

2011 is not 1968: An open letter to an onlooker

by Philip Rizk

On January 28th 2011, Egyptians started marching through the streets of their country's cities in a powerful force of protest. You gazed at the spectacle developing before your eyes, on your TV screens, across various international news channels. A fixation, an intrigue emerged toward the images projected particularly from one site: *Midan al-Tahrir* – the Square of Liberation. The fascination with the constant stream of images opened your imagination. The imagination ran wild. Egyptians had been inspired, as well as shamed, into movement by their North African neighbors in Tunisia. Our uprising in turn helped trigger movements in your cities around the world, from the Take The Square movement in Europe, to a city center occupation in Madison, Wisconsin, to the Occupy movement, not to mention an array of uprisings around the region and still ongoing today in Bahrain, Syria and Sudan only to name a few.

To make sense of the unfurling scenes, media outlets turned to a group of individuals who have come to represent the revolution for many. These news agencies interviewed political commentators or activists – increasingly becoming celebrities in their own right – to decipher the actions behind the images seen. As interpretation and then meaning were layered onto the images, a significant distortion took place to the acts behind the scenes. Non-Arabic language media outlets relied primarily on English-speaking activists, - many of us middle class, many of us already

politicized before January 25th. Arabic-language news stations similarly turned often to middle class activists to speak on behalf of the revolution, each of whom interpreted every moment according to their respective ideological perspectives. Thus, we became the translators of a collective uprising we were far from representative of. Our faces reflected your own. Our voices were comprehensible. We served to make this revolution seem accessible. The intonation in our words gave meaning to what was, for you, an unfamiliar territory. Our explanations also satisfied the practical requirements and standards of a media industry with a target audience accustomed to an interlocutor with a particular profile using a specific political discourse. This process drowned out the voices of the majority. No matter how hard we tried to argue otherwise, we fit the part—middle class, internet-savvy, youth, and thus revolutionary.

Did you hear the voices of the underclass? Did you see the family members of the martyrs clad in black mourning in their homes? Did you see images of unnamed civilians gunned down by snipers on the roofs of police stations? Did you see police officers opening prison doors in order to undermine this revolutionary moment and wreak havoc on nearby communities? Did you see protesters storming police stations on January 28th, seeking vengeance for years of unaccounted for torture, violence and psychological domination? Did you see the Molotov cocktails prepared by women and lowered from their balconies to avenge the maiming of their sons and neighbors? This was not non-violent. Only the fixation through the lens of a camera on Tahrir Square in daylight could appease you with that

impression. Other industries soon followed suit: right after journalism, academia, film, art, the world of NGOs relied on us as the ideal interpreter of the extraordinary. They all eventually bought into and further fueled the hyper glorification of the individual, the actor, the youth subject, the revolutionary artist, the woman, the non-violent protestor, the Internet user. All this took place in the undercurrent of an unrelenting need to identify, validate and valorize the role of the familiar. Revolution became unimaginable without the imagery of a model demonstrator who protected you from the potential of being faced with the unknown: a collectivist uprising against a global system of domination within which there is no place for an onlooker.

The Internet helped create the aura that all this was familiar. By channeling the outrage on the streets through a medium that you recognized, the narrative presented on news channels diluted the mystery within the events and chained your imagination to what is familiar. The layers of interpretation painted over the images diminished your fear of the unknown. “This is only an act against dictatorship.” “This is the individual cry for freedom.” “This is a demonstration for democracy.” “This revolution is non-violent.” The Internet replaced the Kalashnikov. These discourses silenced the structural dimensions of injustice and concealed the role of neo-liberal policies promoted by the likes of the IMF, the EU and the USA in deepening the stratification between poor and rich. They made you forget that it is out of these structures of injustice that the desire for social justice is born in the first place. These dominating narratives – the narratives of domination – localized the problematic, for instance, to that of a homegrown dictatorship.

By isolating the crime, and highlighting the corruption of individuals, these accounts helped set the neo-colonial stage for the now empty shells of the old regime to be replaced by another that maintains the same logic of governance.

It is no surprise that the owners of these images are commercial news agencies run by corporations that support or are supported by the very systems of domination against which we revolted. The images taken by the cameras of the BBC, the CNN or Aljazeera become the private property of these institutions that then use them to tell their narratives, to celebrate what they desire to promote and silence what they want to suppress. The framing and broadcasting of an image is a practice of power. These images circulate in the name of freedom, but by utilizing the captured images for the ends of a profit-driven enterprise, the dominance of the narrative provided has the potential to misinterpret and ultimately undermine the very acts of resistance.

Youth activists were by no means representative of the protests, but they were the dominant voice presented. We were but a handful of individuals amongst a cacophony of shouts calling for change, each person with their own concerns, complaints, desires, cause for action, and reason for revenge. Throughout the upsurge in protests there was a strong horizontal inclination, a non-centralized decision making process, a leaderless movement that could not be represented to a centralized, individual-focused media apparatus, through a penned article, given speech, authored art work, or character driven documentary film. Such a process of representation falsifies reality.

In this letter I too fall into this same logic.

2011 is not 1968

The 1960s were pregnant with the political: battles for racial equality, Vietnam, the Cold War, the final throws of overt imperialism. 1968 rose out of this moment, a young generation confronted with distant scenes of occupation and colonization, a student generation, zealous with ideology, and radicalized by the social and political reality of the times. Over 40 years later the effects of imperialism through the cloak of post-colonialism provoked people yet again into mass protest. Under these new conditions, as Frantz Fanon recounted so clearly, the former colonizers succeeded at hiding their economic interests behind partnerships with the ruling elites of post-colonial states. Thus, 2011 is not 1968. 2011 was an uprising of discontent against the political reality within the neo-colonial condition. 2011 was no intellectual revolution; there was no burgeoning of ideas. In Egypt, no radicalization of the population had taken place, nor was the nation tangled up in a cross border conflict. There was no ideology but the ideology of desperation, the unbearable weight of hypocrisy and the limits of a people living in denial of it. The rising militancy amongst organized workers, and the growing opposition through small middle class movements like *Kefaya* - "Enough"- and the 6th of April movement, as well as through internet-based groups like *Kolina Khaled Said* ("We are all Khaled Said") came about in direct reaction to the political ruling class' ongoing repression of an entire population. By 1968 conflict had spread everywhere, where as in leading up to 2011 the seeds of revolt had only just become ready to sprout. In Egypt there wasn't a movement, but there

was movement, and there was momentum, an undefined force that was much more powerful than any organization could be. Under Mubarak's regime, the repression of even the seedling of opposition groupings had meant that there was hardly a "left" to speak of. The universities were, and still are, a place of theft of public funds, not a place of critical thought. The year 2011 witnessed fast-track political radicalization in the face of years of fast-track neo-liberalization. The street was the academy, where we exchanged rocks for fire with the regime's security forces and military personnel, while exchanging ideas amongst ourselves. This is how radical politicization occurred amongst Egyptians that carried the revolution. The uprising that began in Egypt in the early days of 2011 was pushed by an unprecedented amount of protesters. Similar to an uprising in Argentina in 2001, street protests in Egypt were marked by widespread participation across class, generational and gender lines. Like in 1968, students and workers both participated but in Egypt never as workers and students, but rather, and simply, as part of a collective and popular movement. The protests remained significantly leaderless; we confronted a repressive hierarchical and hegemonic state apparatus using horizontal tactics. It was the vastness of numbers of protesters that, even if only temporarily, brought the centralized state structure to its knees.

Demonstrators held a wide variance of demands, there is no one reason why people started flooding streets and public squares across Egypt on January 28th, different people rejected different faces of the same system of power that dominated our everyday lives. As observers, it was your obsession to comprehend the uprising that fed the media industry's raison

d'être, which sought to quench those desires. In the dominant Western standpoint, it was your gaze that incited references to the common, to the familiar, to what you already knew, making 2011 seem as if it was akin to 1968.

2011 is not 1968. 2011 was not the "classic" revolution of the socialists: students and workers taking to the street to replace a regime with their own. No matter how hard people tried, there were no political parties with a revolutionary blueprint either prior to January 25th nor have any emerged since. A call that rang loud and clear from the start, "the people want the fall of the system," entailed a cacophony of dissent that translated into a desire to put an end to the status quo: change was necessary, some kind of change, but how that change looked was uncertain. This was no weakness of an uprising but testifies to a global crisis to imagine alternative forms of social organization to the neo-liberal state with its self-perpetuating, self-destructive stratification. Furthermore, this leaderless form of protest free of pre-packaged ideology allowed for the emergence of ideas in process, a process of resistance that is only beginning.

Workers and Revolution

A significant moment that made the January 25th revolution thinkable was the rising wave of worker protests that started in 2006. The 27,000 textile workers that went on strike in the industrial city of Mahalla al-Kobra in Egypt's Nile Delta in December 2006 enabled countless Egyptians that caught a glimpse of that mighty act, or of the multitude of protests that

followed, to begin to imagine revolution. Inevitably, strikes and demonstrations started spreading across the country. On April 6th 2008 the independent worker leaders of the same public sector textile mill called for another strike but this time the government succeeded in deterring the action by settling with a select group of workers ahead of time. The demand for increased wages was tied to rising food prices and as almost every home in Mahalla has a family member employed at the massive textile factory the strike was anticipated by more than just the workers. On that day, Mahalla's citizens anticipated a confrontation. The insults of a police officer towards an elderly woman on the street sparked an uprising. April 6th was significant in that the protest moved beyond the geographical lines of one industrial site and was carried out by an entire community. In 2006 workers had broken the social rules of conduct through their public protest. In 2008, the boundaries of possible resistance were pushed further still beyond the limits set by the ruling class. The government used all their wit and force and managed to prevent April 6th 2008 from turning into what became January 25th 2011. In 2008 the government succeeded in preventing the spreading of dissent from one industrial town to the rest of the region – let alone the country – by ordering security forces from across six governorates to descend on the city. In April 2008 the conditions were not yet ripe for what would emerge less than three years later. On January 28th of 2011 demonstrators spread all over the country prevailed over those same security forces in a matter of hours. Again at this juncture there is a need to emphasize that 2011 is not 1968. 1968 would have been impossible without the waves of worker strikes and factory occupations in

parallel with student protests. In the case of the January 25th revolution, while participants spanned all social classes, bringing together the middle class, the unemployed, workers and farmers, it was precarious workers and not Egypt's traditional working class that acted as the radicalizing factor of the revolution. This may sound like a trivial differentiation but it is at the crux of the distinction between 2011 and 1968.

From 2006 through to January 25th 2011 and ever since, workers of organized workspaces never stopped demonstrating for better wages, against privatization, corruption and injustice. The wave of protests that began on January 25th included a vast number of precarious workers primarily from Egypt's many *eshwa'eyat* or informal neighborhoods. This needs some clarification. Starting in 2006 workers protested the effects of the intense neo-liberalization process that Mubarak's final government was exercising. Workers reacted directly- even if rarely specifically articulated in these terms- to the implementation of the Western economic paradigm of neo-liberalism. This meant the government eased the entry of foreign capitalists into Egyptian industry, they privatized factories and public sector enterprises, reduced subsidies while strongly encouraging production for export markets. Backed by international financial institutions, this system enabled foreign investors to access Egypt's natural resources with fewer restrictions and to exploit its working class with more freedom. This process included the intense downsizing of the traditional workforce. It forced workers into what is sometimes termed casualized work, or the "informal sector", which meant working without contracts, without guarantees and without social protection thus making precarious the working conditions of

the traditional working class. Those most suppressed, most exploited and most desperate under the former regime's political system were the underclass without the luxury to attain an education, with no fixed jobs and thus vulnerable to the reality that police officers and employers existed above the law. Precarious workers often maintain two or three jobs in order to make ends meet. Compared to them, Egypt's traditional working class lives in more secure conditions. Though for usually pitiful pay, outrageous hours in the private sector, poor working conditions and minimal benefits, the traditional working class has fixed contracts and steady incomes which gives them a luxury standing within a working class milieu with few guarantees. Consequently, the working class begin to mimic the middle class' cautious life style unwilling to risk loosing their jobs. While the working class will fight for better work conditions, speak out against corruption and abuse at the worksite, their struggles are limited to these because they are not willing – and understandably so – to take their battles beyond the boundaries of their workplaces. Participating in the street battles of the revolution meant taking to the streets and risking giving their employers the justification to fire them for being "troublemakers." The lines of the unemployed ready to take their jobs were they to be fired limited their participation in the revolution. Losing the luxury of employment was a risk many contracted workers were not usually willing to take.

The implementation of new economic paradigms since 1968, has further concentrated capital in the hands of the rich while reducing the livelihoods of everyone else. These policies have brought about the conditions whereby the Lumpenproletariat have become the radical element within revolutionary struggle, having proven themselves to be a force to be

reckoned with. The taking root of deep economic stratification in this neo-liberal era has provoked new forms of resistance; it is this condition that brought Egyptians to the brink of revolution, and it is this condition that will continue to determine future lines of protest.

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On Saturday June 19th 2012, a group of Mubarak-supporters gathered outside a military hospital on the shores of the Nile after reports of the former dictator's death emerged. One of demonstrators held a sign for drivers-by to see: "January 25 Revolution: History will judge."

You decide how January 25th goes down in your annals of history. Is it another 1968, a revolution of your liking? Or is it a movement that goes beyond the meaning you've given to the few images you've seen, and may one day soon confront you at your front door?