

The Arab Revolts and the Cage of Political Economy

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1. Introduction

The wave of Arab revolts is the biggest political earthquake that shook this planet in quite a while. Sporadic massive protests did take place in the last decade (in Seattle or Genoa for G8 protests, in Greece revolts because of the economic crisis), but none took the regional and truly transnational scope of the Arab revolts of the last six months. Their aftermaths are still being felt far from its original epicenter, Madrid being the latest emulation of the type of spontaneous popular occupation initiated by Tunisians and refined by Egyptians in Tahrir Square (Madison was another one). As this is written, future spillovers of that wave might even be felt elsewhere in Europe (Georgia at the end of May), or more certainly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Uganda in particular), forcing us to reconsider the novelty and potential of these popular protests.

Yet, one should not be all too enthusiastic about these revolts. Even if they herald a new era where people have powerfully asserted their inalienable right to protest (and we hope they will continue doing so), the powerful cage of political economy has remained intact even after six intense months of protest. The intent of the imperial US power in the region, along with its allies Israel and the European Union (EU), remains unchanged.

We will review some of the reasons that sparked these revolts (§2), list some of the novelties of the revolts in comparative perspectives: what they are and what they are not (§3), and then proceed with an analysis of the possibility for radical political formations to emerge as full actors or not in the coming years (§4), before reaching a conclusion.

2. The starting points

Surely, Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor with a useless university degree, who set himself on fire in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, was a very important element in triggering the wave of protests. His death, two weeks later, gave a second decisive impetus to the ousting of President Ben Ali and as we will see, his memory still looms over the current debates in the Tunisian transition. But there are other elements, generally un-discussed, that made this wave of revolts possible, one truly international, the other related to the Middle East only. So why did all these protests erupt at that moment in time? Which external conditions¹ enabled these waves of protests to emerge then and not at another time?

2.1. Wheat and commodities prices

As the joke goes, the only forms of participation that neo-liberalism has fostered are bread riots. Bread, or more precisely an essential ingredient to it—wheat—was the first international factor. Massive floods occurred in Australia at the end of November and early December 2010. This contributed to a renewed push on the price of wheat and grain on the international market, as illustrated in Graphs 1 and 2.²

¹ Other internal factors have been underlined by many: demographics, spread of new media (internet and satellite TVs), etc., all of them discussed below.

² Both graphs taken for a twelve month period, from BBC World Services:

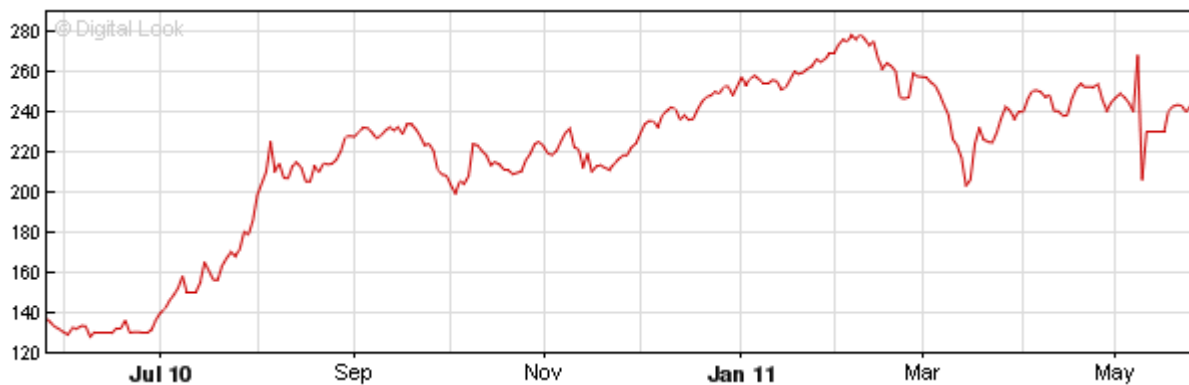
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business/market_data/commodities/158426/twelve_month.stm

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business/market_data/commodities/144824/twelve_month.stm (as of 26 May 2011 – the prices went down significantly since these were written

Graph 1: Price of Wheat Futures US cents/bushel since June 2010



Graph 2: Price of Milling Wheat Futures euros/m tonne since June 2010



Both graphs, illustrating the price of wheat futures and milling wheat over the last 12 months, point to similar trends: a near doubling of the price in the course of six months and the price peaking in February. The wheat futures rose from 500 cents per bushel in Summer 2010 to about 620 in November, and to nearly 900 in February (an almost 100% increase in eight months), while the price of milling wheat also increased from 130 Euros per ton to nearly 280 in early February.

In Algeria, the prices of wheat (and therefore bread) went up in conjunction with a governmental new law intended to force Algerians to declare the real price of goods traded at the end of 2010. The prices of other products also increased radically: sugar and cooking oil witnessed an abrupt 33 to 45 percent increase in the same period.³ Eventually, the government had to back off and freeze the application of the tax reform after a series of street protests in the first two weeks of 2011. At that time, it seemed that the Tunisian revolt was ready to move west towards Algeria, not east towards Libya, Egypt and Yemen.

2.2. Relative calm

On top of structural problems such as food prices, there is also another contextual regional factor, albeit a more slippery one. I personally believe that the relative political and military quiet of the period encountered in the Arab world over the six months prior to the events in Tunisia somehow made these protests possible. By that, I mean no major international military operations and no violent quashing of domestic protests. Many say that, every two years, originally).

³ See Jack Brown, "Algeria's Midwinter Uproar," *Middle East Report*, Online Report No. 1, 20 January 2011, at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero012011>.

Israel will launch a military operation on one of the fronts it entertains due to its annexationist and aggressive policies vis-à-vis the Occupied Territories (OPT) or Lebanon since the 1970s. Thus, many predicted a war with Lebanon in 2010 or a renewed military operation in Gaza. But nothing happened.

Had there been confrontations somewhere, it would have allowed these militaristic regimes, Israel included, to distract attention from more serious internal problems. So this 'pause' gave people the chance to think about their internal priorities. The flagrant electoral frauds in the December parliamentary elections in Egypt were a spit in the face of Egyptians, that contributed to increasing popular discontent against an arrogant regime that was grooming Mubarak's son, Gamal, as the next president.

This relative silence (which does not negate the violence that has been flaring in the OPT since the outbreak of the second intifada, in the Sudan-Darfur crisis, or the difficult post-civil war transition since the amnesty in 2005 in Algeria) was a sort of sounding board for piling up popular *doléances*. The status quo was not an option anymore: the bucket - domestic and regional - was full and the Tunisian drop arrived.

2.3. The aid ratio

It is well known that Israel, since the late 1950s, has been a key bridgehead for US imperialist policies in the Middle East. The relative calm mentioned above mirrors the current frenzy of Israeli efforts to portray the Arab revolts as a threat to its survival. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has, time and again, adopted the view of cornered political leaders that these revolts would pave the way to al-Qaeda-type Islamist regimes coming to power and that Israel was more than ever under threat. In other words, Israel wants to maintain the status quo of aid given by US taxpayers, in the form of 2 billion USD a year. It also wants to portray itself as a bulwark against a de-historicized and generalized Islamist threat, al-Qaeda style. The same is true for Egypt, Yemen or Bahrain (though the alleged threat there is that of the Islamic Republic of Iran)--all benefit from generous funding from the USA. Another commonality of this aid is that most of its content goes to military, defense and security purposes.

Table 1: Ratio Economic and Military aid to top MENA recipient of US aid

Country/Region	Economic Aid	Military Aid	Total
Israel	28,402.90	50,505.70	78,908.60
Egypt	25,095.80	27,607.00	52,702.80
Jordan	2,440.10	2,137.20	4,577.30
Lebanon	470.50	273.00	743.50
Palestinians	703.40	0.00	703.40
Syria	539.00	0.00	539.00
Total Near East	62,449.90	82,519.20	144,969.10

As we can see in this first table (Table 1⁴), military aid to Israel exceeds non-military aid by a ratio of more than 2:1. In Egypt, the ratio has been closer to 1:1 (military vs. non-military), but a closer look (Table 2⁵) at the last decade of US aid to Egypt shows that the level of economic assistance has dropped in favor of more military types of aid (reaching now more than 80% of US aid to the Egyptian regime).

Table 2: Trends of US aid to Egypt (in million USD)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Military aid	1,292	1,289	1,287	1,300	1,289	1,300
Economic assistance	571	530	490	455	411	200
Other
Total (in million USD)	1,865	1,821	1,779	1,757	1,705	1,505

A last comparative table about US aid world-wide also reveals the specificity of the Middle East. The ratio signified in Table 3⁶ serves to measure the amount of military aid (including ‘security’ understood in a broad sense) as opposed to aid for civilian purposes, aggregated here under the heading of ‘democratization’.

Table 3: Ratio between US military aid and democracy aid

Countries (dictatorships)	Ratio	Countries (democracies)	Ratio
Bahrain	258.52	Mexico	108.1
Oman	245.17	Ukraine	6.98
Morocco	102.95	Senegal	5.15
Jordan	73.04	Yugoslavia (Serbia-Mont.)	3.99
Egypt	65.16	Dominican Republic	2.54
Cameroon	40.31	Thailand	1.97
Vietnam	18.86	Georgia	1.5
Tunisia	16.44	Indonesia	0.76
Yemen	6.66	Albania	0.64
Mauritania	5.31	Ghana	0.59

⁴ See Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2011 Request* (Washington: CRS, Febr. 2009 and June 2010), Document RL32260.

⁵ Author’s compilation from Congressional Research Service (CRS), RL32260, Febr. 2009 & June 2010.

⁶ Source: Nancy Bermeo, “Democracy assistance and the search for security”, in Peter J. Burnell, and Richard Youngs (eds), *New challenges to democratization* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 73-90. This is a simplified version of her Table 5.1 on page 81.

Swaziland	4.1	Kenya	0.43
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Unsurprisingly, Bahrain, due to the presence of the US 5th Fleet and its vulnerable position in the Persian Gulf, tops the list. But the high concentration of eight Arab countries (Bahrain, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Mauritania) in the top ten is striking. When we know that there have been significant popular protests in all of them (for readers less aware of detailed political developments in these Arab countries, it is worth underlining that there were protests in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital in April, in similar ‘Day of Rage’ protests,⁷ not to mention Omani protests in February, with oil workers going on important strikes in March⁸), these figures acquire a quasi oracle-like function of where popular protests will burst out.

Beyond the Arab countries as such, since the military plays an important role also in Turkey and Iran, there is food for thought for other African countries and even Russia about how the inter-link between intelligence and the military provides a melting-pot for the formation of future political elites (the so-called *siloviki*⁹). Until recently, the Middle East was the perfect place for autocrats. And as in the past with dictators like Marcos in the Philippines, Mubarak could rely on strong coercive forces, mostly intelligence and national security police forces, to quell any opposition. The interesting development in Tunisia and Egypt is that this pattern has been effectively altered, paving the way for greater democratization prospects than in the past.

3. A comparative reading of the Arab revolts

Let us look into greater details of what a comparison of the revolts can tell us about the prospects for more political participation from below -- some might call this ‘democratization’, but this is far from being clear as one still needs evidence that ‘representative democracy’ is effectively good for the ‘people’ and the masses. But as many have used the prism of ‘democratization’ to read these revolts, we will make occasional reference to that trope.

My contention is that one of the significant results of the waves of revolts is the emergence of strong citizen movements from below and that we are witnessing the emergence of an autonomous counter-power in civil society.¹⁰ Yet, one

⁷ “Mauritania: Tear gas used on ‘day of rage’ protester”, BBC, 25 April 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13188718>.

⁸ “Oil workers strike in Oman”, *World Socialist Web Site*, 17 March 2011, at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/mar2011/oman-m17.shtml>.

⁹ *Siloviki*, sometimes called “securocrats” by political scientists, comes from the fact that these influential people “work for, or who used to work for, *the silovye ministerstva*—literally “the ministries of force”—charged with wielding coercion and violence in the name of the state”. For an illustration, see <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/Illarionov-20-2.pdf>.

¹⁰ I developed a complex definition of civil society in my book on Palestinian civil society to avoid the Eurocentric traps (civil society as automatically opposed to the state, in the Hegel-Tocqueville readings; civil society as an automatic source of democratization, as in the neo-liberal reading). See Benoît Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society. Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and Exclude* (London: Routledge, 2009), Chapter 2. Here I will refer to civil society as understood in Gramsci, namely a place for collective action to gain hegemony in opposition to the political society and bourgeois state. See Norberto Bobbio, “Gramsci and the Concept of Civil Society”, in

needs to be cautious about the chance of success for these popular movements because there are many counter-powers *to* civil society. One needs to zoom out of these events to take the *international* dynamics into consideration (rather than assessing only the domestic or regional levels) -- as we have tried to do in the previous section (§2).

To make my argument that we are potentially seeing the emergence of an autonomous counter-power in civil society, I suggest a twofold reading of the events: what this form of revolt *is* and what it is *not*. Let me start from the latter (not about Western support for democracy, not about religion, nor a simple emanation of class struggles).

3.1. What it is not

First, the wave of protests is *not* the result of two decades of neo-liberal democracy or civil society promotion. The numbers about US aid given for the region were already quite explicit (Tables 1, 2 or 3). Not a single dime of aid earmarked for democratization has contributed to the flow of people pouring onto Middle Eastern streets. The usual suspects in the democratization scene have been conspicuously absent from the formulation of the political and social agenda in the first months of the protests: no advocacy groups and very few human rights activists have been at the forefront of the street embattlements in Tunisia and Egypt, and the absence of the self-appointed civil society leaders (think of the many champions of the non-governmental organization sector) has been as conspicuous as that of religious leaders.

I would argue that western aid has even had a negative effect on the potential influence of these segments of civil society. This is because the nature of the aid apparatus is endowed with the double power to promote and to exclude. It promotes only a professionalized form of activism, which is totally lost when it comes to manage the *extraordinary*. Such aid also contributes to excluding those resisting the institutional and discursive pressures which contribute to the spreading of a managerial version of civil society.¹¹ NGOs are precisely geared at producing new subjectivities--rational citizens who are critical of but still subject to the global neoliberal dominant order.

These observations point to the failure of all attempts at “buying democratization” and the previous tables also demonstrate that the United States and other advanced nations are not buying democracy but rather its repression. A further problem, thus, with this source of aid is that it focuses on hard security features of the state at the expense of aid for social movements, labor movements and other civil society groups, out of fear that it is the state itself that could become the object of predation for non-state actors, in particular Islamist ones. The result is a form of Bonapartism that international aid contributed in spreading in and around Egypt, Palestine and the keystone of Israel, as the high point of US interests in the region.¹²

John Keane, ed., *Civil Society and the State* (London: Verso, 1988), 73-99.

¹¹ Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, 110-16.

¹² See Juan Cole’s apt formulation about Egyptian Bonapartism which could easily be adapted to Tunisia, especially if one has in mind the disturbing remarks professed by the then French Foreign Minister Alliot-Marie in the Parliament early January. In Juan Cole’s words, “The Egypt of the Separate Peace, the Egypt of tourism and joint military exercises with the United States,

Second. The protests have not been about religion. We have come a long way from describing the Muslim Brotherhood as the ultimate bogeyman. To many it might be a surprise to hear that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is actually not so well organized but rather in decline. Again, by assessing the political economy in Egypt, one can find many reasons why the Islamic movement is in this state of relative weakness.

When Egypt embarked on structural adjustment programs and privatized state-owned enterprises from the 1970s onwards, but mostly in the 1990s, it was primarily a *façade*, as only a handful of high-ranking officials could do business. In parallel, with state and welfare services dismantled, the regime allowed a boom in the charity sector, with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB, in Arabic often referred to as the '*Ikhwan*', Brethren) building many private mosques and new charitable organizations. But in the 1990s, when the MB started running for elections (culminating with the winning of 20% of the seats in 2005), the *Ikhwan* paid the price of this political engagement by having no choice but to let people close to the government gradually take control over these charities. The movement also lost credibility when it refused to boycott the 2005 elections and more recently because of its adoption of viewpoints inimical to the lower classes; thus the MB denounced the strikes of Muhalla al-Kubra in the textile sector in April 2008. Similar anti-union positions from Islamists are documented in Gaza or Yemen, creating a rift between the working class and the Islamists.¹³ On both fronts, political and social, the MB comes out a much more fragile actor than it was in the past. Only the lack of alternative opposition and the regime's stigmatization of the *Ikhwan* as a Taliban-like movement kept an otherwise fragmented organization united.¹⁴

This is not to say that the days of the *Ikhwan* are numbered. It still has an enormous organizational capacity and could well become, if the former ruling party (NDP) does not manage to re-emerge in a new form for the September elections, the main faction in parliament. We should not forget that, historically, the Islamists (and not just the *Ikhwan*) have become so big because the regime played them against the communist party in Egypt, thus supporting the spread of Islamism instrumentally to cut the grass under the feet of the communists during the last five decades. The hypertrophy of the Islamist sector is to a large extent the result of the anti-communist crusade during the cold war,¹⁵ and the strange, but rather frequent, conversion of former Marxists into Islamists.

is also an Egypt ruled by the few for the benefit of the few." See Juan Cole's blog, posted on 3 February 2011, at <http://www.juancole.com/2011/02/mubarak-defies-a-humiliated-america-emulating-netanyahu.html>.

¹³ See Patrick Haenni's notion of the "Islam of the market" to describe the growing bourgeois neoliberal tendencies amongst Islamists in Egypt and around Muslim-majority societies Patrick Haenni, *L'Islam de marché, l'autre révolution conservatrice* (Paris, Seuil, 2005). See also Patrick Haenni and Husam Tammam, *Les Frères Musulmans égyptiens face à la question sociale: autopsie d'une malaise socio-théologique* (Fribourg: Institut Religioscope, Etudes et analyses n. 20, 2009), available at http://religion.info/pdf/2009_05_fm_social.pdf.

¹⁴ Daniela Pioppi, *Is There an Islamist Alternative in Egypt?* (Roma: IAI Working Paper 3, 2011), 7-10. Available at <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiw1103.pdf>.

As in Tunisia with elections due for late July (and the rising Islamic party an-Nahda), we will have to see what is the actual outcome for the MB in future Egyptian elections. The MB has exerted restraint, especially in the first two months of the revolt. First it announced around March that it would not field a presidential candidate (but then, in May, a MB member, Abdel Moneim Abdul Fotouh said he would run as an independent, a personal decision that led to his expulsion from the party¹⁶). It also stated that it would present lists for only 30% of the Parliament seats. Was it because the MB was still under intimidation that it made such pleas? Monah al-Ghobashy gave that as a reason for the shy attitude of the MB in the first month of the Egyptian protests, as State security officers seemed to have warned Muslim Brothers in the provinces to stay home.¹⁷ This could explain why, recently, the MB changed its view in early May and that it would run for 50% of the seats instead.¹⁸ It could be that, now that the former regime and its secret police have vanished, they are waiting for glorious day and that they will exert less restraint on expressing their political appetite, as was the case in the last days of May (25 May), when a senior MB member, Sobhi Saleh, expressed his hope that the post-election government would be an Islamic one, only to be asked by the MB political bureau to retract his statement.¹⁹ The fact remains that, both in Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamic block will be more fragmented than it was before the revolts, because of internal splits and the existence of other minor Islamist formations.²⁰

Third and last, the current protests are not a simple emanation of class inequalities. Though the main trade union in Tunisia (*Union Générale Tunisienne des Travailleurs* - UGTT) was an important triggering agent of the revolt, the loose combination of educated people with liberal professionals (lawyers, doctors) gave a decisive boost to the popular protests in Tunisia. The same can be said in Yemen, Palestine, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya and, of course, also Egypt.

However, the class dimension should not be written off from the current protests. In particular, the prominent role that trade unions have played from Bahrain, Tunisia and Egypt is quite striking. It is not clear if their significance is

15 Sandra Halperin, "The Post-Cold War Political Topography of the Middle East: Prospects for Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005), 1135-1156, at 1136.

16 "Brotherhood youth blast decision to expel Abouel Fotouh", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 19 June 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/469394>.

17 See Mona el-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution," *Middle East Report*, No. 258, at <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258/praxis-egyptian-revolution>.

18 "Muslim Brotherhood to contest half of parliament seats", *Daily News Egypt*, 1 May 2011, at <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/egypt/muslim-brotherhood-to-contest-half-of-parliament-seats.html>.

19 "Next government to be Islamist", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 25 May 2011, at <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/450742>.

20 See, e.g., the reluctance of the old guard in Egypt to support the 26 May protests: "Brotherhood divided over Friday's protests", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 26 May 2011, at <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/452783>.

due to their political perspective or whether they have been important because of their sheer existence and organizational capability--such as putting people on buses, getting people to gather around slogans, organizing internal security forces to confront anti-riot police units, etc. It should be noted that these are things that soccer fan clubs have also been seen doing in Egypt. This might sound a strange parallel to draw but, under the state of emergency imposed since 1981 (the same applied in Algeria), soccer fans were the only group of more than twenty people authorized to gather in public space. These groups also became experts in out-maneuvering anti-riot police -- soccer fans were apparently in the front line when Mubarak sent thugs on camels and horses at the end of January to try to oust the protesters from Tahrir Square. Again, as with the future of the Islamists, there are doubts that we will discuss below about the prospect for labor movements to coalesce into important political factions

All this happened in a very volatile situation where it is difficult to read class dimensions from others. Nadia Marzouki, in her early analysis of the Tunisian protests (published five days after the departure of Ben Ali from Tunis) underlined the role of the UGTT, the main labor confederation in channeling the protests:

“The UGTT, which supported Ben Ali from the late 1980s forward, changed its attitude entirely. Beginning with postal workers and primary-school teachers, numerous local and regional chapters of the union organized grass-roots level debates about the course of events. The sense of collective delight that emerged from this recovered right to speak was a challenge to the widespread notion that the ‘Arab street’ is a space of little but anomie and diffuse anger.”²¹

In Egypt as well, there have been new strikes and new trade unions formed literally every week. I list below all the sectors where strikes or labor protests were reported in the Egyptian press during the month of March:

- Real estate,
- Health technologists,
- Teachers syndicate,
- Textile,
- Transport authority,
- Iron and steel,
- Postal workers,
- Bank and pharmaceutical concerns,
- Aviation,
- Journalists,
- Lawyers,
- Cinematographers (a big sector in Egypt),
- Musicians, and
- Petroleum and gas industries.²²

21 Nadia Marzouki, “Tunisia's Wall Has Fallen,” *Middle East Report*, Online Report, Jan. 19, 2011, available at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011911>.

22 Author’s compilation from various Egyptian dailies. In May, a new important sector joined the pack, with Doctors striking. Quote from an article “... The strike, which went into effect Tuesday, reported an 85% response rate with 227 participating hospitals across the country. Demands included the dismissal of health minister

This list illustrates that the unease comes from all segments of the population, not just from the primary and secondary sectors, where the working class is concentrated, but also from the tertiary service-oriented sectors (journalists, aviation, real estate, etc).

Nonetheless, we cannot afford to neglect the significance of sheer material need in shaping the nature of the oppositional forces. In the Middle East, neo-liberalism has done 'wonders', and despite the oil bonanza in many countries of the region, "economic deprivation continues to affect at least 80 per cent of the overall Arab population. Out of 320 million Arabs, some 15 per cent at most (30 million) have benefited from the oil boom directly or indirectly."²³

To this important, but not unique class factor, there are other ingredients leading to the cocktail of revolts witnessed so far. Generation is one of them. Mainstream Western media reported actually little on class struggles and highlighted the involvement of youth and especially of the youth able to make the best use of internet technologies. The media picked up the technological dimension, but the young age of the protesters is much more significant, because more than half of the population in the Middle East is below the age of 25 (even less for other places like Palestine, where the majority is under the age of 21). Many of these youths have been very much disillusioned by the Islamist ideology²⁴ and also by the opportunistic behavior of the left-cum NGOs. Some of these youths might have found a job, but the cruel reality is, as in the Spanish protests at the end of May, there is a high percentage of young college graduates without a job. In Tunisia, 46% of youth have university degrees, but unemployment is extremely high.²⁵ Thus, there was something ineluctable in these disenfranchised youths call for work and participation.

Let us now turn to what these protests are.

3.2. What it is about

Earlier, I chose the phrase counter-power of civil society, because I believe that there is more to civil society than its organized form. To avoid thinking of it as a residual category, I usually define civil society on the principle that it is the

Ashraf Hatem, raising the health budget, and increased wages and security for hospitals... The strike has not been canceled, but suspended until Sunday while doctors meet to discuss the results." Sources: Doctors suspend strike following meeting with ministers", *al-Masry al-Youm*, 18 May 2011, see <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/441906>.

23 Bassma Kodmani, "Democratization by whom? Resistance to democracy promotion in the Middle East", in Peter J. Burnell, and Richard Youngs (eds), *New challenges to democratization* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 153-170, at 155.

24 And interestingly, many blogs or interviews of youth in the region explicitly state that they are not longing for an Iranian-style solution (read Islamic revolution).

25 Nadia Marzouki, "Tunisia's Wall Has Fallen," *Middle East Report*, Online Report, Jan. 19, 2011, available at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011911>.

source for collective autonomy.²⁶ The rendering of autonomy in Arabic is perfect to illustrate my point as the translation is *tasayyir daati* – that is the “self-impulse” or “self-drive”.

And indeed, once the initial spark was lit, it is as if the Tunisian people moved, as a whole, into spontaneous protests. Egyptian, Libyan, and Yemeni people called for the fall of their respective regime. The slogan “*ash-sha’b yourid isqat al-nithaam*” – in English “the people wants the fall of the regime” – captures this social cohesion (the people) and the unity in the project across the region, since it was also used subsequently in Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

These protests entail a radical break with fragmented social structures. To paraphrase Castoriadis’ text on the *Hungarian Source*,²⁷ this moment of self-organization in Egypt was coupled with a moment of radical re-imagination, by placing the nation at the heart of all these protests. It is worth underlining that we are talking about the secular notion of *watan* (territory or homeland), as opposed to the religiously tainted notion of *ummah*.

Thus sectarian, religious or class divisions have frequently been transcended by calls for national unity. Readers can probably recall pictures showing a sense of national unity with the overwhelming presence of national flags (Bahrain in particular, but also in Libya, Palestine, or Yemen and across the region). Other examples include:

- Copts and Muslims protecting one another on Tahrir Square while praying;
- Bahrainis chanting that it is not about being Sunni or Shiite, but about the defense of the *watan* country.
- Libyan youth invoking the past resistance of Omar Mukhtar (a religious leader) to Italian fascism in the 1930s as an example for the nation;
- Palestinians calling for the end of their own divisions, and finally,
- Protests in Syria where demonstrators chanted, “Not Sunnis, not Alawis, we all want freedom”.²⁸

Spontaneity (etymologically, *spons* means the source), understood here as the idea and practice of self-organization of the people on the street, can be seen both as the strength of these regional protests and as their weakness. By definition, spontaneity and self-organization risk being short-term revolutionary fires. In Egypt, where the government was removed by the military (the Supreme Council of Armed Forces-SCAF), executive power is in the hands of people part of the previous power arrangements. By cheering and entrusting the army with managing the transition, people in Egypt might have lost to another group its capacity to decide *what* to do and *how* to do it.

Revolution is, we are told by Castoriadis, the explicit self-institution of society, the capacity to choose the content and the form of the protests. In Tunisia, it

²⁶ Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, 55-8.-

²⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Hungarian Source,” in *Political and Social Writings. Vol. 3, 1961-1979*. Ed. and transl. David A. Curtis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 250-271.

²⁸ “Despite Promise of Reforms, Syrian Forces Try to Disperse Protesters With Gunfire”, *New York Times*, 29 March 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=not%20sunnis,%20not%20alawis&st=cse.

looks like that there has been a real split inside the army and the police forces to keep the revolutionary momentum towards a profound rupture with the past (state media have also been rapidly dis-embedded from control by the Ben Ali and Trabelsi clan – the family of Ben Ali’s wife). But, in Egypt, believing that the Army, which owns so much of the economic sector, will allow this double revolutionary break of self-organization and self-imagination is falling into naïve politics.

There seems nonetheless a strong capacity *and* will by the Tunisian and Egyptian populations to keep this flow of spontaneous protests (like the protest in response to the Egyptian army’s plan to outlaw protests--forcing the SCAF to take down this plan,) as a weapon against the transition governments. Trade unions are again playing a role in keeping the mobilization high on the street, and this without clear indications from the formal syndicate leaders. One UGTT member thus recently reflected on the Tunisian mobilization and when asked, “Was there any hesitation on the part of the UGTT in backing the revolution?”, he replied:

“Well, the union activists on the ground were not awaiting orders from above. No one met in union halls to decide whether to support the revolution or not. The solidarity of unionists with the revolution was spontaneous.”²⁹

Another quote conveys the sense of unity and spontaneity in the streets around Tahrir Square:

“On January 28, shortly after noon, a majestic scene unfolded all over Egypt. Grand processions of thousands upon thousands of people in every province made their way to the abodes of the oppressive forces that controlled their lives. Beckoning those watching from their windows, they chanted, ‘Our people, our people, come and join us!’ When the crowds reached town and city centers, they encircled police stations, provincial government buildings and NDP [the ruling party] headquarters, the triad of institutions emblematic of the regime. The syncopated chorus that had traveled from Sidi Bouzid to Tunis now shook the Egyptian earth: ‘The people...want...to overthrow the regime!’”³⁰

Even in Libya, self-organization in Benghazi and other Eastern towns that were too far from Col. Qaddafi’s reach, organized a network of solidarity by chipping some money into a common fund to secure constant access to water and basic food resources, on top of organizing security for the various city’ neighborhoods.³¹

4. Perspectives for radical politics

In light of this general comparison, what are the prospects for future positive developments in the region? Leaving aside Libya which risks turning into a

²⁹ Chris Toensing, “Tunisian Labor Leaders Reflect Upon Revolt,” *Middle East Report*, Num. 258. available at <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258/tunisian-labor-leaders-reflect-upon-revolt-0>.

³⁰ El-Ghobashy, “The Praxis....”. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer258/praxis-egyptian-revolution>.

³¹ *Le Temps* (Geneva-based daily), 3 March, 2011.

protracted civil war, with NATO and a few Arab allies' intervention (Qatar in particular with its pivotal role in providing weapons to the anti-Qaddafi troops), these Arab revolts have laid bare the non-sustainability of the past regimes, based on a mix of (often indirect) military control in alliance with a small layer of the population obtaining benefits from complacency to autocratic regimes. It is thus no surprise to see these revolts spreading to other parts of the world since this pattern of rule is to be found in many other places. In the Arab world, the revolts have also opened the door to a totally new era, in which the most likely successful alternative political ideology to autocracies is not Islamism anymore but a return to secular politics.

In this section, I would like to dwell on the possibility for labor groups and Marxist formations to regain influence in this new era of secular politics, but also identify what are the adverse conditions for a resurgence of radical Marxism in the region, in particular the deep scars left by nearly three decades of neo-liberalism and the cost of preserving the peace process at all costs.

4.1. Weak and fragmented labor movements

Regaining influence in domestic politics will not be an easy task for leftist groups in all of the countries shaken by the revolts. By underlining the capacity to project a new political imaginary for more direct popular participation in politics (around, e.g., labor protests) and the ability to mobilize large groups, various Marxist groups are now in a watershed period: once again, they can offer credible alternatives and articulate real political programs to satisfy the needs of disenfranchised groups. To use Gramsci, this proven capacity of auto-institution must be accompanied with a more pro-active and class-conscious civil society against the oppressive domination of economics and that of the state. Concentrating *only* on material and economic issues will probably equate with losing the battle of these revolts and future Marxist politics must be done in synchrony with a radical re-imagination of the popular imaginary.

If the Islamists seem to be losing momentum after more than three decades of dominant position in the opposition, there is a golden opportunity for the left to re-emerge. But it will face two serious problems. First, a re-emergence of the radical left will need a radical re-foundation and serious distancing from past accommodations. Second, it will face an uphill battle in re-organizing institutions that had been banned or under strict control by the regime.

In the case of Egypt, one party associated historically with the communist tradition has been the Tagammu', though it later moved towards a socialist reformist stance. Like the historical opposition secular force of the Wafd party in Egypt, it has been in the last decades regime-loyal by participating in rigged elections or by supporting the harsh crackdown on Islamists. A new leadership, less acquiescent to ruling authorities and detached from religious connotations needs to emerge both in the reformist and in the communist movements.

Because, historically, in many Arab countries, like in Egypt, Palestine or Jordan, the disaffection of the left from the trade unions and a move towards the professional segment of civil society – the 'NGO' scene, paved the way for successful takeovers by Islamic groups from the 1980s onwards. The fact that Islamists have shown their true face, of petty bourgeois favoring neoliberal

policies,³² is a golden opportunity to resurrect the central role that traditional social movements can play.

On May Day this year, an old Marxist-Leninist formation went public after years of silence: Egypt's Communist Party (ECP) announced that it would act again in the open after decades of political oppression by the regime. The ECP was formed in 1922 and was outlawed under the monarchy two years later, acting only secretly. With the Free Officers' Revolution in 1952, there were hopes that the movement could operate freely, but Nasser's honeymoon with the Soviet Union lasted only briefly, and the party was dissolved in the mid-1960s. It was re-established in 1975, but under the radar screen as it was illegal and its activists were rotting in jail. Similarly in March, the creation of an "independent labor union" was announced in Egyptian dailies as something that had not take place since 1957.³³

In the recent past, where strikes have been increasingly on the rise (Juan Cole has spoken of more than 2000 strikes in the last four years³⁴), there were always new communist militants, torn apart between the risk of joining an illegal party or an accommodationist and socialist movement such as Tagammu. Hazem Kandil reports that for many young leftists,

"the priority was to organize resistance in the factories. So for at least five years, they had been trying to develop a force of their own, creating, among other things, a journal called *Al-Bousla—The Compass* in Arabic—to bring together the most active layers of the Egyptian Left. These are mostly urban intellectuals, many of them assistant professors—young historians, political scientists or sociologists. (...) It is estimated that some two million workers had been involved in some kind of strike activity over the previous decade. But strikes had been by and large apolitical, restricted to wage demands, resistance to lay-offs, pressure for earlier retirement; and they had been strictly local—there had never been an attempt at any industrial action on a national scale."³⁵

The strike of 2008 in the textile sector in Mahalla al-Kubra was the product of such activism and some of the leaders of the April 6 Youth movement fit the trajectory described above: urban intellectuals, many of whom are without direct connections with working class.

In Tunisia, there are similarities: the former communist party, *Ettajdeed*, became a reformist party in the early 1990s and always remained a marginal

³² Patrick Haenni, *L'Islam de marché, l'autre révolution conservatrice* (Paris, Seuil, 2005). See also Patrick Haenni and Husam Tammam, *Les Frères Musulmans égyptiens face à la question sociale: autopsie d'une malaise socio-théologique* (Fribourg: Institut Religioscope, Etudes et analyses n. 20, 2009), available at http://religion.info/pdf/2009_05_fm_social.pdf.

³³ "After 50-year hiatus, Egypt's first independent labor union is born", *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 3 March 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/337515>.

³⁴ Juan Cole's intervention (on 10 February 2011) on *Egypt Arising*, an event organized by the Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University, at http://cgt.columbia.edu/videos/filter/all/0/0/cole_juan/0/.

³⁵ Hazem Kandil, "Revolt in Egypt. Interview", *New Left Review* 68 (March-April 2011), 17-55.

group. The main vector for labor activism remained the UGTT. This formation, originally called *Confédération Générale Tunisienne du Travail* at its inception in 1924, was a vector of nationalist politics as it was openly anti-colonial. After WW2, the CGTT became the UGTT in 1946 and benefitted, like so many trade unions in the nascent Cold War, of US CIA money, funneled through a partnership with the AFL³⁶. In 1976, 1977 and in the 1978 general strikes, after a period of tense stand offs between the workers, who had organized many wildcat strikes and denounced the leaders of the UGTT as collaborators, and the ruling party Neo-Destour, the UGTT was co-opted by the regime, a tendency reinforced under Ben Ali (in power since 1987). However, the UGTT remained not quite under the full control of pro-regime cadres and small radical groups kept existing on its fringes, explaining probably also the divisions of the UGTT in the first weeks of the protests in Tunisia in January.³⁷ Three of its cadres have been appointed in the first interim government under Mohammed Ghannouchi, but resigned only a few weeks later. The UGTT's dominant position was also breached with new workers' movements and parties created ahead of the July 2011 elections.

4.2. Neo-liberalism has been here already...

Thus, these socialist movements are fragmented, historically weak and will have to find convincing arguments that they have the right answers to bring more social justice, a theme mostly hijacked by the Islamists over the last decades.

Another strong enemy to fight is the impact and ravages created by more than two decades of systematic neoliberal policies in the region--ravages that some of these reformist movements, in particular the UGTT, in Tunisia, have supported. In Egypt, Sadat adopted the *infitah* policy (open door policy) in 1974, later reinforced in 1991 by structural adjustment programs under Mubarak, which brought more confusion about state and society responsibilities. As Mitchell put it, the Egyptian government in the 1990s "subsidized financiers instead of factories, cement kilns instead of bakeries, speculators instead of schools."³⁸ In this process, the military moved out of their barracks and gradually expanded as a capitalist force on its own, by controlling large industrial concerns and real estate close to tourist centers. In Tunisia, the main driving force in the spread of neo-liberal policies was the European Union, with its so-called Barcelona process, launched in 1995 and its failed attempt to create a free trade zone by 2010. Cassarino explains quite accurately what happened in Tunisia and a phenomenon of new forms of state deployments, rather than a 'shrinkage' of the state's capacities, as a

³⁶ Nigel Disney, "The Working-Class Revolt in Tunisia", *Middle East Report*, MERIP 67 (May 1978).

³⁷ And assigning one clear position of the UGTT throughout the initial month of protests in Tunisia is impossible. See some debates on this, see "The American middle class "left" and the Tunisian revolt", *World Socialist Web Site*, 21 January 2011, at <http://wsws.org/articles/2011/jan2011/ugtt-j21.shtml>.

³⁸ Timothy Mitchell, "No Factories, No Problems. The Logic of Neo-Liberalism in Egypt," *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no.82 (1999), 455-68, at 456.

consequence of the economic opening of the Tunisian market with trade to the EU: ³⁹

“Admittedly, a process of economic liberalization has been promoted since the 1980s by the former regime, particularly following the 1995 Association Agreement between the Government of Tunisia and the EU, leading to the emergence of a business-friendly institutional environment. However, state divestiture and the resilience of oligarchic economic interests also characterized Tunisia’s model of top-down ‘participatory development’, as the former regime’s official rhetoric had dubbed it.”

“(…) The adoption of the EU-sponsored *Programme de Mise à Niveau* (PMN), in Arabic *attâhyl ach-châmil*, aimed at upgrading and restructuring the private sector in order to face greater exposure to international competition through gradual tariff dismantling, was expected to buttress the competitiveness of Tunisian private enterprises. *Far from doing so, the PMN actually contributed to reinforcing the interference of the state and its public administration into the private sector.* It did so by selectively allocating financial and informational resources to a number of entrepreneurs with a view to modernizing their (and only their) production lines, and to sustaining their (and only their) export capacities.”⁴⁰

Once again, these global capitalist transformations have contributed to creating easy access to cheap labor costs for international capital, opening new markets for international consumption products (often products that only a tiny population of the Arab world can afford).⁴¹ These processes in Tunisia, Jordan⁴² or Egypt have an equivalent in other countries where the effect of liberalization of the market has been to literally import cheap manpower. Israel did this from the early 1990s onwards to replace Palestinian workforce by Filipinos, Nigerians and other nationals, while Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Dubai selectively imported and exploited their working manpower from the Indian sub-continent and south Asia. Anyone voicing political protests could thus easily be excluded from their host country.⁴³ These profound transformations of the work force have, of course, long term repercussion for the working class, since class formation is fundamentally skewed and systems of workers’ representation simply impossible. Finally, in the Gulf countries, awash with oil and gas remittances,

³⁹ Conclusion also developed in Caroline Abu Sada & Benoit Challand’s introduction to *Le développement, une affaire d’ONG ? Associations, Etats et bailleurs dans le monde arabe*, (Paris:, Karthala-IREMAM, 2011).

⁴⁰ Jean-Pierre Cassarino, “Confidence-building in Tunisia after the Popular Uprising: Strategies and Dilemmas of the Interim Government”, IAI WORKING PAPERS 11/04 (February 2011), pp. 5- 6 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ E.g., Timothy Mitchell, “No Factories, No Problems...”.

⁴² Christopher Parker, “Tunnel-bypasses and minarets of capitalism: Amman as neoliberal assemblage”, *Political Geography* 28(2), 2009, 110-120.

⁴³ Think of the hundreds of thousands Palestinians or Yemenis expelled from the Gulf countries in 1990, 1991.

the emergence of trade unions has been only a recent invention, but all under rather tight control by the royal families.

4.3 ...and the 'peace industry' goes on

Another factor which impedes class struggles in the region is that access to enormous resources is created not simply by the market but by the 'peace industry'⁴⁴ around Israel. This phrase refers to the real business generated by generally hollow peace projects, of fig leaf projects meant to promote peace in and around Palestine and Israel. We have seen already the 'peace dividends' reaped by Israeli and Egyptian governments since the 1978 Camp David agreements (about 1 to 2 billion US dollars per year). The creation of the NGO scene (the 'democratization' and 'peace programs, such as people-to-people) is also a by-product of this industry, dragging important layers of progressive activists and intellectuals into hot air production around advocacy, and the promotion of 'principled beliefs', instead of defending basic collective rights. But there is more to the peace industry than 'grassroots' peace activities and the NGO-ization of civil society. The true nature of this political engagement around peace (be it between Israel and Egypt, or between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the previous Egyptian government) can be seen around the personal benefits that their political leaders have obtained around the construction industry. The intertwinement with international capital is also illustrated with two famous corruption episodes in Palestine.

About five years ago, one of the top figures of the Palestinian Authority was accused of reselling, at near-market price, cement imported at preferential rates (part of the peace dividends) from Egypt via Israel. Not only was there a clear case of embezzlement, but the concrete was sold by the brother of a key Palestinian minister not to Palestinians, but to Israeli concerns in charge of building illegal settlements. There were widespread rumors that part of the cement was also used by Israeli firms to build the security wall that Israel is currently erecting for 'security reasons' to lock in the West Bank into a series of enclaves. Cement and construction materials come from Egyptian-based construction conglomerates, acting in close relationship with Egyptian quasi-state business in which cronies of Mubarak and some military elites have privileged access.

Thus a lot of the 'peace-building' money has been siphoned away from public use. There is little surprise that the Fatah-run PNA and the Israeli government are anxious about the prospect of this 'generous' peace process being derailed. Amira Hass, the only Israeli journalist living in the Palestinian Territories, had many stories from the beginning of the revolts about nervous West Bank political leaders. Thus, before the fall of Mubarak, on February 3, 2011, she stated that: "The Palestinian leadership has been careful not to support the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and has banned demonstrations in solidarity with the rebelling peoples. Palestinian television has virtually ignored the events in Egypt."⁴⁵ In another paper where she hinted at the EU's involvement in training civilian Palestinian police increasingly involved in political repression

44 Markus Bouillon speaks of *The peace business: money and power in the Palestine-Israel conflict* (London, IB Tauris, 2006).

45 "Why isn't the PA supporting the Egypt uprising?", Amira Hass in *Haaretz*, 3 February 2011, see <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/why-isn-t-the-pa-supporting-the-egypt-uprising-1.340966a>.

and torture of political opponents (not just Hamas, but militants of the PFLP and DFLP), she spoke, on February 7, 2011 of supporters of Fatah who, in Ramallah, “had held an undisturbed demonstration in support of the Egyptian government and President Hosni Mubarak”.⁴⁶

We are in the same pattern of full collaboration that took place in the Oslo years ago and where joint Israeli, international and Palestinian capital (some of the money originating actually from international aid for the nascent PNA) merged to create a casino (gambling is forbidden in Israel) in the West Bank town of Jericho⁴⁷. When the second intifada broke out in September 2000, people having a direct stake in the casino (a Vienna-based entrepreneur, some Israeli businessmen and Palestinian officials, the advisor of the late President Arafat and key figures in the Palestinian security forces) called for an immediate end of the confrontation because of the economic damage the Intifada was causing to the casino. This episode illustrates how, back in the ‘Oslo years’⁴⁸ as it is again the case over the last four years, the convergence of capitalist and security forces’ interests is the best guarantor of Israeli security and the best model of ‘peace-building’ in the region.⁴⁹

Interestingly, the SCAF in Egypt has taken a drastic measure to attack past practices of corruption by granting the judiciary substantial power to judge corrupt ministers. The Ministers of Interior (Habib al-Adly) and Tourism have received a lot of attention through accelerated trials; the same is on its way with the Mubarak family, and one key ally, Ahmed Ezz (businessman and key NDP official). The surprise is that the former powerful GIS director Omar Suleiman (seen as an essential pawn in the game of selective security collaboration with Israel) has been recently referred to military court: “Suleiman, the former head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service (GIS), is accused alongside Wadi el-Nil Contracting, a company owned by the GIS, of wasting public money. The military prosecution has requested the reports be transferred from the public prosecutor's office to prepare for further investigations.”⁵⁰

46 “Palestinian security suppressing West Bank fervor over Egypt protests”, Amira Hass in *Haaretz*, 7 February 2011, see <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/palestinian-security-suppressing-west-bank-fervor-over-egypt-protests-1.341722>.

47 See, e.g. Benoit Challand, “Les mutations du leadership palestinien: des accords d’Oslo à la victoire du Hamas (1993-2007)”, *A Contrario*, Vol. 5, Num. 2 (2009), 12-37.

48 Peter Lagerquist, “Privatizing the Occupation: The Political Economy of an Oslo Development Project”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32(2), 2003, 5-20.

49 A statement made in October 2009 by Israeli Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor, confirmed that “cooperation between the PA and Israel, particularly in the security realm, is the best it has been”. Originally published in *Jerusalem Post*, 19 October 2009, quoted in ICG, *Salvaging Fatah*, Middle East Report n°91, International Crisis Group, 12 November 2009, footnote 22, p. 4.

50 See article in Arabic (entitled “Reports against Omar Suleiman transmitted to the military prosecutor”), *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 5 March, 2011, see <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/421516> (English translation quoted in POMED e-newsletter).

The fact that the PNA in the West Bank felt pressure to announce early municipal elections (on February 4, 2011)⁵¹, and later Hamas, also under pressure from various student protests throughout March and April in the Gaza strip, agreed to sign a unity reconciliation deal with Fatah in May is another quite positive development carried forth by these Arab revolts. What Egypt has been doing in the last weeks in relation to the Palestinian issue (opening of the Rafah border and announcement that it would recognize a Palestinian state at the UN General Assembly in September) is sound politics. Moreover, the fact that Turkey has also supported these changes gives more regional credibility to this initiative and puts increasing pressure on Israel.

But the cage of the political economy is not limited to the 'peace industry'. It also relates to the apparatus of international aid. If we look at aid to the Middle East from actors that really matter, US and the EU, one quickly realizes the *Realpolitik* dimension of aid considered as a stick. Time and again, the US administration or Congress has used the aid argument (in Syria, Egypt, Palestine or Yemen) in terms of negative conditionality ("If you don't do this, we will cut our aid."). In this dominant line of reasoning, aid is just being used as a stick.⁵² The EU, as always, never first but always second to the US, also promised the same neo-liberal free market recipe for Libya, Egypt and Tunisia.⁵³ *Nihil novi sub sole.*

5. Conclusions

The Arab revolts will certainly not become revolutions for a series of reasons. First, political systems in the region are likely to open up significantly over the coming months and years, but political systems in the region will remain controlled by a sort of oligarchy or a few strong conservative political parties, as no significantly strong alternatives are on the horizons (elections this summer and fall will tell us more about the *rappports de force* between the different political factions). Second, the political economy, on the regional (peace industry) and international (continuation of neo-liberal policies, aid system, etc) levels is not likely to change. Thus, it is correct to speak of a real cage blocking revolutionary movements in the region and elsewhere in the globe. Third, much of the content of the popular protests is likely to fall back into some form of conservative nationalistic politics. It might be a great achievement that the slogans chanted by protesters throughout the region are not religious, but reverting to nationalist slogans will mean losing the regional momentum of these revolts which precisely highlighted the similarities in terms of skewed economic redistribution and the need for an articulated political

51 "Egypt unrest spurs Palestinian Authority to pledge elections", Amira Hass in *Haaretz*, 4 February 2011, at <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/egypt-unrest-spurs-palestinian-authority-to-pledge-elections-1.341129>

52 In the words of Nathalie Tocci and Jean-Pierre Cassarino, aid, instead, should be about "broadening the spectrum of partners inside and outside". See their "Rethinking Euro-Med policies in the light of the Arab Spring", March 2011, at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/nathalie-tocci-jean-pierre-cassarino/rethinking-euro-med-policies-in-light-of-arab-spring>.

53 EU Commissioner Barroso announcing Civil Society Fund. See "EU announces extra aid to shore up Arab democracy", BBC World Services, 25 May 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13549971>.

alternative in and beyond the whole region (thus it is hardly surprising that the Arab revolts' modality of eruption and spontaneity is copied beyond the Arab world as, there as well, models of redistribution and representation through political parties are failing). In the long run, transnational revolutionary forces will probably be outnumbered by chauvinistic political claims. Fourth, the counter-power in civil society evoked in this paper is in danger. Spontaneity is important to re-imagine a different form of political participation, but eventually these counter-forms of collective actions will need to turn into formal institutions if civil society is to play a counter-hegemonic, emancipatory political role. Concentrating on material and economic issues must be done in synchrony with a radical re-imagination of the popular imaginary. Fifth and last, and in relation to the notion of the imaginary, labor movements and revolutionary groups are facing an uphill battle due to their fragmentation and historically weak position. Class struggle does play a role in these revolts, but it often remains entrapped in national boundaries, when in reality it is the international political economy that represents the real barrier to the emergence of radical groups from below.