thus concealed.”\(^4\)

In Dabashi’s view, the Arab Revolution is an open-ended revolt to be read more as a novel than an epic. It has no heroes. It is to be understood in the language of its protagonists rather than the vocabulary of its antecedents. Even the term democracy should not be fetishized, he remarks. It is meaningful as a political medium to achieve a wider public good that must include also economic well-being, but devoid of social justice it is a hollow and insignificant concept. Engaging in a polemic with Orientalist scholars, he contends that a Pavlovian reaction to Orientalism has become now a cliché among followers of Edward Said and that, in a decentralized Empire, Orientalism is an obsolete category. There is no West to orientalize the East any longer, he states. The West must be overcome by the recognition of other worlds, and these worlds are to be self-assertive, actively conscious of their own historicality.\(^5\)
After the Arab Revolution, Dabashi muses, “[t]he Arab World’ is no longer what it was—it has become a floating signifier.” What happened in Tahrir Square is emblematic of a renewed conception of what it means to be an Arab ... Tahrir Square is now the epicenter of a new geography of liberation, a new world, yet to be named.” The new world the Arab uprising points to is in fact the retrieval of what Dabashi terms, in a language resonant of Heidegger’s vocabulary, “cosmopolitan worldliness,” that is of “worldly experiences that have historically existed”—from the Abbasids in the eighth century to the Ottomans in the nineteenth century—but were “overridden and camouflaged” by two hundred years of colonial and imperial domination. Cosmopolitan worldliness is not the reformulation of Kant’s normative project of global justice but the coming to terms with the actual existence of real, though forgotten, historical experiences. In other terms, Dabashi seems absurdly to believe that, with the Arab Revolution, the West—both as a political and as a philosophical category—has fallen apart and the possibility of a new world—a world rooted in the depths of the Arabs’ collective memory—has opened up.

If, in the thesis of The Economist, the Arab Revolution was a case of economic ascendancy of the new middle classes in Asia demanding political rights and further neoliberal deregulation, in Dabashi’s view from the Arab Revolution emerges a hybrid political language that cannot be appropriated by any external metanarrative. The revolutionary slogans were indexical utterances—such as “the people demand the overthrow of the regime”—whose powerful meaning is to be understood within the frame of reference of the normative tropes of literary humanism:

A novel of Sun’allah Ibrahim, a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, or a film directed by Elia Suleiman are ... infinitely superior for understanding the Egyptian revolution than the columns of the New York Times or The Economist.8

The revolutionary uprisings were forms of what Dabashi terms delayed defiance, whose genealogy resides in a collective imagination, cultivated in literary texts, where the ideas of freedom, dignity, and social justice weave the fabric of a new geography of liberation. From this gesture of defiance descends a hermeneutics of uncertainty that intimates the observer to hear the indexical utterances of the revolution before setting out to determine what they speak about. The indexical utterances of Tahrir Square are the ground zero of politics that anticipate a “renewed pact of civil liberties between the people,” and that debunked expressions such as “democracy” are unable to capture. Their “brevity, uncertainty, and contingency” are all “markers of ... post-ideological indeterminacy”:

The words are solitary, simple, spoken from the silence of ages, allowed into the poetics of a people only, as if fearful that they may say too much. These utterances
speak of silence. They are just the next breath, one breath, from a volcanic silence. They are far from certain, far from certainty, ideology, conviction. They are whispers cried out loud ... They are staccato, not crescendos, not orchestral, not complete. They are rhythmic, musical, tonal ... They are revelatory, versatile. These words are indexical, brief, pointed, and purposeful, born out of necessity, say a lot in the shortest possible way: Arhil, “Leave!”

An indexical expression is like a road sign pointing in a certain direction well before the destination is in sight. In a revolutionary situation, “they are signs of a deferred defiance.” They redefine the very notion of democracy as an open-ended horizon of meaning. They modulate a “constellation of suggestions” rather than “the teleological crescendo of an epic.”

So, even for Dabashi, in Tahrir Square the subaltern is speaking. But in what idiom is he/she speaking? Quite predictably, Dabashi regards the voice of the people that resonated from the Arab insurrectional squares as neither a form of speech nor an ideology. Voice is utterance, he claims. It is a signifier that signates, does not signify. Its contingent idiom preempts the possibility of being theoretically articulated into a speech. The voice of the people is the voice of transcendence, or self-transcendence, whose indeterminacy is better captured by semiotics, where signs enter an intertextual chain of meaning, than hermeneutics. Thus, by virtue of its “novelistic rather than epic” character, with its direct and purposeful utterances indexed to its communal belonging, “Tahrir Square sublates all previous Arab revolutions into a novel narrative of revolt.” Somehow, Dabashi fancies that interpreting—or, better, signating—the world is already changing it.

There is much to be said about the ontological as well as political plausibility of Dabashi’s notion of cosmopolitan worldliness. Suffice here to notice that the possibility of a retrieval of the Arab forgotten historical worlds is predicated on the assumption that imperialism has been transcended into Empire, a thesis largely discredited in the international relations literature in the wake of the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and, quite startlingly, criticized by no other than Dabashi himself. To this, the oxymoronic nature of the concept of cosmopolitan worldliness should be added too. Cosmopolitan worldliness is “at once local and global.” It is the retrieval of a variety of imperial experiences, supposedly embedding a cosmopolitan perspective of the world, and yet refers to particular organic cultures. It is a “pre-ontological disposition,” but it can be “conceptually and categorically” recuperated. It is, in Heidegger’s sense, an existential concept—that is, “historical, lived, experienced, remembered, acted”—and yet it is not actually lived or experienced because it has been “overridden and camouflaged.” Cosmopolitan worldliness is particular and universal, organic but not essentialist, one thing and its opposite.
Where Dabashi’s reclaiming of historicity, that is the recovery of an authentic dimension of Arab existence, leads to eventually is the rejection of universalistic ideas. Dabashi denies both modernity and Kant’s universalism. Following Bernard Yack’s criticism of Rousseau and Marx, he denounces their project of human emancipation as a longing for total revolution that ended up in a cul-de-sac. Their ideal of “a full humanity” to be realized by bringing down the dehumanizing institutions of modern society was, in Dabashi’s view, “a metanarrative of emancipation that further implicat[ed] the knowing subject as its agent in a self-defeating project.”21 His denunciation of Rousseau’s and Marx’s attempts at achieving a full humanity effectively amounts to the rejection of the universal idea of man and to anthropological nominalism. In conformity with Heidegger’s pathos of historicity, Dabashi perceives universalistic ideas as a threat to cultural uniqueness. In his view, humanity in a general and universal sense is an empty abstraction. In its place stands the worlding of the world, a multiplicity of worlds each with its own irreducible identity. But if Tahrir Square re-Orients the world in a Heideggerian-Gadamerian fashion, then Dabashi fails to realize that the individuals within Tahrir Square are swallowed up into their determined, nontranscendable world, which effectively becomes their destiny. In other terms, cultural uniqueness and the pathos of historicity inexorably lead to organicism.

The same belief that the Arab Revolution has disclosed to the Arab peoples the possibility of reconnecting themselves with their own history is shared also by Tariq Ramadan.22 He argues that there is a creative potential in the Orient itself to question, from within its own tradition, the practices and conceptual categories by which the West has objectified it. He rejects the idea that the Arab and Muslim countries are to be integrated into the global economic order, thus severing the ties with their own cultural tradition and collective memory in which the seeds of something new and original, indigenously produced, may be contained. Of course, for Ramadan the Arab peoples share the same values as all other peoples—freedom, equality, justice, autonomy23—but they can be implemented within a political framework other than democracy, a concept now gone bankrupt even in the West.24 Western democracies today find themselves in a position of virtual subservience to economic powers to the extent that the doctrine of free market has taken on in secular societies the status of a new religion. In the face of the ongoing process of de-democratization of democracy, Ramadan suggests that Arab and Muslim majority societies should draw on the resources of their collective memory to find alternatives.

Unfortunately, Ramadan’s blueprint for an Islamic change does not go beyond a list of moral exhortations for the separation between divine and civil authority, emancipation of women, universal education, and tackling of poverty. Despite
incessant calls within Muslim societies to reconcile ethics and economics, an Islamic economy has proved unable even to restrain the excesses of neoliberalism. Obsession with growth, colonization of new markets, over-reliance on debt, capital flights to tax heavens, free rein for multinational corporations, and over-exploitation of migrant workers are common practices in Muslim countries that make a mockery of the most basic ethical concerns.

By appealing to the Arab cultural tradition as still a relevant source of meaning to reconstruct Arab societies, Dabashi and Ramadan seek to counter the widespread belief, not just within Western intellectual circles but also among local Middle Eastern elites, that East and West are finally coming to merge together into the single civilization of liberal democracies. The thesis being propounded there is that the Arab Revolution has fundamentally altered the Western prejudice of a radical otherness of the Islamic civilization. The spectacle of Arab peoples rising up against their oppressive regimes in the name of the values of freedom, justice, and democracy has licensed their entry into the triumphant march of progress. Now the Arabs, whether Muslim or not, are no longer acting against the grain of history but are joining its enlightened onward sweep as self-conscious subjects of the Universal.

Ramadan rejects this celebratory account of the Arab Revolution as politically and ideologically motivated, taking place in a “historical and economic vacuum, as if international relations and foreign influences had been rendered secondary or obsolete.”25 With the same sweeping brush stroke, Dabashi dismisses it as Orientalist claptrap. In his view, under conditions of global capitalism and dispersed Empire, all ideologies, whether postcolonial or not, deprived of a center to oppose and a master code to codify, have come to an end.

**Arab Revolution, Democracy, and Universal History**

Despite their social and economic sensitivity, Dabashi’s and Ramadan’s semiotic/hermeneutical escape into some pristine, though forgotten, Arab historical world remains vulnerable to Rabab El-Mahdi’s charge that the question of power and class stratification has been largely expunged from the narrative of the Arab Revolution. She argues that, with the outbreak of the Arab revolution, the old, orientalist narrative of “Arab Exceptionalism” has been replaced by the new, equally orientalist, narrative of “Arab Revolution.” Whereas in the former narrative Arabs were regarded to be culturally and sociologically refractory to democracy, in the new narrative they are constructed as young, middle-class, non-violent (therefore not terrorist), well-educated people who “hold the same values as ‘us’ (the democratic West) and ... use the same tools (Facebook and Twitter) that ‘we’ invented and use in our daily lives.”26
According to El-Mahdi, this representation of the Arab revolution does not just romanticize it but is plainly false. She contends that the greatest majority of the people who took to the streets in Cairo came from the subaltern classes, “never studied at the AUC,” held antagonistic views to those prevalent in the West, and were violent too. Although their violence did not match by any means that of the government’s security forces, they still set on fire the headquarters of the National Democratic Party as well as several police stations in Cairo, a display of violence which negatively mirrored the systematic violence—in form of torture and humiliation—to which, unlike their middle-class counterpart, they used to be subjected every day under Mubarak’s regime precisely because of their class extraction within the Egyptian neoliberal economic order.

This romanticization of the Arab uprising, which makes the educated, middle-class, technology-savvy young the icon of the revolution, is aimed at concealing, beneath the stereotype youth, “the class composition of dissent,” lumping together the interests of unemployed, rural poor, and slum-dwellers with those, objectively conflicting, of what El-Mahdi designates as “yuppies,” that is, young urban professionals. As a consequence, the voices of the educated, cosmopolitan—therefore peaceful, non-violent, and democratic—Egyptians are considered legitimate, while those of the violent, undemocratic subaltern are considered illegitimate and excluded from representation among the agents of revolution. “Once again,” El-Mahdi concludes, “we are witnessing the ‘empire’ painting the picture of the ‘fringe’ and, within this fringe, the subaltern—‘the fringe of the fringe,’—are being outcast.”

El-Mahdi’s critique, though directed at a renewed orientalist reading of the Arab Revolution, exposes the fundamental flaw of Dabashi’s and Ramadan’s arguments. It suggests that, in the ideological humdrum of the culturalization of politics, of which Dabashi more than Ramadan is an exemplary interpreter, the political economy goes lost. The Arab Revolution unfolded against the background of the most profound global economic crisis to have shaken to its foundations the world order since 1929. To understand it, it is necessary to sever the ties between culture and politics and restore, in its place, the connection between the political and the economic. While the language of the revolution is political, there is always an important economic subtext to it that needs to be uncovered.

The connection between culture and politics is a highly politicized project. Underlying it is culturalism, the doctrine that culture goes all the way down, that “everything in human affairs is a matter of culture.” Yet what is constitutive of the cultural animal is “to sit loose” to its cultural determinants. Man is culturally shaped but in a self-reflexive way. Culture is porous, indeterminate, and intrinsically inconsistent. It is never complete in itself. Thanks to this ontological lack, the Other becomes open and accessible. Culture is always out of joint; it has an
internal blind spot where it fails to be at one with itself, and this fissure in its own being opens itself up to the encounter with the Other. Cultural animals are internally dislocated because they are historical beings capable of transcending nature as well as their cultural context through the free play of the symbolic order.

Culture, as high culture, originally referred to a capacity to transcend one’s particularism in the name of a universal subjectivity. Entry into the kingdom of culture, in the traditional sense of the term, meant to overcome the contingencies of one’s identity and embrace “a deeper dimension” of human belonging. Culture thus understood incorporates a set of values that people share by virtue of their “common humanity.” This idea of culture has been subverted since the 1960s to signify its opposite. Culture now means “affirmation of a specific identity ... rather than the transcendence of it.” The fragmentation of culture into a plurality of sub-cultures—Dabashi’s Arab culture being one of them—challenges the universal rationality of Enlightenment. Yet these micro-worlds reproduce at the local level the same features of closure and alienation that they detest globally.

Culture, as high culture, is cultureless today. It does not refer to any particular way of life but embraces the dimension of human life as such. Yet, though universal, culture is not abstract. It must be grounded in some historical milieu. It cannot, like reason, hover above place and time and transcend its historical, contingent boundaries. Culture, therefore, does have a double interpretive appendage: it is both specific and universal. To be a product of culture means to be detachable from a particular context as a product of universal spirit. Culture bypasses collective identities and particularities to establish “a direct relation between the individual and the universal.” What defines the individual is its humanity, an individualized universal from which all accidental particularities have been stripped away. Culture universalizes the individual by raising it above its arbitrary contingencies. Through the medium of art, it transfigures the individual into universal humanity, thus reducing it to its own essence.

Thus, if we detach culture from politics and revitalize the tie of politics with economics, where are we left with the Arab Revolution? Does such a move offer better interpretive avenues for the apprehension of its meaning? Žižek points out that there is something miraculous about the Arab Revolution. It seems to have come out of the blue, he claims; no one predicted it. The Arab Revolution transscends any kind of social explanation and results from “the intervention of a mysterious agency that we can call, in a Platonic way, the eternal idea of freedom, justice, and dignity.” While Žižek’s category of the miraculous captures Benjamin’s important insight that revolution is a messianic event rather than the logical outcome of humanity’s “progression through a homogeneous empty time,” it is not, however unanticipated, beyond explanation. That political explosions are unpredictable does not mean that the structural contradictions bringing
down a social, economic, and political system cannot be identified. Indeed, Marx observes, “they can be determined with the precision of natural science.”

The first step to be taken in order to reconnect the political with the economic consists in restoring the material content of the idea of democracy. According to Balibar, the founding text of modern democracy is the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a text of universal and world-historical significance. The logic of the Declaration, Balibar argues, lies in the proposition of equaliberty, that is, in the proposition that freedom is equality. In contemporary liberal thought, it is generally assumed that freedom and equality are mutually exclusive, equality being a socio-economic concept and freedom a juridical-political one. For Balibar, instead, freedom and equality are identified in the Declaration. Indeed, they constitute a unity of opposites enacting a dialectic of insurrection and constitution whose outcome takes a revolutionary form, when a claim is made for increased power of the people or emancipation from domination. In other terms, Balibar asserts that every time a demand for freedom and equality is advanced, the original enunciation, which is at the foundation of modern universal citizenship, is reiterated. The demand, at least genealogically if not ontologically, does have an insurrectional meaning. This means that the community of citizens is essentially unstable. It is constantly threatened by “the insurrectional power of universalistic political movements that aim to win rights that do not yet exist or expand those that do by realizing equaliberty.”

This dialectic of insurrection and constitution is, for instance, nowhere better manifested than in the case of the Black Jacobins in San Domingo. The new French constitution proclaimed that all men are free, but it did not include the black men in the French colonies where slavery was still legal.

In 1791 ... half-million slaves in San Domingo, the richest colony not only of France but of the entire colonial world, took the struggle in their own hands, not through petitions, but through violent, organized revolt. In 1794, the armed blacks of San Domingo forced the French Republic to acknowledge the fait accompli of the abolition of slavery on that island and to universalize abolition throughout the French colonies ... In 1801, Toussaint Louverture, the former slave and now governor of San Domingo, suspected that the French Directory might attempt to rescind abolition. And yet, still loyal to the republic, he wrote a constitution for the colony that was in advance of any such document in the world—if not in its premises of democracy, then surely in regard to the racial inclusiveness of its definition of the citizenry. In 1802, Napoleon did move to reestablish slavery ... When [he] sent French troops under Leclerc to subdue the colony, waging a brutal war against the black population ... , the black citizens of San Domingo once again took up arms, demonstrating, in Leclerc’s own words: “It is not enough to have taken away
Toussaint, there are 2,000 leaders to be taken away.” On 1 January 1804, the new military leader, slave-born Jean Jacques Dessalines, took the final step of declaring independence from France, thus combining the end of slavery with the end of colonial status. Under the banner of Liberty or Death (these words were inscribed on the red and blue flag, from which the white band of the French had been removed), he defeated the French troops and destroyed the white population, establishing in 1805 an independent, constitutional nation of black citizens.37

Here, Buck-Morss points out, “the black Jacobins of San Domingo surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications.”38 This does not amount to absorbing the history of San Domingo into Eurocentricity. The Enlightenment, universal goal of freedom, is not approached by subsuming particular experiences of the periphery into an overarching philosophy of history, but “by attending to the edges of the system.”39 Universal history emerges at the margins, at the point of rupture, in the discontinuities of history, where the universal pattern is broken and people establish subterranean solidarities by appealing to a common sense of humanity which exists “in spite of culture and its differences.”40

Against Dabashi’s and Ramadan’s appeal to recover a cultural past deposited in the collective memory of the Arabs, my claim is that there is a form of universality other than the universality of the neoliberal ideology. It is the universality that manifests itself “as the experience of negativity, of the inadequacy-to-itself, of a particular identity.”41 It cuts across all cultures and brings together, in a shared struggle, those who are exploited and oppressed, the excluded within each culture, who cannot fully identify with it. It is a universality that exists as such, within each culture, and destabilizes it from within. To individuals who are out of joint, who experience their culture as a problem rather than a solution, universality, though abstract, appears as actual, as a disruptive force that unsettles the organic harmony of their communal belonging.

Culture belongs to the realm of the parochial. Viewed from a Cartesian or Kantian perspective, it represents the stage of man’s immaturity, where man is dependent upon others, obeys authorities, and blindly performs his duties. Man becomes mature and enlightened when he leaves behind his communal ties and enters the public space of reason, where he engages in social interaction with other participants as an autonomous subject. In this respect, it is the individual, not culture, that is the site of the universal. It achieves universality by raising itself above culture—what Kant terms the private space of reason—and actualizes its “vocation for free thinking.” From the standpoint of public reason, culture appears therefore as something limited and contingent, with no binding power to the individual.
By privileging literary texts to the *New York Times* as explanatory sources of the Arab Revolution, Dabashi fails to recognize the self-reflexivity of those texts, that is, the fact that those texts are humanity’s heritage to the extent that they are critical of their own culture and are able to appeal beyond the narrow boundaries of their own cultural roots.

**The Political Economy of the Arab Revolution**

The global economic crisis against whose background the Arab Revolution took place is a crisis of neoliberalism. Prior to the outbreak of the Arab Revolution, Tunisia and Egypt were held up by the World Bank as champions of neoliberalism. It was Sadat who, in 1974, launched the policy of *infitah*, opening Egypt to foreign investment and trade. Mubarak then deepened Sadat’s economic reforms by subscribing in 1991 to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Structural Adjustment Program. One of the key points of the agreement with the IMF was to repeal the 1952 agrarian reform “allowing the old landlords and their heirs to return and dispossession peasant households.”42 Similarly, in its 2010 report on Tunisia, the World Bank stated:

Tunisia has made remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty and achieving good social indicators. It has sustained an average 5 percent growth rate over the past 20 years with a steady increase in per capita income and a corresponding increase in the welfare of its population that is underscored by a poverty level of 7 percent that is amongst the lowest in the region.43

Despite the enthusiasm of the international financial institutions, neither Egypt nor Tunisia experienced an economic miracle. For its access to foreign exchange, Egypt remained dependent on textile production, a sector highly vulnerable to competition from China, and tourism. Another World Bank report published in January 2011, ironically immediately after the fall of Ben Ali, reads:

In the Middle East and North Africa, the youth unemployment rate at 25 percent is the highest in the world. But that statistic alone doesn’t tell the whole story. World Bank researchers are finding that the actual number of jobless people between the ages of 15 and 29 in the region could be much higher. Many young people who are out of school and out of work are not reflected in the statistics because they are not looking for work. Young urban males, in particular, are at a serious disadvantage in the labour market, with many underemployed, employed in off-the-books informal work, or not working at all.44

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What the transformation of an economic state-controlled system into a free-market neoliberal order means is explained by Paul Mason from the vintage point of the Muqattam slum in Cairo and the zabbaleen, its “garbage people”:

For sixty years, the zabbaleen had run Cairo’s trash collection system. They picked up the waste door to door, fed their pigs with the rotting organic matter and recycled the rest for cash, trading with a traditional caste of middlemen. But in 2003, as part of a privatization program overseen by Mubarak’s son Gamal, three sanitation companies—two Spanish and one Italian—were brought in to “modernize” the city’s waste collection.

These outside firms were given cleaning contracts valued at US $50 million a year. Instead of door-to-door collection, they placed big plastic bins on street corners. Instead of recycling 80 per cent of solid waste—as the zabbaleen had managed to do—their contracts required that only 20 per cent be recycled, with the rest tipped into landfill. The transformation of Cairo’s refuse system was to be crowned by the eviction of the zabbaleen, whose slum was adjacent to a new residential property development planned by friends of Gamal Mubarak.45

Then the global economic crisis came to detonate a political explosion:

The structural weakness appeared in all its magnitude with the 2008 crisis. The springs which had enabled the small boom collapsed as a whole. If we focus on Egypt, we see that remittances from emigrants fell by 17 percent compared to 2008, tourism also went from a rise of 24 percent in 2008 to a fall of 1.1 percent in 2009 and the Suez Canal revenues fell by 7.2 percent compared to 2008, because the travel passages fell by 8.2 percent and tonnage of goods transported decreased by 9 percent. The situation in Tunisia was not very different: its growth of GDP decelerates from rising at 6.33 percent in 2007 to 4.5 percent and 3.1 percent in 2008 and 2009 respectively, while exports of goods fell by 25 percent, largely due to the decline in textiles and apparel and petroleum-related products.46

To this already bleak picture, a sharp increase in food prices is to be added too. The stage is thus ready for a climactic fallout evoked in rather dramatic terms by Larbi Sadiki in the midst of the Tunisian revolution:

From Tunisia and Algeria in the Maghreb to Jordan and Egypt in the Arab east, the real terror that eats at self-worth, sabotages community and communal rites of passage, including marriage, is the terror of socio-economic marginalisation. The armies of “khobzistes” (the unemployed of the Maghreb)—now marching for
bread in the streets and slums of Algiers and Kasserine and who tomorrow may be in Amman, Rabat, San’aa, Ramallah, Cairo and southern Beirut—are not fighting the terror of unemployment with ideology. They do not need one. Unemployment is their ideology. The periphery is their geography. And for now, spontaneous peaceful protest and self-harm is their weaponry. They are “les misérables” of the modern world.47

If this is the case, then there is no easy fix for the Arab Revolution. There is no solution to it which is not a universal one. And only the economy, which is never at its own place, stands for the universal. The economy is not merely a particular domain—alongside politics, culture, law and science—of the whole but the point of reference of social totality. Whenever there is a gap or a breakdown in the social structure, it is there, at the point of rupture, that the economy makes its presence felt. Cultural divisions are abstract, one-sided, and bound to their own limited domain. They aim at difference and recognition. The economy breaks boundaries and knows only the logic of antagonism. It acts as an absent or distant cause. It exerts its causal power not directly but through a series of displacements. Like an actor constantly putting on new clothes, the economy—as the causal agent of social processes—exists in disguise, covered over by the forms of its representation. Cultural conflicts—such as the conflict in the US between creationists and evolutionists—are displacements of political tensions—in the creationists versus evolutionists case, for example, between the conservative right and the liberal left. This does not mean that divisions that occur along cultural lines are mere epiphenomena of more fundamental, structural mechanisms and lack any substantial reality. They are real, not shadows of their true essence. It means, however, that the economy, as the absent cause, operates from a distance. It expresses itself on the political scene by structuring the dynamics of its unfolding. The economy exists as a gap from itself, in displaced, distorted, representative form. It is the hard core of all political, cultural, and ideological struggles and overdetermines them.

Echoing one of Marx’s passages in the Grundrisse, Lenin once claimed that “politics is the most concentrated expression of economics.”48 He did not mean that the logic of politics mechanically reproduces the logic of economic laws, as if politics were a mere reflection of the economy. On the contrary, Lenin was well aware that political activity is, to a certain degree, independent from the economy. What he wanted to emphasize by his formulation was that economic relations and interests do not immediately translate into political demands but are mediated by political agents and, in the process of translation, therefore distorted. However, given that they are expressed in the most concentrated form at the political level, economic needs are also stripped of their accidental elements when they enter the political stage and brought to the fore in their essentiality. This enables a
dialectically informed theory to decode the symptomatic distortions of politics and grasp the systemic contradictions at work beneath it.\textsuperscript{49}

It is often argued that the 2011 protests in Europe and the Middle East were not instances of a common global phenomenon but different manifestations of specific, incommensurable situations. Thus, the freedom and democracy that protesters in Tunisia and Egypt invoked were denounced by the Occupy movement in New York and the \textit{indignados} in Madrid as models of social inequality and mass impoverishment. Similarly, whereas the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009 targeted an authoritarian, theocratic Islamist regime hostile to the West, protesters in Egypt and Tunisia called for the resignation of pro-Western governments. This form of particularization of protest, Žižek contends, while seemingly appealing to a realist politics of concrete, day-to-day measures, de facto surrenders itself to the status quo. It is true that protests cannot be reduced to one single, overarching theme. But it is equally true that all protests associated a rejection of neoliberal capitalism as a system to the ideological-political demand for democracy:

The general tendency of today’s global capitalism is towards further expansion of the market, creeping enclosure of public space, reduction of public services (healthcare, education, culture), and increasingly authoritarian political power.\textsuperscript{50}

These issues were at the core of protests, and the protests demanded that democracy be reinvented in order to restrain the neoliberal version of capitalist excess. However, the fact that protests are against global capitalism “doesn’t mean [that] the only solution is directly to overthrow it.”\textsuperscript{51} Žižek warns against the dual trap of false radicalism (what matters is the abolition of the capitalist system, the other problems are secondary) and false gradualism (let us forget about systemic change in the economy, the real focus now should be the question of democracy). False gradualism fails to acknowledge that the faults of capitalism are “structural necessities” not “contingent perturbations.” False radicalism is instead a velleity. It fails to recognize that “[t]he art of politics lies in making demands which, while thoroughly realistic, strike at the core of hegemonic ideology and imply much more radical change.”\textsuperscript{52} Capitalism is a system fraught with internal contradictions. It is littered with crevices and fissures. The task of protesters is strategically to identify them and expose their inconsistencies so as to make the entire system come under strain.

There are issues which, when politically tackled, turn out to be overdetermined. When masses in the Middle East are mobilized over questions of democracy or government corruption and succeed—as they did in Egypt and Tunisia—they come to realize that the problems which brought them to rise up in the first place continue to “persist in a new guise,” raising the suspicion that the flaw lies in the
goal itself. Thus, the achievement of political freedom and democracy turns out to be insignificant if social and economic life is not democratized too. This is what unites the turmoil in the Middle East with the ongoing unrest in the rest of the world and makes them universal: what protesters fight against is nothing but the hell version of the same capitalist heaven.

Notes

3. The 2011 popular uprisings against Mubarak and Ben Ali have unleashed a revolutionary dynamic in the Middle East that subsequent counter-revolutionary crises have failed to arrest. Although confusion still seems to prevail in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, the revolutions of 2011 have broken a long pattern of political inactivity and opened up the possibility of a different future. Millions of people, especially in Egypt, have demonstrated in public squares, gone on strike, been mobilized in workplaces, become involved in popular committees to believe that they will not continue to do so under circumstances that are more favorable than those prior to Tahrir Square. As Callinicos argues, “revolution is a process, not an instantaneous event. It is marked by advances and retreats, rises in mass consciousness and self-organization and success for the counter-revolutionary forces.” Setbacks are always possible but are far from sealing the last page of a story that is largely still to be written. For an argument against describing the events in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 as revolution and an argument against describing events in Egypt as revolution and counter-revolution, see Hugh Roberts, “The Revolution That Wasn’t,” London Review of Books 35:17 (2013), 3-9, and Aijaz Ahmad, “Revolution or Restoration?,” Frontline, 20 September 2013, http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/revolution-or-restoration/article5085155.ece. For a defense of the thesis that revolution in Egypt is still an ongoing process, see Alex Callinicos, “Specters of Counter-Revolution,” International Socialism, Issue 140 (2013), http://isj.org.uk/spectres-of-counter-revolution/, and Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: Workers & the Egyptian Revolution (London: Zed Books, 2014), 1-34. Also, on the meaning of the future opened up by the Arab Revolution, see Slavoj Žižek, The Year of Dreaming Dangerously (London: Verso, 2012), 127-135.
5. Ibid., 67.
6. Ibid., 98.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 225-226.
9. Ibid., 229.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 230.
12. Ibid., 231.
13. Ibid.
15. To be true, Dabashi qualifies his admission of a reassertion of a “very old-fashioned” imperialism with the claim that “[i]mperialism has always been an Empire, and Empire imperialist, if we simply recognize that capitalism never had a center, and the civilizational manufacturing of boundaries was a heuristic mechanism to sustain the autonormativity of instrumental reason as the heteronormativity of benevolent progress.” Unfortunately, Dabashi never provides a full argument as to why “the United States has lost the imperial game of hegemony.” See ibid., 35, 140.
16. Ibid., 115.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 116.
19. Ibid., 114.
20. Ibid., 115.
21. Ibid., 246.
23. Rather too often Ramadan acritically assumes that values such as freedom and equality are shared by the Arab people, given the fact that they can be found in their historical tradition. This understanding of such concepts is highly simplistic. What modern political philosophy means by freedom and equality has a historical and normative dimension which traces back to the social contract theory and the French revolution. Within this framework, the concepts of freedom and equality imply both “a universalist notion of the citizen,” founded on the declaration of the rights of man, and “a materialist notion of social rights,” embodied by the welfare state. To my knowledge, nowhere does Ramadan articulate the Arab meaning of what he terms the values of freedom and equality. Should he do so, though, it is highly unlikely that his findings would capture the logical and historical complexity inherent in the political-philosophical meaning of the concepts. On the meaning of freedom and equality in modern political philosophy, see Etienne Balibar, Equaliberty: Political Essays (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 100.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 95.
30. Ibid., 38.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 55.
38. Ibid., 39.
39. Ibid., 79.
40. Ibid., 133.
49. It may be suggested that, in the process of translation of economic needs into political demands, culture can still play a decisive role in the way individuals perceive their class interests. Although this may be the case, class perception and actual class struggle are not the same thing. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx sets Hegel’s dialectic at work in the political realm. He shows how, in the revolution in France in 1848, the republican Party of Order was formed by a coalition of two royalist (sic!) movements, the Orleanists and the legitimists. Now, the parliamentary representatives of the Party of Order seized on all possible occasions in the parliamentary debate to reassert their royalist credentials. They would constantly produce royalist slips of tongue to ridicule the Republic and convey the message that beneath their republican mask there was still a royalist heart beating. What they never realized, however, was that, while perceiving themselves as royalist, they were passing a series of laws to extend private property that reinforced the republican institutions and eventually made the restoration of monarchy impossible. In other terms, they were unaware executors of Hegel’s cunning of reason. In pursuit of their particular royalist interests, they were blind to the universal of the bourgeois-republican new order acting behind their backs. Here, culture and economics, local and global, particular and universal are dialectically interrelated but in a way that undermines culture. The universal really exists. It is “the negative force of mediating and destroying all particular content.” It is this actually existing, becoming “for itself” of universality that Althusser overlooked by his notion of overdetermination and his emphasis on the complexity of the historical process that makes it irreducible to the economy. See Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 154-156.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.