

Jon Rich  
**Camels vs.  
Google:  
Revolutions  
Recreate the  
Center of the  
World**

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When Google enabled access to Twitter services through landlines in Egypt, the American administration erred on the side of caution. Google is the crown jewel of the American empire, but whereas the American administration manages ideas, Google deals in instruments and communication interfaces. During the revolution in Egypt, such tools proved their ability to animate the global public, while politics reasoned by ideas remains, as of yet, incapable of responding to chronic problems. We may then say that this revolution was led by Google and its rivals – there is no doubt America has dominated this new century since the beginning.

The American administration reads a political situation in a particular country through an assessment of its active political and social structures. The protesters in Tunisia and Egypt did not register on the agenda of American diplomacy. Nor did they register on the official agendas of Tunisia or Egypt. CNN, one of the most involved networks, broadcast a talk show labeling events in Egypt a “revolution without leadership,” yet the absence of leadership did not prevent it from leading the headlines. Presumably journalistic instinct allowed CNN to infer that the revolution in Egypt would soon alter the course of history.

The Egyptian regime came to this conclusion as well. They knew from the beginning that they would have to come up with new techniques to halt the revolution. Someone ingeniously thought to invent a touristic form of repression: camels and horses running over the bodies of protesters equipped with the latest communication technology. The obscenity was beyond expectations; barbarians trying to trample over modernity – camels vs. Google. What an astonishing difference between the apple of Adam and that of Macintosh!

This revolution was instrumented in ways that rendered it impossible to disarm. Protesters came from a privileged social class: young, educated, multilingual – and they were peaceful. How could one expect even the most repressive regime to succeed in stopping them? A great deal of praise has been invested in technological progress and modernization, even from the most radical and authoritarian regimes. Now the users of these technologies have begun to revolt. It appears the authorities did not have enough time to shelve their previous discourse and build a new one condemning technology and constricting its use. Somewhat regrettably for the Egyptian authorities, they only realized this at their moment of reckoning. They tried to sever the communication networks, but it was already too late.



Protesters at Tahrir Square after rigging a lamppost to charge cellphones.



Protests at Tahrir Square.

## Who Are the Rebels of Today?

There is general agreement that the organizers of today's revolutions and the group that articulates their demands are primarily young and from the middle classes of their societies. They possess the most effective tools of communication and generally share a number of ideals: democracy, gender equality, racial equality, gay rights, the rejection of domestic violence, and so forth.

Perhaps more importantly, they show a remarkable enthusiasm for discussing their views and sharing experiences and knowledge with each other. We may say that they exhibit their existence through Twitter, Facebook, and other social media outlets that compel people to constantly express themselves. A person in this world dies when he or she stops speaking. Hence, they always have something to say, a clear example being the inducing call to comment on Facebook's status bar, "What's on your mind?" The urgency to make statements or comment on images, now more closely linked to political events, is in some respect endeavoring to acquire what Hannah Arendt termed opinionated citizenship.<sup>1</sup> However, the obligation to self-expression does not itself imply a well-structured political discourse. Despite the fact that social media and political discussions urge people to think, adequate solutions to chronic problems are yet to be put forward. A diversity of opinions does not reflect a revolutionary spirit but rather a tendency towards peace and tolerance. And we could argue here that it was the peaceful and tolerant nature of the protesters that made the Egyptian and Tunisian authorities as confused as ever. For bare violence is inexpedient, or at least ineffective, when it comes to repressing a peaceful movement.

What could be concluded in due course is that when the finer layers of society revolt, authority has to respond to their demands, even those that may have seemed unrealistic the day before. Otherwise, what would compel these revolutions to ask for nothing less than the head of the king? In traditional political struggles, one side would never demand the departure of the leader of the opponent side. For example, in a political struggle between Al Wafd Party and the ruling National Democratic Party, the former having rallied a significant part of the Egyptian society, they would never ask Mubarak to step down during negotiations. It is precisely Mubarak who could give them the concessions they would be asking for. The protesters demanded the president's resignation and the opposition parties conformed to their demand. Still, no one knows for sure whether the protesters are fond of the current leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The demand for Mubarak to step down was not political in its nature as much as it was

symbolic; the protesters wanted to ascertain their power in the new social order they were about to create, therefore making what sounded like an unreasonable demand. On the grounds that the president unconstitutionally renewed his mandate, the protesters' own unconstitutional demand was not a cautious move, from the point of view of those who wish to abide by the rule of law. Accusing a small group, even if it is the president and his inner circle, of being responsible for all the country's problems is not fair. Yet this transgression was necessary to make it clear to both authority and opposition that the last word from now on would not be theirs. Anyhow, the opposition's hesitance in declaring its own demands, and the subsequent attempts to catch up with the spontaneous demands of the protesters, was both ridiculous and comic. Any future coalition government in Egypt or Tunisia will know very well where the real power lies.

Neither the revolution's demands nor its symbolic transgressions were complete madness. From the beginning, the rebels in Tunisia and Egypt chose to be on the side of the army and against the regime, its police, and its corrupt business class. Accordingly, it is possible to come to the following conclusion: using common sense and sound political intuition, the protesters chose to preserve the coherence of the system. Instead of a confident step into the unknown, there was a critical adjustment to the balance of power, a natural and legitimate consequence of a prior change on the social level. The revolution has established a discourse defined by the notion that the legitimacy of authority is no longer acquired through the ruling group but rather through the group demonstrating the best organizational skill and the most indispensable resources. In this sense, the call for the president to step down in Tunisia and Egypt was reasonable. These revolutions made it clear that when the time comes to choose between the peaceful group leading the revolution and a president who responds with violence, the local and international community will unequivocally support the former. From the outset, Google implicitly favored one side. Yet it took the American administration some time to admit that there were no other options.

## Why Egypt?

A revolution is an exception in terms of social pattern, in the course of which societies are armed with hope for change. However, every group in these societies has its own specific issues and priorities. What usually makes up the general picture of revolutions is the sum of disparate demands and claims, most of which are unrealistic or unachievable. Nonetheless, all

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groups converge around their disapproval of the existing authority hoping that change will bring about what they aspire for. Revolutions are equally generators of hope and frustration, and the one witnessed in Egypt was not the first of its kind. We may recall four previous instances: Lebanon in 2005, the United States in 2008, Iran in 2010, and Tunisia in early 2011.

Let's start with the outsider: Obama's revolution in the United States. Naturally, no one called it a revolution. Even in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iran, or Lebanon, many were hesitant to give these various forms of civil unrest the same label. Yet all they share what we can regard as the most important element of revolution as defined by Arendt: all gave birth to local councils, where ideas are formulated and debated in the process of protesting and contesting others.<sup>2</sup>

The Americans did not conduct their revolution in the streets, nor did it come without warning. To be precise, the revolution's leader belonged to the traditional political structure. And, as with earlier and later revolutions, it paid special attention to symbolism. Barack Obama and his electoral team invested a great deal of effort in mobilizing the social media networks that supported him; this in turn revolutionized the industry of public opinion-making. When

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journalist Fareed Zakaria published an article in the *New York Times*, he received thousands of comments from those who wished to express an opinion. Arguably, Zakaria has more readers than commentators. Yet, the fact that there were thousands of people actively participating indicates that many were looking for a venue for their views. In other words, they wanted to transform personal opinions into public opinions.

Obama's electoral campaign outlined a substantial framework in which online chatting was reshaped into public debate by turning cybernetic forums into local councils. Any revolution in the course of its formation is founded upon such councils formed by locals. As forums of discussion established on the level of a neighborhood, factory, or town, where people debate matters of concern, form opinions, and defend them, the councils activated by Obama's campaign are still operational at this very moment. If we follow Arendt's argument to its logical conclusion, we would infer that unless these local councils are dismantled, the revolutions would not wither away to be replaced by authoritarian regimes, as happened with Robespierre and Saint-Just, and later with Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. The cybernetic councils of the American revolution are still



flourishing, which is to say that they could at any moment recreate the tour de force of the 2008 elections and urge future candidates to conform to conditions that were not previously part of the electoral game. It has become extremely difficult, almost impossible, to bring down local councils, which remain independent, self-governed, and boast an established web presence using social media groups and other online resources. With the total absence of tools with which to halt their profusion or limit their repercussions, authorities have fallen short of demonstrating the means to silence these revolutionary councils, which have now become established social institutions.

Online forums in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Iran preceded and outlasted the revolutions. In Lebanon, the emphasis was placed on text messaging and effective coordination with broadcasters. In Iran, smartphones exhibited their full potential. In Tunisia, despite the restrictions on social media, the youth communicated through chat forums and text messages. The authorities in Egypt saw what happened and decided to cut off the air that these groups breathe: they shut down the cellular phone networks, harassed reporters and broadcasters, and blocked access to the internet. But it was already too late. Some of these revolutions were more successful than others, but none have fallen prey to a Saint-Just or Robespierre that would turn their councils into ruins; in cyberspace, the councils prevailed, fueled by the intensity of the protesters' hope and the ardency. These were facets that the American revolution shared with the other four. Yet, what was achieved by the former was not possible in the latter cases without street demonstrations. This is because the emerging, socially-networked political groups in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Iran were not fully articulated – unlike their counterparts in the United States. In other words, the number of internet users and bloggers in Egypt does not by itself indicate anything, and will not help us make predictions or jump to conclusions about the future.

The situation in Egypt, and the Middle East in general, is more complicated than that of the United States for several reasons. Let's begin with the technical reason. As described by Tocqueville, and by Arendt in her account of the American Revolution, the US is a society of immigrants.<sup>3</sup> It is among the world's most socially, naturally, and economically adaptable populations. Americans see their industrial and commercial institutions as beings that are born, grow old, and die. Every decade or two, a crucial economic sector crumbles under the weight of foreign competition, but Americans press for the

development of a new sector and invest heavily in it. Before long, this sector becomes the main contributor to the economic and cultural image of the US. We do not need to dwell on the fervor with which America builds its economy and image, but we can nevertheless say that, in a society that evolves according to a secular and modern rhythm, the prevailing industry, its clients and consumers, occupy a vital and central share in the country's public image. And the manufacturer of this image nowadays is communication – from Google to the iPhone. This can only be expected from a society obsessed with displacing its own agora from the public square to cyberspace.

In Egypt and Lebanon, the digital crowd urgently needed to provide a physical presence in the street. If it had remained in virtual space, neither the authorities nor the rest of society would have noticed. It needed to go out looking for the attention of CNN. Societies in this part of the world still read their present and future from the screens of CNN and ABC. This explains why the claims were similar in all four revolutions. The young protester wanted to see his or her image on screen in real time to prove to be the victim of an oppressive regime, and simultaneously the hero and redeemer of his or her own destiny. But in reality, all these roles are hypothetical. The authorities cannot suppress the group that is the most privileged and peaceful, as they do with the working class or other small communities – craftsmen, ethnic or religious minorities, and so forth. Nor is the protester a typical victim of a repressive authority. The protester's appearance on television does not automatically imply victimhood, but rather a state of being halfway between two conditions: the protester is the victor announcing a failure of the authority, while declaring at the same time that he or she is the victim of an irrevocable act of repression.

The practice of American sovereignty in this century is quite different from that of the second half of the past century, when the country was focused on resisting communist expansion. While Marxism's failure as a practice and way of governing is commonly considered to have been an American achievement, I contend that the main factor leading to the fall of socialist societies under the grip of the Americans since the 1960s is still under-acknowledged. In the 60s, America saw the pillars of its capitalist economy begin to crumble, with heavy competition from Europe and Japan. But America had added a third element to Adam Smith's equation (later reiterated by Marx) that an economy is built on two foundations: the means of production and productive forces. These two foundations guide every aspect of life –

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individual taste, self-expression, and the image we choose to promote. The American economy took these two elements, and with the opening of the American market to the consumption of products, the American citizen, as a productive force, gained a second attribute: that of the consumer. Before long, and around the world, the consumer claimed authority. And the socialist system was not equipped to deal with precisely this consumer culture; for while it is fathomable that a taxi driver needs to wear jeans and sneakers given the nature of his job, the socialist system could not comprehend this worker or taxi driver's insistence upon wearing Adidas shoes or Levi's jeans in particular. More confusing still was that an engineer or bank manager would want to wear one specific brand of shoes and not the other.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the consumer became the world citizen. No longer exclusively American, the consumer now lives among Saudis, Russians, Indians, and Japanese. And, yet again, America found itself incapable of competing in the sphere of inventing human needs. Then came the communication revolution – a revolution led by America to invent the need for the consumable communication around the world, with the internet as a pressing demand linking the world around its services. A new social group was thus formed to inherit and exceed the role of the consumer, echoing the historic birth of the working class. This group could be referred to as the “users.” Being highly proficient in communication technologies, the issue for the group is not whether one carries an iPhone or a BlackBerry, but how one uses its features and services. The specific brand is no longer an issue, as the difference between owning an HP or a Toshiba laptop matters little. What matters is to have a Google email account linked to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, connecting one to the expanding world of bloggers. As a social group, the users comprise a global industry, yet this industry emerged and flourished under American sponsorship. The search engines are still based there, as they have always been. The phenomenon that produced Google transformed us from consumers to users, and it is precisely these users that organized the new revolutions in America and elsewhere.

### **The Fragility of Democracy**

Perhaps the greatest paradox has been that in the era of the hegemony and overabundance of images, we found ourselves once again at the mercy of words. The revolutions in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Iran happened before the lenses of cameras broadcasting live around the world, turning the image into an actual event – stripping it of its qualities as image. The excess

of words used to describe these revolutions became a foil for the very limited number of images available. Televisions endlessly looped what few images of the violence were available, which is not to say that other images were hard to find. Yet the images depicting the Egyptian revolution were scarce in comparison to the comments, speeches, and conferences by officials around the world. Drawing a quick comparison with past televised events, the 2006 war in Lebanon or the Gaza war in 2008, saw images of death multiplying relentlessly for weeks. The political discourse from both sides of the war was like the monotonous sound of weeping: generalized death and blood flowing like rivers, the repetitive rhetoric of hate and contempt. On the other hand, the four revolutions in question, and especially the Egyptian one, were not as generous in images as they were in words. The amount of bloodshed in these revolutions was less than the discourse, and bare violence was less harsh than the language of its denunciation. A lot has changed since the first Gulf War; today one can say that these revolutions happened precisely because we saw them on TV, not the other way around. These images that cannot lie, as CNN likes to put it, can no longer recur without making us turn our eyes away. It used to take a small number of victims to trigger our sympathy, but we now find ourselves overwhelmed with countless deaths, barely remembering how to weep or compose elegies.

Since the Gulf War, the image that cannot lie has become irrefutable evidence. We can no longer produce images erratically, because the image is no longer an immortalization of a transient event as much as it is event in and of itself. In other words, the repression in Egypt was nothing like what used to happen in the times of Stalin or Hitler, or what happened in the Syrian city of Hama during the early 80s when Hafez el Assad bombarded it with heavy artillery. Even today, we don't have an approximate number of victims claimed by El Assad's army, though the most conservative estimates figure it to be no less than ten thousand. Today, such actions could not be without consequences. This has to do with politics, but also with the fact that the image is no longer a mere commentary. Every image, no matter how bad, is broadcast repeatedly. The protester no longer goes out on the street without making sure to document each event with his mobile phone or digital camera to then send it to the world to watch. We can say that the number of images available was so few because the events themselves were negligible in comparison with their consequences.

That is why words once again had to serve the function of commenting on the events. The

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assumption is that words, which are said to be in black and white, outweighed the full color image – and this by itself is a significant event. On one hand, speech, in spite of the platitudes of political discourse in each of the revolutions, was much more abundant than the images. And on the other hand, partiality was obvious at all times. No one would question whether the demand to overthrow Bin Ali and chase him and his relatives from the country was a just and fair demand considering the nature of the crimes committed. In the Lebanese case, the matter was even clearer: the Lebanese took over the streets and demanded a change of authority, a demand that sounded reasonable and legitimate given that a foreign army and security force had installed that authority. However, what followed was no more than the total collapse of the system and the rise of religious groups to the forefront of the political scene. What remained following the collapse of the pro-Syrian regime were the structures that predate the logic of the state and of modernity altogether. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran, the protesters demanded the overthrow of a specific group within the established regime. From the outset, they decided to favor one side of the regime and fight the other. They were defeated in Iran but were successful in Egypt and Tunisia. Yet neither one attempted a radical change in the system, and thus the risk of falling into the quagmire of Lebanese uncertainties was avoided.

The assumption is that these revolutions' hesitance in demanding radical change was due to the scarcity of ideas that motivated them. They aspired to shift the status quo to a more dynamic state but failed to reach beyond this formal demand to a deeper and more meaningful one. What does it really mean to want free elections in Egypt while asserting the army's role in maintaining order and determining the country's future? It is most likely an attempt to provoke a political and social dynamic on the surface of a stagnant sociopolitical order that maintains army's hold over security. These changes can be looked at from the perspective of two givens: First is the fragility of democracy and its limited ability to deal with unforeseeable crises, which led these revolutions to ferociously invoke the American model of a democracy. The second given has to do with the weight and nature of the questions facing the region in view of the hegemony of modernity as the unique credible model.

In the first given, we can note that the American democracy is the only one in the world capable of defending itself with real force, and is often assigned the responsibility of defending other democracies in Europe and the rest of the world. Perhaps the reason is that the American

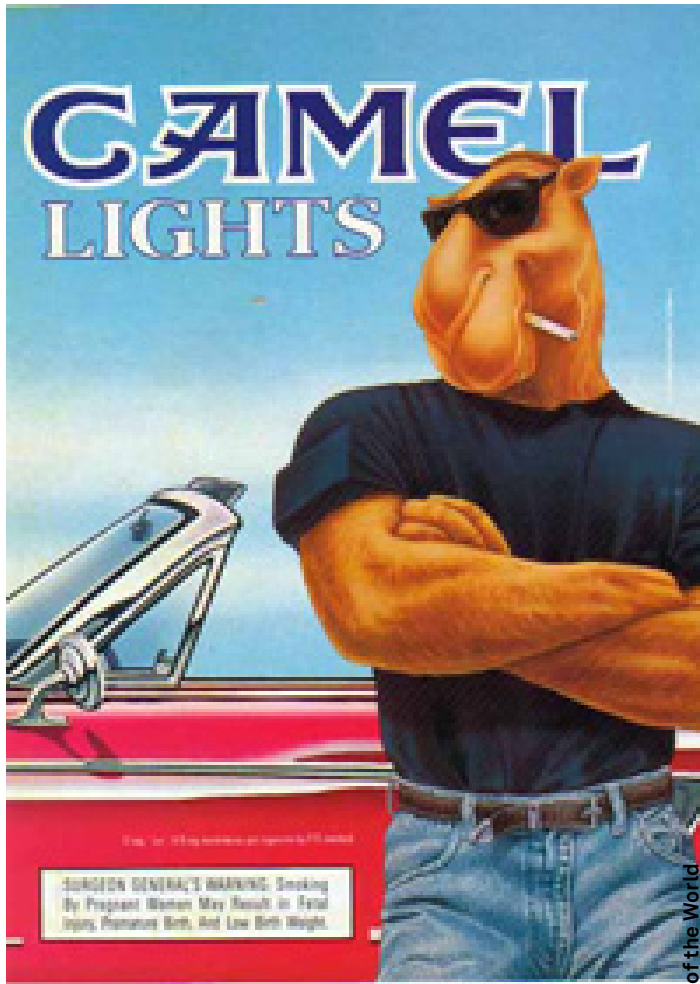
democracy is built on two levels: one level that represents all American citizens living in quasi-independent states, without a real voice regarding defense, foreign policy, or the general economy, and another level that represents the employees of the federal government and national and multinational corporations. The democracies of California, Virginia, or New Jersey resemble those of France, Germany, or Spain. The federal government, however, has little in common with European democracies. Becoming a part of the federal government necessitates fulfilling certain qualification requirements, which includes a list of negating conditions regarding criminal, political, and ideological history. The US federal government doesn't look after a population the way modern governments typically do. This is the responsibility of quasi-independent states. Accordingly, we have the federal government on one side and its people and employees on the other. Furthermore, the federal government builds its institutions on rented property. The only city owned by the government is Washington, a city where most of the population changes with the various administrations. In other words, only a fraction of the population lives there under conditions of permanence. With respect to military bases, army camps, and intelligence centers, they are all built in the middle of the ocean or on land owned either by the American states or a foreign country. It is almost impossible to oppose, much less defeat, a country with no definite borders, or for that matter a country without citizens, whose subjects are employees with job contracts instead of the rights associated with citizenship. Finally, the national and transnational companies are entities in perpetual motion. The United States is a nation on wheels that can't be dealt a lethal blow in any single spot. Copying its democracy in Egypt would mean separating a group of the society from their rights to citizenship and pushing them to play the vital role of defending the nation's borders from both the inside and outside, which is precisely the role of armies.

Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, and Lebanon are states that fell prey to the charms of Western modernities towards the end of the nineteenth century. In these countries, the national dress was replaced with Western dress – something that did not happen in India, Pakistan, or the Gulf States, for example. Accordingly, the elites in these countries saw their ideal in European democracy, but over the last century these democracies proved their inability to protect their achievements. The conclusion of this model as weak and unfit was inevitable, and thus it came to be replaced, in the period between the

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1950s and the 1970s, by the Soviet model and Marxist thinking. Later, the American model became the bridge between this troubled world and modernity.



The second given has to do with the urgency of the questions posed by these societies and the difficulty of finding answers for them. And this is, very probably, the real reason why these modern revolutions are taking place in this part of the world. Western modernities were founded on absolute and flat homogeneity. European democracies left no place whatsoever for differences in religion or ethnicity. All their revolutions took place in response to the Catholic Church, either in favor or in opposition to it. The relation to the Church left them unequipped to deal with the issues of minorities, which later resulted in the emigration, both politically and legally, of European Jews to Israel. The result was an exportation of conflicts to the Middle East, which has been the garbage dump of Western modernity since its inception.

Nowadays, Western democracies border on countless problems of different types and origins, with the major one being unquestionably located in the Middle East. There, the social elites are expected to come up with democratic

solutions to protect religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The development or aggravation of problems threatens to send the whole region back to the Dark Ages. Does it not sound like Bin Laden when he said that resisting American hegemony begins with Muslims returning to the caves and leaving modernity once and for all? There is no doubt that New York's Chinatown is indicative of the inability of American democracy to integrate its immigrants, and the same could be said of Algerians in Paris, Indians in London, or Iranians in Los Angeles. But these problems do not pose serious threats to the city. The real threats are elsewhere in the world.

This is why revolutions happen in this part of the world. And it is why these revolutions find themselves without ideas. It is an extremely heavy burden to bear on the shoulders of the group that now holds the tools to allow it to lead. Abstract ideas are worthless in this regard.

Young Lebanese gathered on the same street because they wanted a chance to learn about each other after a civil war had separated them. And in Egypt, the revolution began just after the incident of the Alexandria church bombing, which looked to be the beginning of another round of violence between Copts and Muslims. And it was an obvious decision – despite the claims and wishes of Iran's Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei – for the rebels in Egypt to not attack the Israeli embassy or assault foreigners. Wasn't it the Iranian revolution that held up the slogan, "Stop the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon"?

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Translated by Ali Chams Eddine and Bechara Malkoun. Edited by Rebecca Lazar.

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1  
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

2  
Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

3  
Ibid.

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