Social Mobilisation and the Construction of Citizenship

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In an interview with the BBC on 23 December 2011, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm noted that 2011 reminded him of 1848, the quintessential revolutionary year in Europe. In the 19th century, it was the working class that led the wave of change, whereas today it is the middle class. However, both cases offer proof that the population – the people – can mobilise, demonstrate and, in so doing, promote sweeping political, social and economic transformations. In the same vein, in an article published in the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* on 30 December 2011, Andy Robinson underscored how the social mobilisations of the so-called Arab Spring had helped to combat one of the historical dilemmas of collective action – the fear of being left to stand alone – and to turn the average citizen into an empowered political activist with the capacity to organise.

Building on these premises, this article does not aim to provide an account of the revolutionary wave that swept countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Algeria and Morocco in 2011, albeit in different ways and to different extents. Instead, it will examine the events from two perspectives: the power of social mobilisation and the goal – less circumstantial now – of constructing citizenship. In contrast with the fatalism and fear that result from isolation and solitude, the capacity to unite makes us citizens and, thus, allows us to restore our individual dignity and channel collective wills. Is that what caused the revolutionary tsunami of 2011? Obviously, it is still too soon to tell, but we can nevertheless try to address this question and, thus, open a space for reflection.

A Historic Uprising

On 17 December 2010, the 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself after the police confiscated the fruit cart he used to make a living and feed his family. It was an act of both desperation and dignity. Thus began, in Tunisia, a wave of revolutionary movements that swept across North Africa and the Middle East. The depth and breadth of the process took most observers by surprise, due to both its internal strength and its ability to catch on first across the Mediterranean and, then, across the Atlantic. Once the initial surprise subsided, however, the experience was examined through the prism of the past, present and future.

At first glance, as noted by Hobsbawm, the Arab Spring was reminiscent of the revolutionary movements of 1848, but also of the turmoil of the 1960s in the United States and Europe and the processes of democratisation that took place in Latin America in the 1990s. These historical references help to interpret certain key factors, but they must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the uprisings of 2011 also unfolded under highly specific and diverse circumstances. They were revolutionary movements that arose to combat situations of political and social repression and, above all, to topple dictatorial regimes. In fact, in 2011, four of these dictators fled their countries or were executed: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia for twenty-three years; Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for thirty years; Ali Abdallah Salih, who had held power in Yemen for thirty-three years; and Muammar Gaddafi, who had been president of Libya for forty-three years.

This notwithstanding, the Arab Spring has proven to be quite contagious, inspiring similar movements in the international context. As Mohamed Aidor, a representative of the Comisiones Obreras (Worker

Commissions, CC OO) trade union in Madrid, acknowledged, "Tunisia was the big surprise; everything else followed in its wake." In other words, uprisings related to the past and unfolding in the present have also been able to project themselves into the future and, above all, to articulate certain frustrations and concerns that, in addition to reflecting the situations of specific countries, have given voice to working and middle classes around the world. The Arab mobilisations may have constituted a revolt against the oppression of specific entrenched dictatorships, but they also triggered a global backlash against the concentration of power in economic, financial and political elites.

This knock-on effect has not only put hope for change on the global agenda but also, perhaps even more importantly, has given hope to the people calling for this change. The uprisings have generated power, have capacitated and given confidence to a population that now sees itself as an active player in the transformation of its world. Social mobilisations affect the people who participate in them. They turn them into citizens who feel engaged and sufficiently empowered to stage a revolt. That is perhaps the most significant effect of any revolution. And it is one that, obviously, has a bearing on the future.

The Reasons for the (Un)expected Uprising

A discussion of the specific causes of each case goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, we can identify some of the shared reasons for this (un) expected uprising. First, most analysts agree that the impact of three decades of clearly neo-liberal positions and actions was an important factor. In Tunisia, for example, Bourguiba's 1956 model of authoritarian capitalism paved the way for the liberal restructuring carried out by Ben Ali from 1987 on. In Egypt, the reforms undertaken by Mubarak beginning in the 1980s had similar goals.

The neo-liberal policies of those years not only imposed a specific ideological discourse but also resulted in an ever more polarised and, thus, tense and confrontational social reality. Their impact on the increasingly subjugated and depressed populations can be seen in the Human Development Index and other poverty indicators. Once again, the case of Egypt is instructive. In the 1990s, some 40% of Egyptians were living below the absolute poverty line (i.e., on less than two dollars a day). It is a country in which 3% of the population accounts for more than 50% of all consumption and in which the dynamics of polarisation only intensified over this period.

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The uprisings, therefore, did not come out of nowhere, but rather stemmed from an experience that combined repression and a lack of civil and political liberties with a sharp social imbalance and the practical difficulties of everyday survival. Individual citizens and society at large were subjected to a prolonged and persistent process of chipping away at their material and moral conditions. The present was wretched, and there was no future to speak of; thus, the unexpectedness of the uprising was due more to the blindness intrinsic to the certainty of the status quo than to any actual analysis of the reality. The ingredients were all there, even though many people did not wish to see them. The uprising may have broken out by surprise, but that does not mean that there was no underlying dynamic, that the initial spark, the small flame that had been smouldering for years, could not have been detected.

The case of Egypt illustrates this idea quite nicely and shows that the "day of rage," in January 2011, was not a sporadic event but rather the culmination of at least a decade of protests and public awareness processes. In fact, the early 21st century saw the emergence of a solidarity movement with the second Intifada that, shortly thereafter, was strengthened by the protests against the war in Iraq. At the same time, the first decade of the new century was rife with movements calling for both civil and labour liberties and rights. The year 2004 saw the organisation of the fledgling pro-democracy movement Kefaya, while a 2006 strike in Mahalla culminated in the uprising of 2008. Over a period of ten years of labour protests, more than 200,000 workers were mobilised and some 3,000 illegal strikes were called. Thus, the subsequent "April 6 Movement," organised over the new social networks and largely led by ur-

ban university students, did not grow out of barren earth but rather soil nourished by years of labour struggles and democratic demands. It is this fertile ground that explains the uprising's power. This was the underlying wave that became the tsunami that triggered the process of mass demonstrations. A set of policies and a social reality combined with the seeds of a revolution, which ultimately sprouted under an alliance of workers and urban youth. The result, of course, was a revolutionary action that led to the partial collapse of the regime and, above all, the restoration of individual and collective dignity. Could this process have been foreseen? Certainly, with the benefit of hindsight, it was more foreseeable than we might have realised at the time.

Finally, this suspect surprise can also be viewed as yet another feature shared with the revolts and movements that subsequently caught on in certain Western countries. In a piece published in the Spanish daily *El País* on 30 December 2011, Sami Nair wrote:

> "These two major events, the Arab revolution and the crisis in Europe, only seem to be separate. In both cases, the same cry has been raised: respect for the right to dignity in an Arab world subject to military and police dictatorships, and respect for social dignity in a Europe subject to the dictatorship of the financial markets and the fecklessness of its political elites. What comes after 2011 will inevitably transpire in the echo of that cry of hope."

An Uprising with Multiple Actors

As noted above, the Arab Spring clearly had many actors: workers, the middle class, university students, women, etc. However, the tensions inherent to this mix have played out under the common standard of the demand for a process of modernisation and democratisation, the defence of social justice and the need to express and overcome a sense of individual frustration and a lack of collective prospects.

This notwithstanding, in the context of these diverse groups, educated urban youth have featured prominently, while workers have been relegated to the sidelines. The Mahalla workers may have been the first to mobilise and the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) may have been the first to articulate social demands, but both were quickly pushed off the front pages by the crowds gathering in the squares. These crowds marked both the emergence of new groups of actors and the first experiments with new forms of protest.

Thus, first, in keeping with postmodern logic, the actors were fragmented and individualised. It was the crowd itself that led the charge, without the types of mediation and leadership characteristic of more classical mobilisations. The protests were not led by trade unions or traditional social institutions, but rather anonymous individuals. This shaped the movement and gave it special strength, particularly given that the traditional mediating structures – both political and social – are currently undergoing a deep crisis of representation. The Arab Spring has shown that citizens can mobilise, and that their mobilisations can have a significant impact even in the absence of intermediaries. In other words, it is possible to act directly. This lesson spread quickly, and it soon made its way across the Mediterranean.

Second, in addition to the substitution of traditional mediating organisations, the mobilisations were leaderless. Or, at least, they lacked clear and visible leaders. Experience dictates that the effectiveness of a protest movement is tied to its having a top-down structure whereby a hierarchical leadership issues instructions and guides the actions of a group that would otherwise become disperse and unfocused. In the late 19th century, the French psychologist Le Bon wrote that masses are fit for action but cannot think and that they thus need some form of leadership to prevent them from becoming a mob.

In this regard, it is worth noting not only that in the Arab Spring it was the crowd itself that played the leading role, but also that the crowd did not require any sort of leadership to help it think, to guide it or to focus its proposals. In the academic jargon, we would say that these proposals have become a form of networking. Networks are horizontal structures devoid of relationships of dependence and independence; in other words, actors neither follow the instructions of a higher authority nor work in isolation. Instead, networks operate through relationships of interdependence in which each actor knows that it needs the others to achieve its goals but also understands that no single actor can impose its action strategy on the rest.

In such situations, coordination is not explicit and, thus, vertical leadership and mediating structures are not needed. Rather, coordination arises from shared objectives, mutual trust and the existence of

low-level leaders that articulate without overseeing. In many of the squares in which the Arab Spring played out, the collective action could be characterised thus: a group of individuals who needed each other to achieve shared goals and, above all, to generate confidence in both themselves and others with regard to their capacity for transformation. In networks, individuals are not executing agents but agents of change. This conceptual statement resonates with many of the uprisings examined here and has imbued them with strength and energy.

Finally, it has been postulated that the possibility of eliminating the intermediary structures, of operating directly as a network without vertical leadership, is closely related to the use of new technologies, to the fact that this was an *uprising 2.0*. The use of the Internet and of social networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube was what determined both the characteristics of the movement and who would emerge as its main actors. These tools made it possible to operate individually and as a network, while at the same time assigning leading roles to those people already used to a 2.0 lifestyle and relations. Upon closer analysis of the who and how of the 2011 revolts, the impact of these networks seems clear, although whether the central role they played has made the revolts "technodependent" or not is still up for debate. This dependence could give rise to biases when deciding whether or not to include certain social actors, and, above all, in the terminology of Zygmunt Bauman, it could make the movement too fluid and, thus, difficult to contain and channel. Indeed, the movement's fluidity is one of its main assets, but only insofar as it resists becoming shallow and steeped in the type of porous reality that would ultimately water it down. Only time will tell whether the Arab Spring has staying power or whether its own fluidity will dissipate and dilute it.

An Uprising to Construct Citizenship

In terms of content, it is worth noting how, in addition to the social and economic demands, the protesters were seeking the recognition of individual rights. Indeed, many authors have referred to the Arab Spring as an uprising to restore dignity, to shake off the fear of living under the yoke and to become recognised and engaged citizens. That is why this paper calls it an "uprising to construct citizenship."

In Western countries, recognition of citizenship rights has been used to analyse the dynamics of progress over the last three centuries. Thus, in keeping with Marshall's argument, the French and American revolutions made the 18th century the century of the struggle for civil rights; the 19th century was the century of the struggle for political rights; and the 20th century saw the construction of the welfare states that would foster social rights. In other words, civic, political and social citizenship were the three main revolutionary milestones of a world based on the recognition of individual rights and the importance of ensuring that each and every individual can lead a life of dignity and fulfilment.

Viewed from the outside, the Arab Spring in many ways seems to have packed the goals of three centuries of struggles and revolts into just a few weeks or months. First, the people gathering in the squares demanded that their liberties be recognised and that they thus be able to enjoy fully what we call civil rights. Given the authoritarian and often oppressive regimes against which they were rebelling, that was and still is the primary demand. Second, the Arab Spring has also been defined as a democratic revolution. The mobilised populations demanded political rights insofar as they sought to regain the power that had been usurped and illegitimately exercised by political and military elites. Finally, the social polarisation, the misery of many families and the lack of economic prospects crystallised in a third demand, namely, for social justice and collective rights. In short, restoring personal dignity requires creating citizens endowed with civil, political and social rights.

In the previous section, we saw how new forms of revolt have crossed the Mediterranean, leaping from the southern to the northern shore. Now we are seeing how the goals attained in the north through extensive historical processes have served as the foundation for the demands of the uprisings of the south. In this exchange of ideas and experiences, it is important to remember the enormous resistance that arises to this struggle for citizenship, to the demand for dignity that permeates the claims of the Arab Spring. To this end, in his splendid book *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, Hirschman reminds us that each of the three waves of *revolutionary* progress identified by Marshall was accompanied by strong reactions aimed at halting progress on the citizenship-building process. The counter-revolutionaries of the 18th century, the critical discourses of democracy that proliferated in the 19th century, and the neo-liberal positions that questioned the welfare

state in the 20th century were all political forces of the first order. The Arab uprisings must not underestimate the power of this resistance and, thus, must be prepared for a long and complex struggle.

An Unfinished Uprising

One year on – which is still too soon – the Arab Spring is clearly an unfinished and open-ended uprising. Contrary to some predictions, the movement has managed to survive; however, it faces significant challenges. In the case of some especially rocky regimes, such as Syria's, these challenges are very basic, but there is also the more generic challenge of deepening and strengthening the social, political and economic transformations that lay at the core of the revolt. The role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and of Ennahda in Tunisia also raises significant doubts, at least with regard to the demands of some key groups of actors, such as workers, the middle class or women. Nor is it clear what format and level of institutionalisation the grassroots mobilisations should now take on.

In short, the questions and contradictions are myriad, but the perception that things will never be the same, that there is no turning back, cannot be emphasised enough. That is the first great success of the movements and uprisings of 2011. In this regard, in the online article *Las revoluciones árabes de 2011* [The Arab Revolutions of 2011], J. M. Antentas wrote:

> "Along with the expansion of basic freedoms in Tunisia and Egypt and the fall of Gaddafi, the main accomplishment of the 'Arab Spring' is the faith it has restored in action and collective power, putting an end to the feelings of powerlessness and manipulation felt by most the population and workers."

This faith is one of the uprisings' main legacies, albeit a vulnerable one that could quickly fade away if visible and significant progress is not made. In any case, even today this faith in the power of the revolutionary movement, or, if you prefer, in the perception – hitherto entirely absent – that collective action is not only possible but also potentially useful and effective, can still be seen. This faith was one of the pillars of the movement and one of the aspects exported by the Arab Spring, first across the Mediterranean and, later, the Atlantic. The Arab uprisings sparked an international wave of protests, and they did so by showing that it was possible. The demands of this wave have been multiple and diverse, but all have shared, at least to a certain extent, a new culture of protest.

Thus, new formats have been assayed and the initiative has been regained in a context that goes beyond the realities of the Arab countries in which the mobilisations first arose. However, we must not forget the specific characteristics of those countries. The deficits of civil, political and social citizenship in them are glaring and hardly comparable to the situations found on the northern shore of the Mediterranean, where protests can often become a goal in themselves, inadvertently eroding the dramatic content of the initial demands. In some Western circles, the new protest culture is already being viewed as a triumph of marketing, which could distort the meaning of the revolt.

Notwithstanding these doubts and contradictions, there is no denying that 2011 was an exceptional year, a period in which certain ties that bound us to the past have been broken and in which cracks have been opened allowing us to glimpse the potential of the future. To borrow the terminology of Sami Nair, at the core of this transformation lies a shift from the political, bureaucratic and military elites to the people. Thus, the uprisings have contributed, as noted above, to the construction of citizenship and civil society, thereby facilitating access to modernity. To quote Nair:

> "[This shift] is in keeping with a contemporary and modern rhetoric: that of the rights of peoples to control their own destinies vis-à-vis their own state powers. That is why the rights of man, the ardent demand for citizenship and freedom of thought have been at the centre of the uprisings."

In other words, the revolution is, above all, democratic, but it will not stop there; it cannot control the forces of social transformation that sparked it. The uprising is not yet over and the jury is still out on its actual results, but it has begun to generate an awareness of citizenship. Once the engine of civil, political and social rights has been started, the process of transformation becomes a complex but inexorable journey.