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Protestation and Mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa: A Foucauldian Model

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ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault has inspired a rich body of work in the field of critical social theory and the social sciences in general. Few scholars working in the area of social movement studies, however, have applied a Foucauldian perspective to examining the twin phenomena of social mobilization and collective action. This may stem, in large part, from the commonly held assumption that Foucault had far more to say about ‘regimes of power’ than ever about mobilization and collective action or contention politics in general. Be that as it may, a close interrogation of his work reveals the broad contours of a theoretical framework for analyzing social movements whose chief merit lies in a sensitivity to the sociopolitical context within which oppositional movements form, develop and conduct their operations.

This paper aims at delineating what a Foucauldian model of social movements would entail, with specific reference to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region traditionally consigned to the margins of social movement studies. An enquiry of this kind is important because, as I argue, the leading mainstream social movement theories that have been applied to contemporary MENA cases invariably fall short of fully elucidating the phenomenon of mass mobilization. Specifically, leading mainstream theories are prone to certain universalistic assumptions and ‘West-centric’ orientations that render them incapable of accounting for the specificities of MENA cases. I shall demonstrate how a Foucauldian perspective on social movements can bypass the problem of applicability to the MENA region by mapping out a theoretical framework whose chief merit lies in a sensitivity to the sociopolitical context within which oppositional movements form, develop and conduct their operations. At the same time, I argue that a Foucauldian model transcends social movement theories with their linear conception of social and political progress, their exclusivist understanding of sociopolitical ‘development’ and ‘modernist’ assumptions by advancing an account of ‘multiple modernities’.

Keywords: Foucault, Social Movement Theories, Arab Spring, MENA, Political Spirituality, Iran’s Green Movement, 1979 Iranian revolution, Middle East, North Africa, Bahrain’s Uprising of Dignity, Social Movements, Counter-conduct

Introduction

This paper aims at delineating what a Foucauldian model of social movements would entail, with specific reference to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region traditionally consigned to the margins of social movement studies.¹ An enquiry of this kind is important because, as I shall argue, the leading mainstream social movement theories that have been applied to contemporary Middle East and North African cases invariably fall short of fully elucidating the phenomenon of mass mobilization, the chief reason being that they were developed in Western liberal democratic polities, and more specifically “in the context of . . . reform movements . . . in the US and Western Europe,”² where collective action is viewed in a positive light as “a forc[e] for progress toward democracy.”³ This stands in stark contrast to the case in the MENA region, where oppositional movements are viewed as a dire threat by a number of states prepared to use whatever force necessary to preserve the status quo. In these settings, mass social movements tend to form, develop, and operate in circumstances where “contention faces huge constraints” and where “the collective dimension of protest is far from [a] given.”⁴

All this has led Asef Bayat to question “how far prevailing social movement theor[ies] [are] able to account for the complexities of [social] movements in contemporary [MENA] societies,” given that they were developed in “highly differentiated and politically open Western societies,”⁵ and therefore reflect, as Steven Buechler reminds us, the “structural features of [those] societies.”⁶ Specifically, and as I will argue, leading mainstream theories are informed by universal assumptions and ‘modernist’/‘Western-centric’ orientations that render them incapable of accounting for the specificities of MENA cases.

In the first part of the paper, I examine the applicability of leading mainstream theories to MENA social movements with a view to identifying their apparent deficiencies in this regard. Having emerged in the 1960s as a field in its own right, social movement studies would branch into various schools and traditions. This enquiry focuses solely, however, on those leading mainstream theories, both American and European, that have been applied to, or have referenced, the

¹ This point has been raised by various leading social movement theorists. See, for example, C. Kurzman, ‘Conclusion: Social movement theory and Islamic studies,’ in Q. Wiktorowicz (ed), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 289-298; see also D. McAdam, D. J. McCarthy, & M. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xiii-xiii.

² E. P. Oliver, J. Cadena-Rao, & D. K. Strawn, ‘Emerging trends in the study of protest and social movements,’ *Research in Political Sociology*, 12(1), 2003, p. 215 ([https://doi.org/10.1016/s0895-9935\(03\)12009-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0895-9935(03)12009-8)).

³ R. Garner, and J. Tenuto, *Social Movement Theory and Research* (London, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁴ J. Beinín & F. Vairel, *Social movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, (eds.), (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 19.

⁵ A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 4.

⁶ S. Buechler, ‘New social movement theories,’ *The Sociological Quarterly*, 3(3), 1995, p. 447.

phenomenon of social mobilization in the Middle East and North Africa. In the course of delineating the historical contexts and conditions giving rise to these theories, I shall analyze their key assumptions regarding oppositional movements to assess how far such assumptions can account for the specificities, e.g., the organizational structure, leadership, modes of solidarity building, and domains of protestation and contestation of social movements in contemporary MENA societies.

In the second half of the paper, I articulate a Foucauldian-inspired model of social movements, delineating how it can, by virtue of its sensitivity to the contexts and settings within which social movements form, develop and conduct operations, and elucidate the sociopolitical processes underpinning them. At the same time, I argue that in presenting an account of 'multiple modernities,' a Foucauldian model transcends social movement theories with their linear conception of social and political 'progress,' exclusivist understanding of sociopolitical 'development,' and 'modernist' assumptions.

Mainstream Social Movement Theories: Origins and Foundational Assumptions

In the United States, dominant social movement theories took their inspiration chiefly from the civil rights, national student liberation and anti-war movements of the 1960s. While each of these had a specific agenda—a legislated end to racial segregation, radical reform of the education system, and the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam, respectively—all were “*self-consciously*” politically oriented and looked exclusively to Washington for remedies.⁷ All were perceived, moreover, to be “forces for progress toward democracy,”⁸ and on the basis of two assumptions: “democracy materializes in the context of social movement activism;”⁹ and “social movements emerge vis-à-vis “opportunities and constraints afforded by [the liberal democratic state].”¹⁰

Resource mobilization theory (RMT), one of “the dominant paradigm(s) for studying collective action in the United States,” seeks to explain how, in light of political opportunities, i.e., conditions in the political system that either facilitate or inhibit collective action, actors come to recognize and seize opportunities to initiate action.¹¹ From this perspective, the resources available to oppositional groups prior to mobilizing, and the ways in which these are pooled and employed, play a critical role in determining how they make their presence felt and the level of effort

⁷ D. Davis, 'The power of distance: Re-theorizing social movements in Latin America,' *Theory and Society*, 28(4), 1999, p. 594; emphasis added.

⁸ Garner & Tenuto, *Social Movement Theory*, p. 5.

⁹ Davis, 'The power of distance,' p. 599.

¹⁰ Garner & Tenuto, *Social Movement Theory*, p. 23.

¹¹ Buechler, 'New social movement,' p. 441.

they can bring to bear to affect social and political change.¹² In this schema, structured leadership emerges as a pivotal aspect of social mobilization; indeed, for leading RMT theorists such as McCarthy and Zald, this factor plays a key role in identifying and defining grievances and exploiting opportunities to initiate collective action. According to these luminaries, “[o]nly after a well-defined leadership emerges do we find well-defined group action.”¹³

RMT focuses primarily on economic factors—cost-reducing mechanisms, career benefits for cadres, the division of labour, management incentives—which speak to the centrality of aggregated resources, chiefly money and labour, to promote collective action.¹⁴ Seen in this light, the emergence, endurance and impact of a social movement organization (SMO) will hinge largely on the capacity to collectivize “what would otherwise remain individual grievances”¹⁵ — a capacity predicated upon such factors as effective communications and the degree of professionalism among SMO staff. Thus, a central tenet of RMT holds that “social change requires a high level of technical expertise.”¹⁶

Other strands of social movement theory developed by American scholars shift the focus from the human and material resources available to SMOs to the political environment in which they operate.¹⁷ The best known of these is ‘political process theory’ (PPT). Among social movement analysts, PPT is viewed as a “hegemonic paradigm” that has “powerfully shap[ed] [the field’s] research agenda.”¹⁸ According to this model, it is the opening up of political opportunities, or the ‘structure of political opportunities,’ that provides a window of opportunity for collective action. Doug McAdam identifies three ‘consensual’ dimensions of political opportunity used to explicate the emergence of social movements: 1) access to a political system which reflects the degree of its openness; 2) intra-elite competition and/or elite allies who encourage or facilitate collective action; 3) a declining capability on the part of the state to repress oppositional movements.¹⁹ These three broad structural factors have been joined recently by a fourth, namely exter-

¹² See, for example, J. C. Jenkins, ‘Resource mobilization theory and the study of social movements,’ *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9(1), 1983, pp. 527-553; D. J. McCarthy & N. M. Zald, ‘Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory,’ *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(2), 1977, pp. 1212-1240.

¹³ D. J. McCarthy & N. M. Zald, *The Trends of Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization* (Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Corporation, 1973), p. 17; emphasis added.

¹⁴ See, for example, McCarthy & Zald, ‘Resource mobilization,’ pp. 1215-1217; see also A. Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

¹⁵ Q. Wiktorowicz (ed), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 10.

¹⁶ Garner & Tenuto, *Social Movement Theory*, p. 23.

¹⁷ See, for example D. McAdam, D. J. McCarthy, & M. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*; H. Kitschelt, ‘Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies,’ *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(1), 1986, pp. 57-85 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712340000380X>).

¹⁸ J. Goodwin & J. M. Jasper, *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotions*, (eds.), (New York: Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp. 3- 4.

¹⁹ McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives*, p. 26.

nal factors broadly understood as international/geopolitical pressures that can provide “favorable conditions” or “open[] up ... opportunit[ies]” for a movement to emerge.²⁰

As the above suggests, PPT aims to advance a universal, causal theory of social movements predicated upon a set of structural factors, i.e., “factors that are relatively stable ...and ...outside of the control of movement actors.”²¹ For the most part, it is the susceptibility on the part of the state to popular political pressure, coinciding with the public’s awareness of that susceptibility and willingness to exploit it, which triggers the mobilization of a mass movement.

In Europe, the new social movement theories were directed at addressing what was deemed to be a deficiency in classical Marxism, namely a tendency toward economic and class reductionism. Regarding the former, all politically significant social action had to be grounded in the economic logic of capitalist production, “[with] . . . all other social logics secondary at best in shaping such action.”²²

Against this background, new social movement theories emerged rooted in traditions of continental European social theory and political philosophy, which was used to reformulate the historical theory of emancipation.²³ With new social movements springing up in Europe in the 1960s—the student movements that erupted in 1968, in addition to the environmental, feminist, ecological, and anti-nuclear movements, among others—social movement theorizing assumed a direction that was both “non-class and ‘new’ [in terms of] social and political logic.”²⁴

One feature of the new social movements stands out in particular: they were theorized in the context of a historically specific phase in the development of Western liberal societies; an attribute that, as Steven Buechler observes, speaks to “the most distinctive feature of new social movement theories.”²⁵ To be precise, while different theories prescribe clearly differentiated models—post-industrial society,²⁶ post-materialist society,²⁷ advanced capitalist society,²⁸ information

²⁰ J. Markoff, ‘Response to Jack Goldstone,’ in McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives*, p. 53; see also McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives*, pp. 25-29.

²¹ Goodwin & Jasper, *Rethinking Social Movements*, p. 4.

²² Buechler, ‘New social movement,’ p. 442.

²³ See, for example, J. Cohen, ‘Strategy or identity? New theoretical paradigms and contemporary social movements,’ *Social Research*, 52(4), 1985, pp. 663-716; B. Klandermans, ‘New social movements and resource mobilization: The European and American approaches revisited,’ in D. Rucht (ed), *Research on Social Movements: The State of the Art in Western Europe and the USA* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag; Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 17-44; E. Larana, H. Johnston, & J. R. Gusfield, (eds.), *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Davis, ‘The power of distance,’ p. 594.

²⁵ Buechler, ‘New social movement,’ p. 443.

²⁶ A. Touraine, *The Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Postindustrial Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

²⁷ R. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²⁸ J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

society,²⁹ etc.—contingent upon the specific constituencies and issues under examination, they have one commonality: all operate based upon, and work to reference, a type of “*societal totality*” closely bound up with the new structural features emerging in Western Europe that were precipitating new patterns of sociopolitical action as the old order was dissolving—in the process providing a context for collective action.³⁰ In investigating the ‘post-industrial’ nature of this totality—an historical stage, indeed, the highest level of historicity—Touraine pits it against its ‘industrial’ predecessor with a view to examining new patterns of sociopolitical action and the conditions governing their emergence—a crucial point I shall revisit shortly when gauging the applicability of his theory to MENA societies.

Social Movement Theories and Specificities of MENA Oppositional Movements

As the above discussion reveals, American social movement theorists view social movements as ‘parcels’ of collective action that present, for the most part, an “organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities.”³¹ In the “politically open and technologically advanced Western societies”³² in which they emerge, they evolve to operate, more or less, as formal ‘business-like enterprises’ whose success is ultimately contingent upon resources, leadership, a clear-cut division of labour, professionalization and strategic planning, etc.; in other words, factors relating to technical expertise. It is, moreover, by acts of mobilization and protestation, chief among them petitioning and lobbying, that the actors engage and influence mainstream political institutions, e.g., parliaments, houses of representatives, political parties, etc. with a view to bringing about change.³³

But what of those political settings where ‘mobilizing structures’ such as formal organizations and professional staff are either non-existent or rudimentary and/or severely handicapped by authoritarian states, where acts of mobilization, e.g., petitioning and lobbying, are ineffectual with respect to pressuring governments unaccountable to oppositional voices, and /or where the political channels for effecting meaningful change or bringing social and political reform are controlled by factions that have a monopoly over certain exercises of power?

Home to a number of states where mobilizing structures have been ruled out, the MENA region can serve as an ideal laboratory in which to examine these questions. Among the countries of the region, Bahrain, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran—each with a unique brand of authoritarianism—represent outstanding cases of states that have historically, and to varying degrees, proven most adept at denying their opponents opportunities to recruit professional staff and establish

²⁹ A. Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁰ Buechler, ‘New social movement,’ p. 442; emphasis added.

³¹ C. Tilly, ‘Social movements and national politics,’ in C. Bright & S. Harding (eds.), *State-Making and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 304.

³² Bayat, *Life as Politics*, p. 20

³³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

formal organizations.³⁴ Consequently, in each case oppositional groups have, for the most part, been driven underground, from where they have conducted clandestine activities.

Where such groups operate in plain view, they are closely monitored by state security forces and their cadres are often subjected to intimidation and harassment, or even arrest and imprisonment. Oppositional leaders, moreover, are “routinely harassed and intimidated, placed under house arrest [, exiled] and/or incarcerated for long periods,”³⁵ or worse, executed.³⁶ One or more of these fates have befallen Mohammed Saleh Al-Bejadi and Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr (Saudi Arabia), Mohammad Mosaddegh, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi (Iran), and Sheikh Ali Salman and Ibrahim Sharif (Bahrain).

Even in the case of Iran during the administration of the reform-minded Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), efforts on the part of oppositional and civil society groups to advance a reform agenda through official channels, such as the *Majlis*, the Iranian Parliament, were severely handicapped or blocked entirely by, to cite but one example, the so-called ‘religious supervisory bodies’ like the Guardian Council, which since the beginning of the early 1990s has been dominated by a conservative establishment that has had the final say in adopting legislation.³⁷

For a prime example of the enormous influence wielded by certain factions holding a monopoly of power, one need look no farther than the failure on the part of the *Majlis* in the early 2000s to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – a United Nations initiative hailed by feminists as an international bill of rights for women. If adopted, CEDAW would have directly challenged a host of laws, customs and practices that had worked to marginalize and subordinate women. Following a press campaign by Iranian feminists aimed at pressuring the government to deliver on its promise to “reconcile Islam with democracy and human rights” by adopting CEDAW, the Khatami administration, in De-

³⁴ I use the phrases ‘each with its own unique brand of authoritarianism’ and ‘to varying degrees’ here to differentiate these states in terms of the opportunities afforded oppositional movements. Thus, for example, a republican, semi-democratic Iran under the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) promoted the development of a civil society in which student and women’s movements could operate with some degree of impunity; indeed, this was the case until Ahmadinejad’s rise to power. Nothing of the kind has ever been possible in the far more authoritarian milieus of Syria and Saudi Arabia, where oppositional groups have historically had little or no opportunity to engage in any kind of subversive action.

³⁵ N. Pourmokhtari, ‘Understanding Iran’s Green Movement as a ‘movement of movements,’ *Sociology of Islam*, 2(3), 2014, p. 148 (<https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00204004>).

³⁶ See, for example, Independent News, ‘Nimr Baqir al-Nimr: Saudi Arabian Shia cleric who denounced the kingdom's rulers and called for religious freedom,’ 2016, available from <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/nimr-baqir-al-nimr-saudi-arabian-shia-cleric-who-denounced-the-kingdoms-rulers-and-called-for-a6798061.html>>.

J. Butler, ‘Bodies and alliance and the politics of the street,’ *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, 2011, available from: <<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>>, para. 1

³⁷ See, for example, M. Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 30-34.

cember 2001, drafted the requisite legislation and submitted it for ratification to a reformist dominated *Majlis*.³⁸ However, immediately prior to the final vote, the enabling bill was placed on hold owing, according to the speaker Mehdi Karoubi, to ‘concerns’ on the part of conservative clerics regarding its compatibility with *Shari’a* law, the sacred law of Islam.³⁹

Pressured by activists, reformist deputies would, over the course of the following two years, demand an official enquiry, but to no avail. Finally, in August 2003, the Guardian Council announced that the CEDAW bill would not be ratified.⁴⁰ Thus, it is apparent that in political settings like Iran, efforts to bring about social and political change by working through official channels are invariably frustrated by factions holding a monopoly over certain exercises of power.

When combined, all the above factors—the closed political environment, government crackdowns on oppositional cadres, the inefficacy of the acts of mobilization aimed at pressuring the state to adopt social and political reforms—imbue oppositional movements in the region with *certain specificities*. For example, far from posing an “organized [and] sustained ... challenge to existing authorities,”⁴¹ as is often the case with oppositional movements in the ‘West,’ in the MENA region, collective action takes the form, more often than not, of “open and fleeting struggles [waged] without [formal] leadership, ideology or structured organization.”⁴²

Relatedly, and herein lies a second specificity, among those Middle East states where social and political reform is likely to be blocked or at least hampered by factions possessing a monopoly over power, where open political channels simply do not exist, and/or where oppositional groups are denied political rights, particularly where challenging government policy is concerned, mobilizing actors may seek out ‘*alternative spaces*,’ most often of a *public kind*, in which to voice their demands, forge solidarities and/or express discontent, thus transforming them into ‘spaces of resistance and defiance.’

In the case of the MENA region, it is the urban streets in particular that lend themselves most readily to contesting the status quo. Ali Mirsepassi labels this spatial phenomenon the “tradition of democracy in the streets.”⁴³ A *sine qua non* for expressing discontent in the region, it is a “consistent and powerful aspect of ... protest movements”⁴⁴ across much of the Middle East and North Africa, e.g., the 1979 Iranian revolution, the 1994 uprising in Bahrain, the so-called ‘upris-

³⁸ Z. Mir-Hosseini, ‘The conservative-reformist conflict over women’s rights in Iran,’ *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 16(1), 2002, p. 38 (<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016530427616>).

³⁹ See. N. Tohidi, “Islamic feminism”: Negotiating patriarchy and modernity in Iran,’ in I. M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *The Blackwell companion to contemporary Islamic thought* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 624-643.

⁴⁰ Feminist News, ‘CEDAW rejected in Iran,’ 2013, available from <<http://www.feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=7996>>.

⁴¹ Tilly, ‘Social movements and national politics,’ p. 304.

⁴² Bayat, *Life as Politics*, p. 46.

⁴³ A. Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. ix.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix (<https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814795644.001.0001>).

ing of dignity,' the 1999 Iranian student movement, and the mass demonstrations in Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain, and elsewhere in the region, in this century.

Asef Bayat discusses this transformative potential of MENA streets under the rubric of "street politics," defined as the participative use of streets for the purpose of "express[ing] grievances, forg[ing] identities [and] enlarg[ing] solidarities."⁴⁵ In this way, he asserts, "a small demonstration [can] grow into a massive exhibition of solidarity" aimed at contesting and negating the status quo.⁴⁶ Thus, streets have become, in effect, the locus for a 'tug of war' between the state and the masses. And "[i]t is [owing to] this epidemic potential of street politics" that, not surprisingly, "almost every" major case of contention in MENA has ultimately "[found] expression in the urban streets."⁴⁷

I want to suggest here, moreover, that public spaces generally in the MENA region have become *a kind of politics* in the sense of serving as mediators through which social and political conflict and contestation originate and develop. Thus, it might be more to the point to talk about a kind of 'spatial politics' unfolding during the course of some of the well-known episodes of contention that have periodically erupted across the MENA region over the past three decades. In this context, the term 'spatial politics' refers to *a feature or strategy of defiance* used by demonstrators to transform *governmentalized zones* into strongpoints where marginalized, subordinated, and subjugated bodies might defy power, and by implication the very 'regimes' it sustains.

The 'political' in 'spatial politics' has a dual meaning. First, it refers to the disruption of the ordinary sequence of things, what Asef Bayat calls "the normal flow of [everyday] life,"⁴⁸ in ways that, as Judith Butler opines, challenge and negate the "very public character of ... space,"⁴⁹ best described as 'meticulous or methodical,' 'fluid' and/or 'disciplinized' and above all 'governmentalized.' In this sense, what lends 'public spaces' a 'political' dimension is that while they have "increasingly becom[e] the domain of ...state power"⁵⁰—which "regulates their use [and] mak[es] them "orderly""⁵¹ through a host of laws and regulations—they have also become, simultaneously and contingent on the will of the masses, "[loci for] "shaming" the authorities."⁵² In this way, and most vexing for the latter, they have been turned into spaces of resistance and sites of political contestation and social negation of the status quo. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Iran's Azadi Square (2009), Egypt's Tahrir Square (2011 – 2012) and Turkey's Taksim Square (2013) should emerge as chief signifiers for mass discontent during the recent spate of uprisings in which each figured prominently. In all three cases, it would be the gathering of immense crowds

⁴⁵ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ J. Butler, 'Bodies and alliance,' para. 1.

⁵⁰ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, p. 53.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵² Mirsepassi, *Democracy*, p. ix.

that demonstrated in a most telling way the power and vitality of these movements, whose actors managed to de-legitimize and de-authenticate 'governmental regimes' before the eyes of the world by occupying these governmentalized zones, thereby disrupting the normal flow of everyday life.

At the same time, the 'political' in 'spatial politics' can also refer to the strategic role urban spaces play in advancing the cause of social and political reform; as such, they function as an alternative to acts of contestation and protestation, e.g., lobbying and petitioning, as well as surrogate channels for pursuing reforms and demanding change where formal political institutions, parliaments, senates, and legislative assemblies have failed. To appreciate the extent to which public spaces have fulfilled this function in the MENA region over the course of the last three decades, we need look no farther than the numerous instances where urban spaces have been converted into sites of contestation and negation.

Thus, for example, in an effort to bring about political and socioeconomic reform in June 1994, over 1,500 Bahrainian activists held a sit-in demonstration in front of the headquarters of the Ministry of Labor.⁵³ This single event led to a series of uprisings (1994 – 1999) that would seriously undermine the Al Khalifa monarchy, bringing into question its very legitimacy. These manifestations of a profound discontent would also be among the first post-ideological⁵⁴ cases of collective action within the region.

On July 9th 1999, in the aftermath of the Tehran University dormitory attack by paramilitary groups affiliated with the conservative establishment,⁵⁵ 50-60,000 demonstrators, the majority students and youth, poured into the public spaces of Tehran and other major cities to express their discontent with the status quo; in addition, sit-ins were held on university campuses—a public space under close scrutiny by the police and paramilitary forces—their purpose being to express discontent, demonstrate solidarity and demand radical social and political reform.⁵⁶ Thus, by massing in unprecedented numbers and occupying governmentalized public spaces, the crowds succeeded in challenging the Islamic Republic's 'governmentalizing regime,' including its

⁵³ Refworld, 'Routine abuse, routine denial: Civil rights and the political crisis in Bahrain,' 2006, available from: <<http://www.refworld.org/docid/45cafc9e2.html>>. The immediate cause of the demonstration was, according to the report published by Human Rights Watch, soaring unemployment, which at one point reached 15 percent.

⁵⁴ The term 'post-ideological' is used here to refer to instances of collective action motivated by no specific ideology, such as, for example, the majority of cases of collective action transpiring in the region over the course of the twentieth century, e.g., the 1979 Iranian revolution. In the series of uprisings that would periodically shake Bahrain between 1994 and 1999, leftists, liberals and Islamists joined forces, setting aside ideological differences to demand democratic reforms.

⁵⁵ Note that a day earlier, i.e., July 8th, students staged a mass demonstration to protest the government closure of a popular reformist daily. Thus, the vigilantes' attack was in large measure meant to crush resistance on the part of students. See M. Sahimi, 'The Iranian Student Uprising of 1999: 14 Years Later,' *Muftah*, 2013, available from: <<http://muftah.org/the-iranian-student-uprising-of-1999-14-years-later/#.V7nkhZBTGcw>>.

⁵⁶ A. Afshari, 'Interview with Ali Afshari, former student activist and former political prisoner,' 2015.

formidable security apparatus, and in the process undermine Tehran's moral and political authority as never before.⁵⁷

August 2006 witnessed in Iran the launch of the so-called Women's One Million Signatures Campaign. One of the most momentous cases of contention of the post-revolutionary period, this initiative aimed at petitioning the *Majlis* to repeal family, civil, and criminal laws that discriminated against women – most notably those relating to divorce, polygamy and temporary marriages.⁵⁸ The campaign workers would soon experience the wrath of the Mahmood Ahmadinejad administration: many were arrested and/or imprisoned, while others had their passports confiscated to prevent them travelling abroad.⁵⁹ In response, the campaigners occupied streets, boulevards, shopping centers, civic squares, shops, the metro, buses and taxis, and whatever was at hand, transforming them into sites of contestation and negation.⁶⁰ Various oppositional tactics were employed in these venues, but the most popular and effective is what will be referred to here as 'spatial theatre.' Thus, for example, in one especially popular 'skit,' two activists, supposedly married to the same man, engaged in a heated argument, sometimes accompanied by mock fisticuffs, during which each reveals how this polygamous relationship has worked to undermine her rights, dignity and authenticity as a woman. Spatial theatre would become the campaign's signature tactic⁶¹ for bringing about reform by "creat[ing] a [public] discourse on women's rights" to which the authorities had to respond.⁶²

These kinds of initiatives did not always have favourable outcomes.⁶³ The point to be grasped here, however, is that in all the cases discussed above, the demonstrators elected to en-

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ See S. Tahmasebi, 'The One Million Signatures Campaign: An effort born on the streets,' *Amnesty International, Middle East and North Africa Regional Office*, 2011, available from: <<http://amnestymena.org/en/Magazine/Issue20/TheOneMillionSignatureCampaigninIran.aspx?articleID=1101>>.

⁵⁹ See Tavaana, 'One million signatures: The battle for gender equality in Iran,' 2016, available from: <<https://tavaana.org/en/content/one-million-signatures-battle-gender-equality-iran>>.

⁶⁰ A. Abdi, 'Interview with Ali Abdi, former student activist, former member of the One Million Signature Campaign, and former political prisoner,' 2015.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Tavaana, 'One million signatures,' para. 10. That response would come in the form of the movement's sole practical achievement: successfully pressuring the *Majlis* to repeal, over the course of 2008, two patriarchal laws and replace them with gender-neutral legislation. Specifically, women were granted the right to inherit a husband's property and to receive equal 'blood money' in the event of an accident covered by an insurance company. The campaign was eventually forced underground, however, and became inactive in 2009 following a systematic crack down on the part of the security forces in the wake of the June election crisis. See Tavaana, 'One million signatures.'

⁶³ For example, in the case of the Bahraini uprisings (1994-1999), a series of confrontations took place between state security forces and demonstrators, which led to 40 civilian deaths. In 2001, in a bid to end the turmoil, Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain, agreed to adopt a National Action Charter delineating ways and means of implementing a program of progressive reform, following a 98% referendum vote in its favour. The charter was followed in 2002 with the promulgation of a new constitution that established a constitutional mon-

gage in a so-called 'politics of space' when they found that the formal, i.e., institutional, avenues for effecting change were either inadequate to the task or blocked entirely. Thus, for example, in the years and months leading up to the Bahrain uprising, opposition groups sought to reform/democratize the political process by repeatedly petitioning the government. In each case, however, their efforts proved fruitless.⁶⁴

In similar fashion, on the eve of the July 1999 Tehran demonstrations, efforts on the part of students to bring about social and political reform were being systematically "sabotaged ... by totalitarian Islamists" within the legislative and judicial branches of the Islamic Republic, who were determined to defeat reformist measures being put to the vote in the *Majlis*.⁶⁵ The same fate would befall the 2006 One Million Signatures Campaign when its efforts to pressure the *Majlis* to ratify CEDAW and rescind discriminatory laws against women proved fruitless.

Thus, unable to work through official channels, disparate opposition groups were left with no choice but to appropriate urban spaces as an alternative avenue for expressing discontent and voicing demands in ways the authorities could ignore only at their peril. By engaging in 'spatial politics,' these groups succeeded in "mut[ing] [politics] within [spaces] ... supposed to be its natural and [normal] habitat",⁶⁶ e.g., the *Majlis*, and in transforming urban spaces, i.e., 'governmentalized zones,' into *political loci of defiance* whose very existence served to de-authenticate the status quo and de-legitimize the political system as a whole. Thus, in both the Iranian and Bahraini cases, 'spatial politics,' that signal feature of defiance and principal strategy for conducting contention episodes, may be viewed as "a capacity for action" directed at contesting the status quo—a capacity "that specific [power] relations...create[d]...enable[d], [and motivated]."⁶⁷

Lastly, what instilled a sense of solidarity and commitment to engage in collective action within these disparate elements was the shared experience of having lived within the same 'governmental space,' and thus having had to abide by codes and rules of governing that worked to

archy and called for equality between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and guaranteed civil and property rights to all citizens, among other things. See Refworld, 'Routine abuse.' The 1999 Student Movement abruptly collapsed after the Revolutionary Guards occupied major Iranian cities and seized control of public spaces in what can only be described as a campaign of terror and intimidation, which included the arrest of thousands of activists. Note also that none of the immediate demands of the movement, e.g., the release of political prisoners, liberalization of the political process, the arrest and trial of those responsible for the dormitory attack, were met. Afshari, 'An interview.' For a discussion of the course and impact of the 2006 Women's One Million Signature Campaign, see previous footnote.

⁶⁴ See Refworld, 'Routine abuse.'

⁶⁵ N. Tohidi, 'Student movement: The harbinger of a new era in Iran,' *ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Newsletter)*, 4(1), 1999, para. 6.

⁶⁶ W. Walters, *Governmentality Critical Encounters: Critical Issues in Global Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012), p. 80.

⁶⁷ S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 18.

deprive them of their social and political rights. To take but one example, as Ali Abdi, a former 2006 One Million Signatures Campaign worker, asserted during an interview with the writer:

Rather than any ideological inclination, it was the conviction among the campaign workers that the status quo was unjust so far as women were concerned and that existing laws discriminated against them that fostered a sense of solidarity among campaigners and fired them with a determination to engage in collective forms of activism. All this transpired during Ahmadinejad's presidency, when the security forces, which were omnipresent, would not hesitate to arrest, imprison and/or beat up, if necessary, members of oppositional groups, in particular campaign workers. Nonetheless, many male activists elected to join the campaign, because they, too, wished to end the state-sponsored patriarchy that had worked to subordinate and marginalize women.⁶⁸

This convergence of disparate actors, which may be viewed as a kind of 'spatial solidarity' informed by common rules of conduct, would enable moments of social contestation and/or social rupture, even where, as in Ahmadinejad's Iran, surveillance and repression orchestrated by the "most reactionary and repressive elements of the Islamic Republic" were part of the fabric of everyday life.⁶⁹ Thus, the term 'spatial solidarity' is used here in reference to the coming together of a people bent upon collective action and united by virtue of being ruled within the same governmental space, and by implication by the rules, codes and norms that define that space. It is this condition of being ruled in such a way that inspires collective action, even in circumstances where "repression has ... left its mark."⁷⁰ This is because authoritarian states and their overweening use of power can create the conditions of possibility for challenging certain rules, codes, and norms, and do so in diverse spatial domains. In this sense, 'spatial solidarity' "mirror[s]" the ways in which "[s]paces of resistance are bound up with ... spaces of power and domination."⁷¹

Applying Political Process Theory to MENA Cases

For its part, political process theory (PPT) is hampered by certain presuppositions that limit its efficacy for analyzing oppositional movements based in the MENA region. Owing to the heavy emphasis placed on *structural conditions*, PPT theorists see mass mobilizations, ultimately, as a response to opportunities that reveal "the vulnerability of the state to popular political pressure."⁷² As such, political opportunities capable of triggering mass mobilizations are viewed met-

⁶⁸ Abdi, 'An interview.'

⁶⁹ N. Ahmadi Khorasani, *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story* (Women's Learning Partnership, Washington, DC, 2009), p. 43.

⁷⁰ Beinin & Vairel, *Social movements*, p. 19.

⁷¹ C. Death, 'Ungoverned spaces, heterotopia, and counter-conducts,' Unpublished Manuscript. *BISA 40th annual conference*, London, 2015.

⁷² C. Kurzman, 'Structural opportunity and perceived opportunity in social movement theory: The Iranian revolution of 1979,' *American Sociological Review*, 61(1), 1996, p. 153 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/2096411>).

aphorically as “‘windows’ that open and close,”⁷³ i.e., “they are either there or not there.”⁷⁴ From such a perspective, oppositional movements are assumed to be comprised of agents possessing an a priori and mechanistic essence, i.e., they constitute “potential groups with preexisting desires . . . who only await the opportunity to pursue them.”⁷⁵ This disposes PPT theorists to focus by and large on the “state or the polity as the only field of struggle that really matters” where mobilization and collective action are concerned.⁷⁶

This fetishization of the state as “an entity presenting social movements with opportunities . . . to mobilize is highly problematic,”⁷⁷ at least with respect to MENA states like Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, where such opportunities are seldom, if ever, presented by governments determined to maintain the status quo at whatever cost. Thus, “[t]hose dissidents courageous enough to transgress the narrow limits of public discourse imposed by the state risk arrest, ‘show trials’ [and long jail terms],”⁷⁸ as was the case in Iran in the post-Green Movement era,⁷⁹ or even execution, as was the fate of Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁰ Thus, it is hardly credible that oppositional movements would have open opportunities to mobilize in political environments of this type.

These realities compel us to seek out factors other than ‘open opportunities’ to mobilize extant in the political environment if we are to plumb the root causes of collective action in the MENA region. Some recent cases of mobilization in this context are instructive in this regard. For example, in the case of the 2009 Iranian Green Movement, as I have shown elsewhere, far from the state providing such opportunities, it was the oppositional forces—chiefly students, youth,

⁷³ J. K. Kingdon, quoted in Goodwin and Jasper, *Rethinking*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Goodwin and Jasper, *Rethinking*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ J. Goodwin & J. M. Jasper, *Contention in Context: Political Opportunities and the Emergence of Protest*, (eds.), (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 15.

⁷⁶ Goodwin & Jasper, *Contention*, p. 15. Note that in response to criticism issuing from a number of social movement scholars, including Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper and Charles Kurzman, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and the late Charles Tilly in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001), a revised PPT has been produced that articulates a more ‘relational’ model of social movements, which is far better suited to studying oppositional movements in the MENA region. See D. McAdam, S. Tarrow, & C. Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). However, as Beinin and Vairel opine, even the reformulated theory is not entirely free of structural bias: “[the authors] appear not to have completely changed their minds about the classical categories they helped to establish. They... reuse ... or adjust them [merely] modifying their meaning [or simply] reasserting them.” See Beinin and Vairel, *Social Movements*, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Pourmokhtari, ‘Understanding Iran’s Green Movement,’ p. 145.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Time, ‘Iran’s show trials: The hard-liners build their case,’ 2009, available from: <<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1914294,00.html>>; see also A. Karami, ‘Will house arrests of Green Movement leaders come to an end?,’ *Al-Monitor*, 2016, available from: <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/rouhani-entezami-house-arrests-green-movement-leaders.html>>.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Independent News, ‘Nimr Baqir al-Nimr.’

and women's groups—that took the lead, or so it has been argued, in creating them.⁸¹ All three were motivated in part by discriminatory policies implemented by the Ahmadinejad administration during its first term in office (2005-2009), and in part by the widespread perception of election fraud. At no time during this period, or prior to it, did the state provide anything that might be construed as an opportunity to mobilize.⁸² Thus, opportunity was “what [they made] of it.”⁸³

Two years later, a wave of protests would sweep through Tunisia, revealing the authoritative will of disparate peoples longing for the kind of fundamental change that alone might usher in a brighter future. Again, one might argue that those who filled the streets created their own opportunities—opportunities that may be viewed as attributes of the actors themselves. Perhaps nothing better illustrates this last point than a solitary act of defiance on the part of a young Tunisian street vendor named Mohammad Bou'azizi. In December 2010 Bou'azizi set himself ablaze to protest the arbitrary confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation suffered at the hands of a municipal official and her aides. This single incident triggered massive demonstrations throughout the country, precipitating what would come to be called the 'Arab Spring.'

Thus, with respect to the Green Movement and this first flowering of the 'Arab Spring,' one might argue that the demonstrators felt compelled to put their lives on the line, spurred on by moral outrage directed at governments that had violated their sense of justice beyond the point of endurance. In such circumstances, a people may come to perceive themselves as agents of social and political change, as actors capable of advancing their interests and possessed of a sense of authority, legitimacy, and subjectivity stemming from the certainty that the status quo is fundamentally unjust—actors determined to leave their mark on history “under circumstances they have the power to change.”⁸⁴

New Social Movement Theories and their Application to MENA Cases

The lived experience of those who filled the streets of Iranian and Tunisian cities demanding change, which will be elaborated upon below, is reflected nowhere in the new social movement theories, which is not surprising given that they take as their datum the technologically advanced and politically open societies of the West. For this reason, they are prone to making grand and monolithic assumptions about social movements, which makes their application highly problematic in the Middle East and North Africa. Touraine's much celebrated post-industrial society theory, which rests upon the assumption that history unfolds as a succession of stages, i.e., 'commercial,' 'industrial' and 'post-industrial,' is a case in point. According to this luminary, post-industrial societies have attained an unparalleled level of historicity—the highest to be precise—

⁸¹ See, for example, Pourmokhtari, 'Understanding Iran's Green Movement,' pp. 149-166.

⁸² For a comprehensive overview of this last point, see *Ibid.*, pp. 144-177.

⁸³ C. Kurzman, 'The Poststructuralist Consensus in Social Movement theory,' in Goodwin & Jasper, *Rethinking*, p. 117.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

wherein societal movements are no longer conceptualized as “dramatic events,” but rather as “the work that society performs upon itself.”⁸⁵ Henceforth, Touraine contends, in post-industrial societies “there can be no societal movement other than the collective actions that are aimed directly at the affirmation and defense of the rights of the subject—of his freedom and equality.”⁸⁶ For this reason, the new “societal movements have become moral movements,” vis-à-vis their predecessors that were of a religious, political or economic character.⁸⁷

Touraine uses this last point to articulate the concept of ‘levels of historicity,’ from which he derives the corollary that only post-industrial societies can achieve the “highest level of historicity,” namely, that of self-production.⁸⁸ In contrast, ‘traditional’ societies still “lie within history,” and for this reason, their ability to produce the cultural models that govern how they function is more limited because the distance that historicity requires (from God, oneself and the world as object) has not been achieved.⁸⁹ In terms of the opposition constructed here, i.e., between post-industrial and traditional societies, MENA societies still ‘lie within history’ being too close to god and therefore too preoccupied with religious concerns. Thus, they lack the kind of ‘moral movements’ that are a hallmark of the post-industrial societies of the West—not to mention post-industrial economies, the *sine qua non* for attaining the highest level of historicity along Touraine’s evolutionist continuum.

The best that may be said about such overarching theorization is that it reflects a historically specific period of Western history; at its worst, Arturo Escobar opines, it conceives Third World societies, and by implication their oppositional movements, “as lacking historical agency or ... as only having a diminished form of agency compared with the European case.”⁹⁰

The above discussion reveals that the new social movement theories as well as their American forebears, which were formulated in light of European and North American experiences and trajectories, “coevolved with the relatively stable popular democracies of the West,”⁹¹ and, by implication and despite all “claims to universality,” are predicated upon a set of “historically-specific developments occurring in the United States [and] Europe.”⁹² It is for this reason, Charles Kurzman asserts, that “apply[ing] contemporary social movement approaches [to social move-

⁸⁵ A. Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye. An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 29.

⁸⁶ A. Touraine, quoted in A. B. Bakan & E. MacDonald. *Critical Political Studies: Debates and Dialogues from the Left*, (eds.) (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), p. 290.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p 290.

⁸⁸ Touraine, *The Voice*, p. 105.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p 105.

⁹⁰ A. Escobar, ‘Imagining a post-development era? Critical thought, development and social movements,’ *Social Text*, 31(32), 1992, p. 37 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/466217>).

⁹¹ Oliver, et al, ‘Emerging trends,’ p. 215.

⁹² Davis, ‘The power of distance,’ p. 92.

ments in non-European and non-North American contexts]” presents so formidable a challenge.⁹³ Despite this caveat, however, the leading social movement theories have, as was shown above, acquired a hegemonic status predicated upon their universalizing assumptions and grand causal narratives, their efficacy in constructing general categories for social movements, and their referencing of what is assumed to be the uniquely Western phenomenon to modernity. All this has profound implications for conceptualizing MENA oppositional movements, of which one in particular requires elucidation: their so-called essentialist nature.

MENA oppositional movements are construed as ‘exceptionalist’ cases, a view stemming from an understanding of these movements as rooted in a religious revivalism of a strictly ‘fundamentalist’ nature, and hence divorced from anything deemed to be even remotely utopian or progressive. Thus, for example, both Alberto Melucci and Alain Touraine conceptualize MENA oppositional movements, e.g., the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in terms of a ‘regressive utopianism’⁹⁴ or as ‘anti-movements,’⁹⁵ respectively, thereby reducing them to a manifestation of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’—in effect dismissing them as reactionary, anti-democratic, and anti-modern movements instigated by ‘traditional’ peoples.

Other luminaries, e.g., Sidney Tarrow, express similar views, referring to the Middle East of the 1990s, for example, as a land of ‘ugly movements’ “rooted in ethnic ... claims [or] in religious fanaticism and racism”⁹⁶ and dominated by “radical Islamic fundamentalists who slit the throats of folk singers and beat up women who dare to go unveiled.”⁹⁷ These accounts work ultimately to relegate MENA movements to the margins of scholarly analysis where they are dismissed as ‘exceptionalist’ cases.

The positions taken by Melucci and Touraine can surely be questioned given that their ‘modernist’ assumptions and ‘Western-centric’ orientation work to consign oppositional movements in the MENA region, along with the societies from which they spring and the conditions governing their emergence, to grand categories; the defining feature of which is an essentialism. Thus, for example, one can trace in Touraine’s thought how his normative concept of ‘levels of historicity’—according to which only social movements in the post-industrial societies of the West can achieve the highest level, a standing that lends them their ‘progressive’ and ‘modern’ character and which distinguishes them from all other societies, i.e., those that still ‘lie within history’—leads him inexorably to dismiss the 1979 revolution as an ‘anti-movement.’

Equally intriguing are the totalizing accounts of MENA societies presented by these theorists, wherein a ‘religio-centrism,’ assumed to be the defining feature of ‘Islamist movements’—the latter viewed almost exclusively as backward movements embedded in religious revivalism,

⁹³ Kurzman, ‘Conclusion,’ p. 294.

⁹⁴ Melucci, *Challenging Codes*.

⁹⁵ Touraine, *The Return of the Actor*.

⁹⁶ S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 8 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813245>).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

replete with primordial loyalties and signifying the peculiar and unique⁹⁸—is cast as the engine of, as well as dominant code for, social mobilization. Thus, for example, in his account of a ‘regressive utopianism,’ Melucci asserts that such movements, whose defining feature is a “totalizing monism,” forge their “identit(ies) in terms of the past, drawing on a totalizing myth of rebirth.”⁹⁹ Melucci contends that these cases, of which the 1979 Iranian revolution is an exemplar, represent nothing more than “a mythical quest for the Lost Paradise ... [which] crystalizes into fanatic fundamentalism.”¹⁰⁰

Such assertions are like a “god trick,” to borrow Donna Harraway’s phrase—voices pretending to offer a vision that is “from everywhere [but in fact] nowhere.”¹⁰¹ There lies in these accounts little interest in uncovering the layers of constituencies, histories, diversities and trajectories that propel Middle Eastern movements forward. And yet, the historical record is clear: The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a reaction on the part of diverse societal groups, including, but not limited to, nationalists, social democrats, leftists, and Islamists, all of whom took to the streets. It was, in fact, the Ayatollah Khomeini’s call for, and pledge to promote, pluralism in the post-Shah era—and in particular the statements to this effect issued during his brief period of exile in France—that rallied these diverse elements to his cause—a cause that would receive additional momentum by repeated claims on his part to have no interest in governing the country.

At the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution, moreover, Iran possessed, contrary to popular belief, nothing remotely resembling a strong Islamist movement; rather, the latter was at an early stage of development when overtaken and eclipsed by the events of February 1979. Asef Bayat makes this point abundantly clear in a comparative analysis of the sociopolitical impact of Islamism upon Iran and Egypt, which shows that in the former, vis-à-vis the latter, it was the very absence of a strong Islamist social movement that was partially responsible for precipitating a populist revolution “led by the radical clergy and carried out by the popular mobilisation of various sectors of the population.”¹⁰² Only *well after* the revolution was consolidated and the Islamic state established did Islamization proceed and eventually triumph.

It is against this background that one must judge the merits of Tarrow’s claim that the Afghani Taliban constituted a “movement that took its inspiration from the Iranian revolution of 1979,” and of his description of the Middle East of the 1990s as a land of ‘ugly movements,’ i.e., as a locus of violence and fundamentalism steeped in racist sentiment and religious fanaticism.¹⁰³ The point here is not to deny that the MENA region was and remains home to a number of ‘extremist’ movements, including the Taliban and the more recent so-called Islamic State in Iraq and

⁹⁸ A. Bayat, ‘Islamism and social movement theory,’ *Third World Quarterly*, 26(6), 2005, pp. 891-892.

⁹⁹ Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, p. 104 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590500089240>).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁰¹ D. Harraway, ‘Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective,’ *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 1988, p. 584.

¹⁰² Bayat, ‘Islamism,’ p. 897.

¹⁰³ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 203.

Syria (ISIS); rather, it is to suggest that during the 1990s some remarkably progressive movements emerged in the region—indeed, the first post-Islamist movements to advocate pluralism, the rule of law and human rights and to embrace student, youth and women’s groups¹⁰⁴— a point lost amidst the ‘exceptionalist’ tendencies that inform much of what passes for scholarly analysis of MENA movements.

Undeniably, some of the more recent cases of mobilization to emerge in the Middle East and North Africa call into question the totalizing and exceptional accounts that some dominant social movement theories advance, as well as the presuppositions they foreground about cases of protestation and contestation in the MENA region specifically. For example, the 2009 Iranian Green Movement and its counterparts in Tunisia (2011) and Egypt (2012) have been labeled ‘post-Islamist’ owing to their reformist impulses, rejection of religious doctrine as the basis of government policy, and willingness “to accommodate [certain] aspects of democratization.”¹⁰⁵ This new political sensibility may be the harbinger of the demise of ‘Islamism’ as a sociopolitical project, i.e., “... as a complete social, political, economic, and moral system.”¹⁰⁶

This begs the question of what role, if any, Islam, or more precisely ‘political Islam,’ played in these recent developments. This question cannot be addressed, argues Olivier Roy in his analysis of the uprisings in Tunisia (2010) and Egypt (2011-2012), with reference to the “Islamism [vs.] secularism” dichotomy; it can, however, be constructively framed by focusing on “the issue [of] religiosity,” i.e., “of the way people experience their relationship to religion, the way they experience their faith.”¹⁰⁷ This observation is for Roy a point of departure from which to conclude that, far from a lack of religiosity and/or a decline in religious practices among disparate groups engaged in oppositional action in the two countries, one can speak of a new reality: “an individualization of faith and diversification of the religious field” that has taken place “outside the debate [of] Islam,” or, to be more precise, outside of the debate of “Islamism [vs.] secularism.”¹⁰⁸

And herein lies the crucial point to grasp for anyone wishing to understand the recent cases of mass mobilization in the region: the demand for human dignity, freedom, good governance and citizenship rights implicit in the signature refrains of the Egyptian, Tunisian and Iranian demonstrators, namely “bread—freedom—human dignity,” “Tunisia Tunisia free free, Bin Ali is out” and “where is my vote?” respectively cannot be understood without taking account of the profound transformations that had, over the course of three decades, irrevocably altered the social and political sensibility of disparate classes, ethnic groups and religious sects.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Bayat, *Making Islam*, pp. 49-97.

¹⁰⁵ Bayat, *Life as Politics*, p. 310.

¹⁰⁶ A. Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 54.

¹⁰⁷ O. Roy, ‘Islamic revival and democracy: The case in Tunisia and Egypt,’ in C. Merlini & O. Roy (eds.), *Arab Society in Revolt: The West’s Mediterranean Challenge* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Chief among these was a massive demographic shift after a region-wide baby boom that had begun in the 1980s. The experience of Tunisia and Iran is instructive in this regard. As Cesare Merlini and Olivier Roy note, “[t]he current young generation” in Tunisia is the “last from a period of wild population growth” that, though contained in the 1990s by the introduction of family planning programs, had effectively turned the country into a relatively young nation by the dawn of the new millennium.¹⁰⁹ Thus, by 2013, of a population numbering 10.6 million, a full 51 percent was under the age of 30.¹¹⁰

In the case of Iran, rapid population growth was promoted for reasons of national security. Shortly following the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988), the authorities launched a series of family policies in response to the heavy toll the war was taking on the country’s manpower reserves. More births would in time translate into more soldiers, thereby fulfilling Ayatollah Khomeini’s dream of an *artesh-e 20 million*, an army of 20 million – a force that would effectively safeguard the Islamic Republic.¹¹¹ Note that these policies would remain in force until the end of the conflict in 1988, at which point the authorities realized that, if sustained, rapid population growth would far exceed the country’s carrying capacity. Nonetheless, their long-term consequences would prove dramatic; by 2013 out of a population numbering 77 million,¹¹² 60 percent were under the age of 30.¹¹³

In both the Tunisian and Iranian cases, more youth translated into more university students,¹¹⁴ giving rise to a generation far better educated than their parents, and as a consequence “less defined by the traditional patriarchal society at large” and less susceptible to the “appeal of traditional ideologies, be they Arab, nationalist, or Islamist.”¹¹⁵ Tunisian and Iranian youths thus saw themselves in a new and profoundly different way: as both bearers and agents of fundamental social and political change that would spell the demise of the old order and the birth of a new one that was democratic, individualistic and urban. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in

¹⁰⁹ Merlini & Roy, ‘introduction,’ in *Arab Society*, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ See Youth Policy, ‘Factsheet: Tunisia,’ 2014, available from: <<http://www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/tunisia/>>. See also E. Churchill, ‘Youth work in Tunisia after the revolution,’ *EUROMED*, 2012, available from: <http://www.youthpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2013_tunisia_youth_work_ENG.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Afshari, ‘An interview.’ For a further discussion of this point, see J. Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹² Country Meters, ‘Iran population clock,’ 2016, available from: <<http://countrymeters.info/en/Iran>>.

¹¹³ The World Bank, ‘Iran: Overview,’ 2016, available from: <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview>>.

¹¹⁴ To take but one example, in 2010 there were 3.8 million Iranian students in a country of then 75 million, making 1 in 20 Iranians a university student. See World Education News & Review, ‘Education in Iran,’ 2013, available from: <<http://wenr.wes.org/2013/04/wenr-april-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-iran/>>.

¹¹⁵ Merlini & Roy, ‘introduction,’ in *Arab Society*, p. 7.

Tunisia the mass mobilization of 2010 would thereafter be known as the “youth uprising” and that the language of youth would be adopted in “defense of the revolution”¹¹⁶

In this “new sociological context,”¹¹⁷ moreover, a yearning for ‘good governance’ would supplant ideological commitment, and ‘citizenship rights’ would trump the ‘religious duty’ embedded in the sociopolitical project of ‘Islamism,’ which stripped of its religious veneer may be seen to constitute a mono-politicized calculus for governing. Yet, as to the role ‘Islam’ played in the mass movements in Egypt, Tunisia and, one might add, Iran, “[t]he stress,” according to Olivier Roy, “is on individual belief [and] individual faith, not on collective belonging to the *ummah*, or community of believers, or on blindly following the *ulama* (Muslim scholars).”¹¹⁸ Put differently, what these recent events reveal is “a transformation in religiosity,”¹¹⁹ i.e., “a process of individualization of faith and diversification of the religious field,”¹²⁰ one that marks, according to Hamid Dabashi, the “epistemic exhaustion of ideological Islamism ... as [a] categor[y] that can generate ideas, sustain convictions, and [inspire] movements.”¹²¹

From the preceding discussion, one might conclude, at least with reference to the cases delineated above, that recent mass movements in the Middle East and North Africa are not necessarily ‘theory-confirming’ in that, however generally conceived, they do not conform to the chief presuppositions underpinning dominant social movement theories; nor are they, as was shown in the Tunisian case, for example, ‘exceptionalist,’ a view that works to dismiss nearly all Middle Eastern cases as regressive, fundamentalist and anti-modern, thus subjecting them to totalizing narratives and in the process relegating them to the margins of social movement studies.

It is against this backdrop that MENA specialists have called for theoretical innovation that aims at moving beyond the trans-historical, grand causal, universalistic models and totalizing/exceptionalist narratives that currently dominate the field with a view to accounting for the specificities of MENA cases, e.g., the authoritarian settings in which they emerge and develop.¹²² The remainder of this paper will focus on delineating one such approach.

A Foucauldian Model of Social Movements

I would like my books to be a kind of toolbox that people can rummage through to find a tool they can use however they wish in their own area . . . I don’t write for an audience, I write for users, not readers.

— Michel Foucault¹²³

¹¹⁶ Churchill, ‘Youth work in Tunisia,’ p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Merlini & Roy, ‘introduction,’ in *Arab Society*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Roy, ‘Islamic revival,’ in *Arab Society*, p. 48.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹²¹ H. Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p. 52.

¹²² See, for example, Bayat, ‘Islamism,’ pp. 892-893; Bayat, *Life as Politics*, pp. 1-29.

¹²³ M. Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits t. II*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 523-254.

Social movements are dynamic and complex entities that must be interrogated primarily as “historical phenomen[a] [unfolding] in a span of time.”¹²⁴ Thus, it follows that “the search for universally valid propositions and models, at least for anything so complex as social movements, is bound to fail.”¹²⁵ It is thus imperative to acknowledge that “historical specificities [giving rise to any form of collective action] are never entirely reproducible.”¹²⁶ If Bayat, Goodwin and Jasper, and Beinin and Vairel are correct, a comprehensive analysis of social movements must take into account the particular settings in which they emerge and conduct operations—a consideration that compels us to be ever cognizant of the “situationally contingent” mechanisms that inspire disparate forms of social movements and collective action.¹²⁷ Both Charles Tilly and Saba Mahmood underscore this point by warning against advancing universalizing and totalizing accounts of social movements; the latter raising serious doubts regarding the possibility of “identify[ing] universal categor[ies] of acts... outside of the ethical and political conditions within which” they acquire their relevancy,¹²⁸ and the former contending that such analyses obscure factors such as history, time, and place that are pivotal to explicating diverse forms of social mobilization.¹²⁹

A Foucauldian perspective offers a timely and much needed alternative to this line of enquiry. Foucault was a ‘nominalist’ in the sense that he rejected the presupposition that human and social phenomena have an essential, unchanging character.¹³⁰ For this reason, his rich and diverse contributions to historical and sociopolitical enquiry work to problematize all that is considered absolute, eternal and universal, and in the process invite the reader to view social phenomena as events and processes that showcase the ‘radical historicity’ of that which is studied.¹³¹

Given his stance on historical nominalism and aversion to grand theory, Foucault conceives theorization as an endeavour that is always tentative, contextual and socio-historically specific.¹³² In this vein, he conceives theorization, in and of itself, as a form of situated practice: “theory does not express, translate or serve to apply practice: it is practice,” i.e., it is a “local[ized] and

¹²⁴ Bayat, ‘Islamism,’ p. 897.

¹²⁵ Goodwin & Jasper, *Rethinking*, p. 27.

¹²⁶ Beinin & Vairel, *Social Mobilization*, p. 8.

¹²⁷ Goodwin & Jasper, *Rethinking*, p. 27.

¹²⁸ S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 9.

¹²⁹ C. Tilly, ‘History and sociological imagining,’ in K. Erikson (ed.), *Sociological Visions: With Essays from Leading Thinkers of Our Time* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), p. 69.

¹³⁰ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans R Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p 93.

¹³¹ See, for example, M. Foucault, ‘Questions of method,’ in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller, (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 76-78.

¹³² For a discussion of this point, see M. Gallagher, ‘Foucault, power and participation,’ *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 16 (3), 2008, pp. 395-398 (<https://doi.org/10.1163/157181808X311222>).

regional” system of struggle against power and thus contingent upon the setting in which it is applied.¹³³

Foucault, Collective Action and Movements of Counter-Conduct

Within the corpus of Foucault’s work, a vantage point for analyzing social movements may be discerned in his writings on power, or more precisely governmental power, understood as “the way[s] in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed.”¹³⁴ In essence, it is “a mode of action upon actions of others” predicated upon specific knowledges, techniques, methods and mentalities.¹³⁵ Thus, Foucault conceives the exercise of power in terms of bringing to bear the appropriate combination of such techniques, methods and mentalities. This is not to imply, however, that in modern societies power is, or can ever be, entirely coercive, for “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not *only* weigh on us a force that says no.”¹³⁶

Being an object of power “does not [necessarily] mean that one is trapped,” for the very existence of power relations has as its corollary the possibility of resistance.¹³⁷ As Foucault famously postulated, “where there is power, there is resistance;” without it, there can be, in fact, no relations of power, but only a state of domination where the subject has no room whatsoever to maneuver.¹³⁸ Thus, resistance is an integral aspect of power that embodies the possibility of defiance, disruption and subversion, a theme taken up in, among other works, his *History of Sexuality*, wherein it is demonstrated that “bodies and pleasures” can serve as “a base of operations” for a “counterattack against the deployment of sexuality,” which in the process gives rise to and makes possible a counter-discourse that disrupts the power relations sustaining the dominant discourse on sexuality.¹³⁹

It is thus apparent that, for Foucault, rather than being resisted by a force external to it, power is opposed “precisely at the point of its application.”¹⁴⁰ This means that it operates on the individual in two ways: first, he/she is subject to the constraints of social relations of power; second, and simultaneously, he/she can and may take up the position of a subject in and through those very constraints. This is what Foucault calls ‘subjugation’ or ‘subjection,’ a term that de-

¹³³ M. Foucault & G. Deleuze, ‘Intellectuals and power,’ in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 208.

¹³⁴ M. Foucault, ‘The subject and power,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 1982, p. 790 (<https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

¹³⁶ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977*, in C. Gordon (ed.), (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 119; emphasis added.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

¹³⁸ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans R Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 95.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁴⁰ T. May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 114.

notes the co-constitutive nature of power and resistance, i.e., while one can conceive power as a heteronomous, multiple and expansive phenomenon, one can also speak of “a multiplicity of points of resistance” made possible through the disparate mechanisms of power.¹⁴¹

The question this co-constitutive relationship raises has to do with, specifically, how Foucault’s formulation of governmental power and resistance translates into a theoretical framework for elucidating social movements, the forms they assume and the conditions governing their emergence.

In his elucidation of the power-resistance nexus, Foucault identifies those moments of historical singularity when a people subjected to the techniques and mechanisms, discipline, and normalizing ‘gaze’ of the modern state feel compelled to initiate various forms of collective resistance. These moments, as Foucault understands them, manifest “the strategic codification of [various] points of resistance,” leading to “great radical ruptures [and] massive binary divisions”¹⁴² between the two poles dividing the conductors, i.e., those who govern, and the conducted, i.e., the governed. Such moments of radical rupture embody, for Foucault, materialized ways to resist power, which are expressed in the form of full-fledged demonstrations and protestations, and whose possibilities are enabled through what he calls *movements of counter-conduct*.

A movement of counter-conduct may be broadly defined as a “[collective] struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others.”¹⁴³ Such movements represent a collective rejection of the status quo by a people preoccupied with the question of “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, in view of such objectives and by the means of such methods, not like that, not for that, not by them.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, it is not a question of whether one ought to be led, but rather why and how one must be led in a particular way and to such a degree. Or, to take an extreme case, actors engage in collective action for the sake of demanding governance “by other conductors [and] towards other objectives.”¹⁴⁵

As will be shown here, the principles, attributes and features Foucault assigns movements of counter-conduct can be used to construct a theoretical framework with which to examine oppositional movements as both have the same aim: *to contest power*. Indeed, just as the former seeks to circumvent or replace specific ways of conduct for the purpose of contesting power techniques in the service of governmental regimes, social movements, however conceived and constituted, also challenge ‘governmental regimes,’ and by implication their power, at the level of both principles and practices of governance. Both do so by engaging in various forms of collective action aimed at advancing specific social or political agendas or resisting or reversing government poli-

¹⁴¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 95.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁴³ M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, in M. Senellart (ed.), (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 201.

¹⁴⁴ M. Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’ in J. Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 384; emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁵ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, p. 197.

cies, which in the process mobilize “people with [a] common purpose and solidarity” in systematic interaction with elites and their functionaries.¹⁴⁶

Analyzing social movements through a counter-conduct lens, however, constitutes “a particular style of analysis”¹⁴⁷ in that while it does not abandon key concepts—the state, society, agency, and the mobilization of actors/agents pivotal to social movement studies—it eschews their application in a rigid and universalistic manner to all scenarios, cases and contexts. Instead, all are to be treated as “‘transactional realit[ies],’” as entities that have “‘not always existed’ but are “nonetheless real” and “born precisely from the interplay of relations of power and everything which constantly eludes them.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the chief merit of the analytical framework to be employed here lies in its sensitivity to contingency, i.e., that of concepts and ideas in relation to historical processes specific to particular localities, which in turn opens up a theoretical space to elucidate specific formations of social movements, understand the conditions governing their emergence, and interrogate the mentalities that drive them to embrace collective forms of action.

Movements of counter-conduct emerge at those historical junctures when certain configurations of power, and by implication knowledge, have become so intolerable as to leave mobilization, demonstrations and protestations the only remaining avenues for expressing discontent. This is why for Foucault they possess the attribute of singularity; they appear upon the scene at those historical junctures when “life can no longer be bought”¹⁴⁹ and/or when “no power can continue to rule over a people who refuse to be intimidated by death.”¹⁵⁰ Such singular moments, however, do not possess the attribute of universality, nor do they encompass a laundry list of attributes that can be applied to every contentious situation, hence Foucault’s dictum that there exists “no pure law of the revolutionary.”¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, they may arise when a people give “preference to the risk of death over the certainty of having to obey,” which is “that moment when life will no longer barter itself.”¹⁵² Under such circumstances, they will refuse to be governed by such principles, laws and regulations and will begin to speak and act against a governmental regime; and they will do so “with a single voice.”¹⁵³ Not surprisingly, then, such moments are the by-

¹⁴⁶ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Walters, *Governmentality*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁸ M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, trans G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 297.

¹⁴⁹ M. Foucault, ‘Is it useless to revolt?’ In J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault: Volume 3* (NY: New York Press, 2000), p. 450.

¹⁵⁰ J. Simons, ‘Power, resistance, and freedom,’ in C. Falzon, T. O’leary & J. Sawicki (eds.), *A Companion to Foucault* (Malden Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 310.

¹⁵¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 96.

¹⁵² Foucault quoted in Simons, ‘Power, resistance,’ p. 85.

¹⁵³ C. McCall, ‘Autonomy, religion, & revolt in Foucault,’ *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture*, 2(1), 2004, p. 12.

products of the reciprocal interaction of state and society; more specifically, they are contingent upon “a form of schematization appropriate to a particular technology of government.”¹⁵⁴

Nowhere does Foucault highlight the role of this reciprocal interaction in producing movements of counter-conduct more, perhaps, than in his analysis of the 1979 Iranian revolution, where he introduces the concept of ‘political spirituality’ to describe the principal “mode of resistance to the Shah.”¹⁵⁵

For the people who inhabit this land, what is the point of [contestation and demonstration], even at the cost of their own lives, for this thing whose possibility [can only be realized by] a *political spirituality*[?]¹⁵⁶

It would appear that this ‘political spirituality’ encompasses an understanding on the part of the people that to change society they must first change themselves, i.e., “renew their entire existence” by undergoing a spiritual experience, or more precisely, “a spiritual experience that they thought they could find with-in Shi’ite Islam.”¹⁵⁷ And far from constituting some kind of ‘irrational resurgence’ of a peculiar and/or regressive type, which Foucault is at great pains to clarify, it is a function and at the same time a by-product of Iran’s history, and by implication, that of the Pahlavi ‘governmentalizing regime’: “[W]hen I say that they were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity,”¹⁵⁸ I mean it in the sense that “there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully,”¹⁵⁹ and that something was, it bears repeating, “the desire to renew their entire existence,”¹⁶⁰ in the teeth of “a modernization that [was] an archaism”¹⁶¹—a most compelling oxymoron for the “Shah’s [greatest] crime.”¹⁶²

This so-called ‘archaic modernization’ was part Turkish-inspired “Kemalist program... of modernization,”¹⁶³ and part yearning for a return to the grandeur and glory that was ancient Persia—a fantasy the Iranian monarch “cling[ed] to ... as if it were his sole *raison d’être*.”¹⁶⁴ This

¹⁵⁴ M. Foucault, *Resume des Cours, 1970-1982* (Paris: Julliard, 1989), p. 113.

¹⁵⁵ C. McCall, ‘Ambivalent modernities: Foucault’s Iranian writings reconsidered,’ *Foucault Studies*, 15, 2013, p. 39.

¹⁵⁶ M. Foucault, ‘What are the Iranians dreaming about,’ in J. Afary & K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 209; emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁶¹ The Shah is a hundred years behind the times,’ in J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 195

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

grand social and political project was to be realized by “a corrupt and despotic system”¹⁶⁵ and enforced by the SAVAK, the Shah’s dreaded secret police. In 1979, Foucault concludes, it was “[t]his archaic] modernization [that was] utterly rejected” by the great mass of a people caught up in an irresistible revolutionary wave.¹⁶⁶

This last point suggests that what “was at stake in Iran was a revolt of subjectivity,” one “that cannot be explained solely in economic terms” à la European models of revolutionary ideology.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, “the very fact of [its] singularity,”¹⁶⁸ i.e., “[the] coincidence of religion and politics in the form of a political spirituality that embodied political spontaneity on the part of the populace” accounts, at least in part, for Foucault’s fascination with the Iranian revolution,¹⁶⁹ which he labels a “revolt that is the most modern and the most insane.”¹⁷⁰ This means that, ultimately, his analysis can be viewed as a seminal work upon which to build a “theory of multiple modernities or multiple projects of modernity.”¹⁷¹ Put differently, in the Iranian case, a “political spirituality had been born that owed nothing to Western models of [collective action].”¹⁷²

This explains why Foucault’s perspective on the 1979 revolution as a case of counter-conduct—in particular his concept of ‘political spirituality’ and focus on ‘multiple modernities’—is so germane to understanding MENA oppositional movements. It transcends “Western models of revolutionary ideology and sociopolitical progress,” and by implication the exclusivist and linear understanding of sociopolitical ‘development’, as well as the ‘modernist’ assumptions and ‘Western-centric’ orientations embedded in them.¹⁷³ Indeed, Foucault’s work debunks the all-too-familiar universalizing and/or exclusivist project of ‘modernity’ and sociopolitical ‘development’ and ‘progress’ that ‘collective oppositional action’ is supposed to inspire and enable. In this way, in his analysis of the 1979 revolution with its emphasis on ‘political spirituality,’ Foucault aims to

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁶⁷ McCall, ‘Ambivalent Modernities,’ p. 29.

¹⁶⁸ T. Osborne, ‘Critical spirituality: On ethics and politics in the later Foucault,’ in S. Ashenden & D. Owen (eds.), *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* (Sage Publications, 1999), p. 52 (<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221822.n3>).

¹⁶⁹ McCall, ‘Ambivalent Modernities,’ p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ Foucault, ‘The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt,’ in Afary and Anderson, p. 222. Germane to this observation was, for Foucault, how revolutionary ideas were transmitted and disseminated among the populace through modern technological means such as cassette tapes. For a discussion of this point, see Foucault, ‘The revolt in Iran spreads on cassette tapes,’ in Afary and Anderson, pp. 216-221. Also note that Foucault uses the term ‘insane’ in reference to the fact that, as he puts it, the 1979 uprising was “the first great insurrection against global systems,” i.e., a Western-backed political-economic project that had reinstated, sustained and empowered the Pahlavi dynasty. Foucault, ‘The mythical leader,’ p. 222.

¹⁷¹ McCall, ‘Ambivalent Modernities,’ p. 28.

¹⁷² Osborne, ‘Critical spirituality,’ p. 52.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

illustrate that “modernity [constitutes a set of] multiple practices” and that it is also tied to, and must be understood in relation to, trajectories of people outside Europe.¹⁷⁴

Relatedly, and on another level, part of Foucault’s fascination with the 1979 revolution lies with the mode of resistance to the Pahlavi monarchy, i.e., the “political spirituality” that generated a kind of “political spontaneity on the part of the populace.”¹⁷⁵ The latter proved to be a most effective surrogate for “the organized political resistance that serve[s] as the impetus for [various] forms of [collective action in the ‘West’].”¹⁷⁶ Thus, this Foucauldian view of counter-conduct provides “an alternative account of collective [action],”¹⁷⁷ and by implication collective agency, wherein cases of collective action can be understood in terms of the “multiple [historical] process[es] that constitute [them].”¹⁷⁸ Thus, what unfolds is a story of “specific actions in specific contexts.”¹⁷⁹

It is apparent from the above discussion that in the Foucauldian conceptualization of counter-conduct, one can clearly discern a dynamic theoretical framework for analyzing social movements, wherein their ‘conditions of possibility’ are contingent upon a series of historical processes and heterogeneous events arising from specific forms of governmental conduct. In such a formulation, mobilization, protestation and contestation “rely upon, and are even implicated within, the strategies, techniques and power relationships they oppose,”¹⁸⁰ which in turn open up a space to analyze social movements based on the diverse “mentalities, practices, [techniques] and subjectivities” which constitute them.¹⁸¹

According to this reading, social movements are nothing short of heterogeneous parcels of defiance that seek to shape human conduct vis-à-vis governmental power techniques. By way of demonstrations and protestations, the actors showcase the collective “political will”¹⁸² to change and/or contest the status quo. They do so by employing a ‘technology of politicization,’¹⁸³ the purpose of which is to “redeploy the space of appearance” and to “contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy.”¹⁸⁴

Under these circumstances of collective contestation and refusal, “everything,” Foucault contends, “can be politicized, everything may become political”¹⁸⁵ insofar as unexpected alliances

¹⁷⁴ McCall, ‘Ambivalent Modernities,’ p. 28.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, ‘Questions of method,’ p. 76

¹⁷⁹ S. Vinthagen & A. Johansson, “‘Everyday resistance’: Exploration of concepts and its theories,’ *Resistance Studies Magazine*, 1, 2013, p. 36.

¹⁸⁰ Death, ‘Counter-conducts: A Foucauldian,’ p. 240.

¹⁸¹ Death, ‘Counter-conducts in South Africa,’ p. 426.

¹⁸² Foucault, ‘The mythical leader,’ p. 222

¹⁸³ See Walters, *Governmentality*, pp. 27-29.

¹⁸⁴ Butler, ‘Bodies and alliance,’ para. 13.

¹⁸⁵ Foucault, *Security, Territory*, p. 390.

can be formed, unlikely citizenship claims made, multiple identities/subjectivities enabled and repertoires of collective action practiced, remade, and reinvented. This is because ‘revolts of counter-conduct’ are no less than “work[s] of ethical self-transformation on the part of those who say ‘no’ to power.”¹⁸⁶

Germane to this ‘process of self-transformation’ is the importance of *public spaces as a kind of politics*, i.e., as a mediator through which social and political conflicts originate and develop. Indeed, for the Foucauldian ‘active subject,’ public spaces are crucial as loci for conducting “all forms of communal life,”¹⁸⁷ and this is especially the case where social and political reform is likely to be blocked or at least impeded by factions possessing a monopoly over power; where open political channels simply do not exist; where political parties are simply non-existent and/or their function(s) is rudimentary; and/or where oppositional groups are denied political rights—chief among them the right to lobby and petition governments and the right of freedom of expression, particularly where challenging government policy is concerned. It is under these circumstances that such subjects may turn to ‘alternative spaces,’ most often of a public kind to voice their demands, thus transforming them into ‘loci of resistance and defiance.’ In this way spaces are, for Foucault, “fundamental in [all] exercise[s] of power.”¹⁸⁸

Thus, just as “all strategies of power and resistance have spatial dimensions,”¹⁸⁹ movements of counter-conduct emerge as a consequence of, or are conditioned by, the transformation of space by acting subjects into a kind of politics. In this way, protest, contestation, and varied forms/arts of resistance work to undermine what Clive Barnett calls “the presumed efficacy of ...power” manifest in “[its] particular configurations of human bodies in space.”¹⁹⁰ Taking account of this process is crucial, as demonstrated in some of the MENA case studies examined above, to understanding how episodes of collective action emerge and develop, and to delineate their specificities, i.e., their actors’ techniques, tactics, and modes of resistance, as well as specific organizational structures, leadership characteristics, and the spaces converted into domains of defiance. This is because—and Saba Mahmood’s remarks bear repeating here—these specificities are conditions of, indeed “capacities for”[,] action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.”¹⁹¹

Lastly, once such moments of ‘pure subjectivity’ emerge, politics may often be downplayed or suspended within those domains that are normally its natural milieu, i.e., parliaments, congresses and political parties, etc., and yet manifest itself in all manner of unexpected sites and

¹⁸⁶ Osborne, ‘Critical Spirituality,’ p. 52.

¹⁸⁷ Foucault, quoted in J. W. Crampton & S. Elden, *Space, Knowledge, and Power: Foucault and Geography*, (eds.) (Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2007), p. 45.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁸⁹ Death, ‘Ungoverned spaces.’

¹⁹⁰ C. Barnett, ‘Culture, government, and spatiality: Re-assessing the ‘Foucault effect’ in cultural-policy studies,’ *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(3), 1999, p. 378.

¹⁹¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 18.

places—urban streets and alleyways, the homes of strangers pressed into service as temporary refuges for protestors on the run, or the roof-tops of demonstrators' homes. This is possible precisely because oppositional actors are united by a shared condition: “[they] are all governed.”¹⁹² It is owing to this state of affairs that they derive the sense of solidarity required to contest the governmental power that subjugates them. This, for Foucault, represents an ‘aesthetic’ solidarity, meaning that it has become ‘historicized’ and ‘stylized.’¹⁹³ And, as was shown in the above example of ‘spatial solidarity,’ this phenomenon can be a starting point from which to examine how disparate actors in diverse MENA cases, and others elsewhere in the world, might coalesce into movements of social contestation. What makes the concept of ‘spatial solidarity’ especially relevant to the MENA cases investigated here—Iran, Bahrain, and Egypt, among others—is the transformative function of spatial domains, which instils in actors a sense of unity and cohesion even in settings that are less than auspicious for mobilization and contestation. Therein, ‘spatial solidarity,’ i.e., the merging of a people into a kind of ‘politics of space’ to produce a singular moment of social contestation and/or social rupture, can function as a template for understanding how various episodes of contention in the region emerge, and precisely because it reveals how the “most malign ... the most well-armed brutal power” can “be resisted [and/or inverted] by the force of collective will.”¹⁹⁴ In this way, the Foucauldian-inspired notion of ‘spatial solidarity’ can serve to facilitate an understanding of how the ‘acting subject’ can recreate him/herself through concerted and harmonized action as “a work of art”¹⁹⁵ by turning ‘governmental spaces’ into “[lo- ci for mounting a] corporeal challenge to the norms of political conduct”¹⁹⁶— even under the most unfavourable circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper has delineated a Foucauldian model of social movements, which, as demonstrated above, is better suited, vis-à-vis leading social movement theories, to analyzing MENA movements; and in three respects: first, in transcending many of the difficulties posed by the universalistic and grand-casual narratives, which for most of these theories are a staple feature, it provides a contextual approach, focusing on the social and political relations that underlie social movements; second, in focusing on the particular localities in which social movements arise, evolve and operate, it facilitates an examination of oppositional movements based on the reciprocal relationship between state and society; lastly, by elucidating the trajectories and experiences of such movements, along with the motives that impel their actors to embrace collective forms of action, it offers a more historicized account of social movements thus revealing in detail their relations to

¹⁹² Osborne, ‘Critical spirituality,’ p. 53.

¹⁹³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹⁵ Foucault, quoted in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁶ R. Meade, ‘Foucault’s concept of counter-conduct and the politics of anti-austerity in Ireland,’ *Concept: The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory*, 5(3), 2014, p. 9.

the specific 'regimes' whose power they seek to contest. Herein lies a theoretical approach predicated upon the recognition that episodes of mobilization and collective action are never wholly reproducible; rather, they are contingent upon the settings and contexts within which they emerge; in other words, each is embedded in a unique historical and social web of relations whose specificities must be delineated if the dynamics at play, i.e., the factors and forces driving each episode, are to be understood. Thus does a Foucauldian model, with its emphasis on historical contingency and sensitivity to particular localities, hold out the promise of providing a theoretical underpinning sufficiently rigorous to analyze MENA social movements in a way that reveals their true character and dynamics.

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