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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTER OF THE "ARAB REVOLUTIONS" AND HOW THEY COULD BE STUDIED

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ABSTRACT: Over the last ten years, the masses have taken to the streets in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa, determining a rapid dislocation of the mechanisms that order societies and creating the potential conditions for deep transformations. Despite this, the results have been modest. Dealing with political revolutionary movements that have failed to ignite social revolutions, scholars have questioned whether these events can be regarded as revolutions and which theoretical instruments are the most appropriate to explore a changing region. This article discusses these issues. It does so in two ways. Firstly, the article criticises the most common understandings of revolution and proposes a different interpretation of the phenomenon. This is based on a three-step strategy, which moves beyond an evolutionist interpretation of history, takes into account different dimensions of revolutions, and distinguishes different types of revolution. Secondly, to study revolutions properly, the article proposes to combine insights from both structuralist approaches and microfoundational studies. This allows to develop a moving picture of the revolutionary situation that does not overlook class and institutional aspects. Scholars can do this by scaling down the level of analysis from the outcome that revolution produces to the mechanism that puts it in motion.

KEYWORDS: Arab revolutions, Arab Springs, Arab uprisings, Mass mobilizations, Revolution, Revolutionary movements

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1. Introduction

Millions of people have poured into the streets in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) over the last decade. Marches, rallies, sit-ins, strikes, assemblies and occupations of squares have become recurrent events for many citizens of the region. Mass participation in politics has also gone hand in hand with a rapid, albeit short-lasting in many cases, process of self-emancipation of marginalised groups. In a development that was simply unthinkable just a few days before the outbreak of these revolutionary movements, entrenched hierarchies were deeply challenged, politicised arts flourished everywhere, and hitherto voiceless people turned out to make their opinions known loudly.

As documented, episodes of contentious politics are not something new for the MENA (Chalcraft 2016). At the same time, the magnitude, diffusion and intensity of what has happened throughout the 2010s are arguably without precedent. For analytical reasons, two main waves might be identified. The first started in Tunisia in late 2010 and rapidly spread like wildfire, reaching several countries in the region and forcing out of power long-standing autocrats in Tunisia itself, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The second wave emerged first in Sudan in December 2018, reaching Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon in the course of the following year. In this case as well, "presidents for life" in Sudan and Algeria and prime ministers in Iraq and Lebanon resigned out of necessity. In both waves, initial huge hopes covering such different aspects as social justice, political freedom and civil liberties have rapidly faded away. There are several reasons for this. Monarchical regimes in the Gulf as well as in Jordan and Morocco proved robustly stable (Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds 2015). Prolonged and bloody civil wars that saw the direct intervention of many regional and international powers developed in Syria, Yemen and Libya (Heydemann 2018). In some of these territories in which state institutions broke down, armed militias and terrorist groups have proliferated. The rapid rise of the so-called Islamic State in a wide swath of territory in Iraq and Syria has been by far the most spectacular example of this trend (Gerges 2016). Even in those countries in which the fall of presidents and prime ministers sped up the process of change, the situation has proved more complicated than expected. This is obviously the case in Libya and Yemen, but it holds true elsewhere as well. Tomasi di Lampedusa's cruel verdict – change everything to change nothing – seems to describe the current situation prevailing in Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, whilst military control of political life is vast in Sudan and overwhelmingly dominant in Egypt (Alexander 2021). The emergence of procedural democracy in Tunisia stands out therefore as a significant counter-trend. Even in this case, however, social justice and wealth redistribution, let alone class reconfiguration, have remained completely unachieved (Beinin 2016).

Analysing the context as briefly sketched out here, regional specialists have confronted two issues, which are partially linked. First and foremost, they have sought to grasp the nature of the two waves of mass protests that have taken place in the region over the last ten years, questioning whether these events were revolutions or something else, such as mass protests, uprisings or upheavals. If the former is the case, in what sense then should the Arab revolutions be regarded as revolutionary? Secondly, scholars have struggled to find useful theoretical and methodological instruments to deal with a rapidly changing region, questioning whether the focus should be on the outcome, on the behaviour of political parties, social classes, and state actors, or rather on social mechanisms at the basis of the revolutionary dynamics.

This article addresses these issues and proceeds as follows. It firstly discusses what a revolution is, showing how the events in the Arab world have challenged common interpretations and analyses of revolutions. The second part introduces a three-step strategy to grasp the actual nature of a revolution. It is based on an anti-evolutionist interpretation of history, discusses the key dimensions of revolutionary phenomena, and distinguishes different types of revolution. The article then explores how studies on

revolution tend to provide either structural explanations that are static (historical snapshots) or dynamic interpretations that pay little attention to previous social and institutional transformations (decontextualised moving pictures). To overcome these shortcomings, the fourth part combines insights coming from both structural and microfoundational approaches and focuses on the two constitutive components of the mechanism that puts in motion a revolution: class and institutional transformations, on the one hand, and the evolution and convergence of a broad opposition, on the other. The conclusion reviews the main aspects discussed in the article.

2. The disputed and changing character of revolution

Revolution is a modern phenomenon. In the course of Roman history extending over a millennium, for instance, only three major slave revolts occurred (Davidson 2012). None of these was in any sense successful. The meaning associated with the term “revolution” till the 16th century – which referred to a planet’s orbital motion around its rotation axis, a movement that ended where it started – shows how sporadic political revolutions were. The situation has gradually changed since the 16th century, when the word revolution started to mean a generic change in the affairs of a state. It was, however, the taking over of the Bastille in Paris on 14 July 1789 that imposed today’s familiar notion of revolution as a radical transformation of (at least) the political structure of a country imposed by the action of the masses (Sewell 1996). Not coincidentally, the changing character of what a revolution is and is not evolved together with a growing tendency of the lower classes to contest the existing order (Davidson 2012). The period running from Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the Americas to 1960 witnessed 256 years of revolution out of 468 (Anievas 2015). Since then, the pace of revolutionary events has accelerated even more. Between 1980 and 2010, Beissinger (2013) estimates 39 revolutions worldwide, whilst 2019 alone saw major revolts, if not proper revolutions, in Algeria, Chile, Ecuador, Hong Kong, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan (Choonara 2020). Radical mass mobilisations have therefore emerged as a recurrent feature in modern societies, leading to a constantly changing understanding of the notion of revolution. As is often the case in social sciences, great historical episodes provide the empirical material to critically re-examine the appropriateness of what a notion means. In this regard, what has happened in the MENA throughout the 2010s has shown how the overwhelmingly dominant understanding of revolution is not adequate to deal with these events and merits being thought again.

In the decades before the outbreak of revolutionary movements in the Arab world, the character of revolution had changed dramatically, tending towards the “political” rather than the “social” type (Beissinger 2013). After the revolutionary successes in Iran and Nicaragua in 1979, no revolution has come close to producing, let alone achieving, transformations beyond the form and leadership of the government. Indeed, most post-1979 revolutions have resembled compact urban uprisings that articulated demands for greater civil and political rights or technical solutions to policy problems, leaving social justice, political ideologies and class issues on the sidelines. To deal with this situation, scholars have significantly downgraded the threshold of what qualifies as a revolution, often equating it to “mere” regime change from below (Lawson 2005; Nepstad 2011; Ritter 2015). At a first glance, the Middle Eastern and North African events of the 2010s confirmed this trend: mass mobilisations that were not anchored in any broad ideological view of the world and whose trajectory was reformist and technocratic in terms of strategy and vision for change (Bayat 2017). There is hardly any country in the region, moreover, that seems better off in social terms today.

By looking deeper, however, it emerges that the Arab revolutions have been significantly different from their most recent predecessors in many respects. Three aspects are particularly relevant. First is the unparalleled social intensity of Middle Eastern and North African revolutions. These were class-based

uprisings in which protesters did not rule out political violence in advance, also leading to bloody clashes with state apparatuses (Goldstone 2011; Ketchley 2017). Secondly, not only were the dominant states in the international system scarcely supportive of the revolutions, but in many cases regional and extra-regional powers did everything they could to halt the process and favour counter-revolutionary forces (Teti and Gervasio 2011; Allinson 2019a). The third and last element concerns the fact that Middle Eastern and North African revolutions did not result, with the exception of Tunisia, in some degree of broader civil and political rights (Brownlee et al. 2015). In other words, the Arab revolutions do not resemble what George Lawson (2005) calls the “negotiated revolutions” of 1980–2010.

In reaction to this, there has been a resurgence of outcome-focused and process-oriented approaches. The former draws inspiration from Theda Skocpol’s (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*. According to her, social revolutions are “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structure, [...] in part carried through by class-based revolts from below”, whilst political revolutions “transform state structures but not social structures, and they are not accomplished through class conflict” (Ibid.: 4). We shall deal with the appropriateness of this distinction below. For the moment, it is enough to state that Skocpol’s emphasis is entirely on the outcome the revolutionary process produces. This raises problems, however, both in relation to the notion of failed revolution, which becomes nonsensical once the success of a revolution is “the primary determinant of its definition” (De Smet 2016: 74), and with regard to counter-revolution, seen as possible only after the establishment of a new order (Allinson 2019a). The adoption of a fully outcome-focused approach leads therefore to incorrectly conclude that neither revolutions nor counter-revolutions occurred in North Africa in the last decade (Beinin 2013; Roberts 2013).

Process-oriented approaches reject, on the contrary, the view of revolution as a single moment of rupture. Revolutionary processes are characterised by continuous ups and downs, making it impossible to judge whether the Arab revolutions have been successful or not in the short run (Abdelrahman 2014; Bennani-Chraïbi 2017). There are two reasons for this. First is the fact that these mass mobilisations created, for the first time in decades, a new horizon of expectations and political imagination that will take time to grow (Haugbølle and Bandak 2017). Secondly, in a view that Achcar (2016) has supported the most, the blockage of development in the MENA is likely to determine continuous cycles of upsurges and backlashes that might go on for years, if not decades. The outbreak of a second wave of revolutionary politics in 2018-19 seems to vindicate this perspective. Nevertheless, once the point of view switches from the region as a whole to single countries, a fully process-oriented approach shows its limits. Revolution broke out in many MENA countries over the last decade; yet, no country has lived in a continuous revolutionary situation. This suggests how revolutions are periods of relatively brief duration in which competition for power between the existing ruling class and its challengers is relatively balanced, coming to an end “when power can no longer be *fundamentally* questioned” (Thomassen 2012: 684).

In conclusion, none of the approaches briefly discussed here seems without shortcomings. Whilst legacies of revolution can last for decades and successful ones might become models for revolutionaries in other countries (Sohrabi 1995), they are bounded phenomena. By overemphasising the *long durée* of revolutions, however, process-oriented accounts tend to represent the outbreak of a revolutionary situation as a mere acceleration of an already ongoing process that has been anticipated by a long series of strikes and protests, whilst the success-failure dichotomy is rejected on the basis that revolutions are seen as completely open processes that produce long-term effects (Abdelrahman 2014; Haugbølle and Bandak 2017). Such an interpretation is likely therefore to overlook both the onset and ending point of a revolution. Outcome-focused approaches grasp the latter, but miss the fact that revolutions are processes that evolve over time rather than pure events. Contemporary interpretations of revolutions do not offer a better theoretical lens either. By describing a very specific type of revolution, they refer to phenomena that present few similarities

with the Arab revolutions. We are therefore left with the same question that opened this section: What do we mean by revolution today? The answer provided to this leads directly to exploring what the present article regards as the revolutionary character of the Arab revolutions.

3. How revolutionary were the “Arab revolutions”?

Whilst classic and contemporary definitions of revolution do not specify in any way the direction of change (Huntington 1968; Skocpol 1979; Foran 2005; Lawson 2019), scholars tend to have a specific image of what constitutes a revolution worth studying. It is in fact leftist social revolutions that are studied the most, whilst revolutionary movements that do not fit this model or fail to produce deep change are simply not regarded as revolutionary (Beck 2018). To a large extent, this bias is the product of a linear understanding of history. In a view that vulgar and evolutionist Marxism has championed, all history is strictly represented as progress: a mechanical process that, as a mere effect of the growing contradictions between the forces and relations of production, would automatically determine the replacement of a mode of production with the following one and ultimately lead to socialism (Hobsbawm 1965). Such an understanding of history leaves, however, no room for revolutionary movements that were neither socialist nor successful. To explore the Arab revolutions, which do not match the leftist social model of revolution, it is therefore crucial to break with an evolutionist interpretation of history. It is the Marxist tradition itself that provides interesting insights in this regard.

Whilst escaping from the Nazi regime and just before committing suicide, Walter Benjamin (1940: 402) proposes one of the strongest anti-deterministic interpretations of history. According to him, revolutions are not “the locomotives of world history”, as Marx famously stated, but rather represent the desire of the passengers on the train to pull the “emergency brake”. This means that revolutions do not emerge as the “natural” or “inevitable” result of economic and technical progress, but rather are critical interruptions of a trajectory that otherwise would lead to full disaster, as the abyss of devastating environmental and climate catastrophes that the world is rapidly approaching reminds us today. In this regard, contemporary revolutions are first and foremost the “shout of ‘enough’” (Lawson 2019: 15). As Löwi (2019) makes clear, Benjamin contrasts the eternal waiting for the emergence of a revolutionary situation that never comes with an open conception of history as human praxis in which a revolutionary potential exists at any time. It is precisely the combination of this anti-deterministic and open-ended interpretation of history that helps make sense of the last decade, in which many regions of the world have been in a constant state of turmoil (see Rivetti and Cavatorta in this Special Issue), but little has changed. Within this trend, the MENA represents a paradigmatic case.

A second important aspect to understand the revolutionary character of the Arab revolutions is to explore the two key dimensions in revolution: movement and change (Bayat 2017). Every revolution in history has begun with a revolutionary situation (Tilly 1978). However, as Barker (1987: 220) makes clear “by no means every revolutionary situation ends with a successful revolution”. For this reason, scholars need to separate the beginning of a revolution from its end (De Smet 2016; Beck 2018). In other words, they have to point out what accounts for the outbreak of a revolution and when a revolutionary situation has to be regarded as successful. As Sewell (1996) argues, the most indisputable sign of the outbreak of a revolutionary situation is the rapid dislocation of previous existing formal and informal mechanisms that order society. This happens once the masses, which in ordinary times tend to be passive bystanders of decisions taken on their behalf by others, enter the political arena, creating the potential conditions for the establishment of a completely different order (Trotsky 1932; Foran 2005; Thomassen 2012). In many cases, the assessment of such a situation is relatively easy. The revolution started on 25 January 2011 in Egypt; on 22 February 2019 in

Algeria; and on 17 October 2019 in Lebanon. In other situations, smaller events might create a snowball effect that eventually leads to actual revolutionary situations. Retrospectively, the first significant episode of contentious politics or a qualitative leap in the magnitude of protests might be taken as the symbolic starting points of revolution. An example of the former is Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, whilst mass mobilisation in Syria's capital on 15 March 2011 represents a paradigmatic case of the latter.

This interpretation of what marks the outbreak of revolution contrasts with Tilly's (1978) approach. According to him, it is the emergence of a phase of dual power, in which more than one bloc effectively claims control over a polity, that characterises a revolutionary situation. Some scholars have highlighted how multiple sovereignties effectively developed in a few Arab revolutions, such as in Tunisia, Egypt or Syria (Bennani-Chraïbi 2017). In the former two countries, the occupations known as Kasbah I and II in Tunis, and the 18 days of Tahrir Square in Cairo, are implicitly or explicitly seen as instances of dual power (Zemni 2015; Ketchley 2017). In any case, the duration, diffusion and articulation of these radical democratic experiments from below were not sufficient to give birth to actual and alternative centres of power. The situation was significantly different in Syria, where the implosion of Assad's regime in some provinces by mid-2012 led to the formation of revolutionary councils that provided emergency services and organised the communities. However, due to many factors such as mass killings, international military interventions and NGO-ization of revolution, they gradually lost momentum (Hearn and Dallal 2019). Multiple sovereignties have therefore to be considered as a development that might happen in the course of a revolutionary process. Not all revolutionary situations determine a phase of dual power and its emergence does not offer a guarantee of success. When multiple sovereignties do not take root, however, radical transformations are extremely unlikely. This leads to the issue of what a revolutionary outcome is.

To deal with this aspect, it is useful to move on to the third and last step in our strategy, which introduces a distinction between different types of revolution. The "classic" dichotomy between political and social revolutions provides an interesting starting point, even though the relationship between the two concepts remains complex and scholars disagree on their relative extension. In the already mentioned definitions that Skocpol (1979) proposes, a political revolution involves the transformation of the state, but not social structures, whilst a social revolution transforms both. Davidson (2012: 492), on the contrary, narrows the scope of political revolutions, arguing that they are not about transformation but control of the state, and broadens the scope of social revolutions so that they involve "a change from one socioeconomic structure to another". By relying on Draper's (1978) distinction, this article argues that political revolutions are those revolutions that determine changes in the form and leadership of government, whilst social revolutions also involve a basic change in the mode of production that might take place as a consequence of the transfer of political power to a new class. At the same time, it seems useful to reduce the very broad character of political revolutions in Draper's (Ibid.: 18) formulation, which spans "from those involving no social side to those with a very important social element", and introduce another type of revolution that falls somewhere in between the two polar models. It is a political revolution that involves a strong social soul, leading to a change in the social stratum within the ruling class, in the ideological and symbolic references that it makes to legitimate itself, and partially also in the relationship among classes. It stops short, however, of transforming social relations of production. For the lack of a better name, I call this type of revolution economic-ideological revolution. The 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1989-91 Eastern European revolutions are paradigmatic examples here. In both cases, there was a sweeping ideological shift (from Western-inspired modernisation to Islamism and from formally "socialism" to market economy respectively), a significant change in the institutional framework (from monarchy to semi-presidential republic with absolutist features in Iran and from one-party authoritarian regimes to multi-party bourgeois democracies in

Eastern Europe) and, most importantly, a somehow significant reshuffle in the relations among classes, with some groups benefitting, such as the *bazaari* (a broad network of merchants and traders) and co-opted sectors of the working class in Iran while others declining, such as middle and low ranking bureaucrats in Eastern Europe (Lawson 2019). In any case, the re-organisation of ownership and control of capital did not lead in these two cases to the emergence of a different mode of production and thereby these episodes fall short of becoming social revolutions.

The use of different types of revolutions allows scholars to study the same phenomenon from different points of view, avoiding the risk of defining as equally successful revolutions that transform societies in qualitatively different ways. The Tunisian revolution, for instance, is a successful political revolution, but it can also be analysed as a failed economic-ideological revolution. Many revolutionary situations, however, are simply unsuccessful, not even affecting the political level. Three main types of revolutionary situations can be identified here. First is a situation in which the ruling class is able to re-establish its power in more or less the same way as before, as the Algerian case seems to suggest at the current stage (Volpi 2020). The second scenario concerns the ability of the dominant coalition, or parts of it, to rebuild new and partially different structures and mechanisms of domination that the revolutionary movement had successfully dislocated. This process is called counter-revolution. Egypt exemplifies it, whilst Syria represents its most violent manifestation (Allinson 2019a; Hearn and Dallal 2019). Finally, there are also revolutionary situations that do not lead to the establishment of a new order, as the Libyan and Yemeni civil wars show (Heydemann 2018).

4. "Historical snapshots" and "de-contextualised moving pictures"

Starting from Jack Goldstone's (1980) seminal article, studies on revolution are conventionally divided into generations of scholarship (see also Foran 2005; Lawson 2019). The first is associated with natural historians such as George Pettee (1938) and Crane Brinton (1938), who provided a rich narrative of some of the major revolutions up to their day but failed to explore the reasons for the revolutionary outbreaks. After World War II, a second generation of scholars focused on the relationship between modernisation and revolutionary situations in the Third World (Huntington 1968; Gurr 1970). As an effect of the vagueness of the concept of modernisation and the problematic overlapping between political violence and revolution, the third generation switched attention towards state breakdown and structural contradictions, such as commercialisation of agriculture, international pressures and population growth (Wolf 1969; Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991). The fourth generation of studies on revolution is valued, on the contrary, for having proposed a new amalgam among international factors, structural conditions, regime types, mobilising ideologies and collective actors (Dix 1984; Parsa 2000; Goodwin 2001; Lawson 2005). In particular, as a reaction to the overwhelming focus on the peasantry of many contributions of the previous generation, these studies have underlined the crucial role that broad and geographically diffuse coalitions might have in revolutionary situations. What appears as the actual manifesto of these theoretical reflections is Foran's (2005) *Taking Power*. According to him, Third World revolutions emerge out of five individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: dependent development; an exclusionary, personalistic state; political cultures of resistance; economic downturns; and world-systemic opening. If these five conditions are met, Foran (Ibid.: 23) argues, a "multi-class, cross-racial, and all-gendered coalition of aggrieved social forces" takes shape and carries out a revolutionary project. Whilst Foran's study pays attention to structural conditions and how they change over time, it tends to see the coming together of different political groups and social classes as following in a deterministic way from the matching of the list of supposedly crucial factors. In this perspective, coalitions form once and for all. Yet, this is not what happens in a revolution. As

an effect of the activity of the masses, social and political forces seek to adapt to a constantly changing scenario, giving birth to implicit and short-lasting convergences. In this regard, it might be concluded how Foran's study represents a good example of historical snapshot. It focuses on long-term processes and therefore is historical. It remains, however, a snapshot for being ultimately reducible to a static checklist of five factors, failing to provide a truly "moving picture" (Pierson 2004: 2) or "moving spectacle" (Lawson 2019: 10) of the revolutionary situation.

Some studies on the Arab revolutions have similarly proposed a static interpretation of the dynamics that lead to the emergence of a broad and heterogeneous anti-regime convergence, overlooking the relevance of interactions among social, political and state forces. In his comparison of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan revolutions, for instance, Goldstone (2011) points out the key role that cross-class and cross-regional coalitions played. In a rather similar way, others have highlighted how the magnitude of the movements and their nonviolent character increased the costs of regime repression and thereby made the success of protests more likely (Nepstad 2013). Allinson (2015) provides the finest comparison of different regime trajectories that starts from the balance of class forces, whereas Durac (2015) was probably the first scholar to move beyond class divides and take into consideration parties as well. By specifically comparing revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, scholars have also noticed the more middle-class character of the latter (Beissinger, Jamal and Mazur 2015).

These studies provide important insights into the character of the Arab revolutions, but stop short of analysing these events over time and breaking a rigidly linear understanding of the structure of time. In particular, they tend to represent the formation of coalitions in revolutionary situations as a static process in which there is a single moment that determines the emergence of these broad social and political alliances. Some interesting answers to these shortcomings have been provided by the so-called microfoundational approach.

In response to the so-called fourth generation of studies on revolution, contemporary scholars have created a new agenda of research that focuses on processes, the sequence of events and interactions among actors (Kurzman 2004; Bennani-Chraïbi 2017; Volpi 2017; Volpi and Clark 2019). According to some, this can be identified as a hitherto unacknowledged fifth generation (Allinson 2019b). Others have rejected this view (Abrams 2019). In any case, what is more relevant for the discussion here is the fact that this stream of research – often known as microfoundational studies – has strongly rejected the attempt to search for structural elements that might explain retroactively the outbreak of revolution. In this perspective, it focuses on elements such as emotions which get activated during protests, such as the sense of duty to counter repression, arrests or even the murder protesters, which set in motion an unpredictable series of events, despite the limited relevance that the first rounds of protests have for the later and much wider revolutionary processes (Sewell 1996). This happens, according to Kuran (1995), because in non-democratic regimes, the people tend to keep their political preferences private, thus resulting into unpredictable processes; whilst Kurzman (2004) emphasises how the contingency and unpredictability of revolutionary situations determine very rapid changes in what people believe. What becomes crucial is therefore to study the lived experience of the revolutionary situation and how the first acts of transgression are collectively elaborated as a symbol of the people's will at a later stage (Sewell 1996).

A number of studies have adopted these theoretical lenses to analyse the two revolutionary waves in the MENA over the last decade. In his book on revolutions in North Africa, for instance, Volpi (2017) highlights how the identity of actors cannot be taken for granted, but rather it is also the product of a new situation created by the rapid dislocation of formal and informal mechanisms of domination. To understand how more people might be induced to join an ongoing protest movement, scholars have pointed to either emotions (Pearlman 2013) or protesters' overrated perception of the weakness of the regime (Weyland 2012), whilst

the development of an interactionist perspective has allowed to consider the point of view of players, their identities, culture and emotions seriously (Volpi and Clark 2019). By studying the formation of large coalitions, Abdelrahman (2014) has drawn attention to the relevance of the gradual accumulation of revolutionary energies that spanned a decade in Egypt. Others have instead highlighted how the formation of broad opposition movements is the combined effect of the spread of mobilisation and divisions within the repressive apparatuses (Bennani-Chraïbi 2017) and how such a development is capable of subverting the segmentation that authoritarian regimes implement (Berriane and Duboc 2019).

All these accounts draw attention to revolution as a process and seek to understand how the revolutionary dynamics evolve over time. At the same time, they suffer from two main weaknesses. First is a scarce interest in the economic, political and social context in which revolutions take place. Many of these studies are dynamic in reference to the revolutionary period, yet static when they deal with the pre-revolutionary phase. While it could be the case, as Pierson (2004: 13) underlines, that “some social processes have little significance until they attain a critical mass, which may then trigger major change”, this does not mean that nothing happens before the outbreak of a revolution. In contrast to all previous modes of production, capitalism has a strong tendency to revolutionise the relations of production and thereby transform the whole society (Lukács 1923). This means that there is an unending change in the relative balance of force among the various factions of the propertied classes, between these and the lower classes, and at the institutional level. Secondly, as the recurrent use of words such as individuals, players and people suggest, the role that political forces and social classes play in a revolution is often overlooked in microfoundational analyses. As an effect, they risk missing the different weights that different constituencies have in society. When workers strike, for instance, they interrupt the process of capitalist accumulation and in so doing they are likely to be much more relevant than other classes or groups (Valenzuela 1989). One person counts once in the ballot box, but this is never the case in the course of a revolution, where the totality is not simply the sum of its parts, and the political leadership of a movement is as relevant as the sociological background of protesters. Seen in this perspective, microfoundational studies appear as decontextualised moving pictures.

5. The social mechanism of revolution

Major political events such as revolutions are generated by causal processes that are extremely complex and context dependent, reducing the possibility to formulate general laws (Hall 2003). In this regard, it might be fruitful to scale down the level of abstraction from outcomes to mechanisms (Elster 1989). That is, scholars should not search for regularities across all cases, but shed light on how processes unfold and only subsequently underline similarities and differences (Tilly 1995). By starting from the view that social life unfolds over time and that social processes have distinctly temporal dimensions (Pierson 2004), this article argues in favour of “reading history forward”. This means moving beyond the attempt to retroactively explain the occurrence of a specific outcome and adopt an *ex-ante* perspective in which the positions that key social and political groups take at critical moments is fully assessed with the scope to reconstruct the actual support behind the various positions. The overall premise is that there is no revolution in history that has ever been born as necessarily successful or doomed. Revolutions are open-ended processes that must be studied over time, through a careful reconstruction of the interactions among social, political and state actors. This might happen through a focus on what the present article regards as the basic social mechanism at work in a revolution and that, for analytical reasons, can be split into its two constitutive components: class and institutional transformations that lead to the outbreak of a revolutionary movement; and how a broad protest convergence evolves and transforms over time. The former has been the main object of analysis of the fourth generation of studies on revolution, while microfoundational studies have mainly investigated the latter. It is

through a combination of these two approaches that a richer and more complex explanation of revolution can emerge. How this can effectively happen is briefly suggested in the remaining part of this section.

In their attempt to explain the outbreak of revolutionary movements in the MENA, many scholars have underlined how the region has moved rather homogeneously from state-led development to market-friendly policies, leading to some common trends, such as the growth of an unproductive, state-dependent and rent-seeking bourgeoisie, the numerical decline of state employees, and the substantive increase of informal jobs (Achcar 2013; Hanieh 2013). Macro-economic analyses tend, however, to overlook how the class structure of the various countries has changed differently over the last decades, determining, for instance, the transformation of the armed forces into a bourgeoisie-in-arms in Egypt, the emergence of a capitalist class fully connected to international circuits in the Gulf countries, or the sharp decline of manufacturing employment in Algeria (Alexander 2021). To fully understand a revolution, it is therefore important to move beyond general economic trends and explore what happens within the capitalist class, whether some specific factions emerge within its ranks, how the balance of power among bourgeois factions changes, and the structural reconfigurations of the working and lower classes. Another important element is the institutional setting, which regards the mechanisms through which power is achieved and maintained. There are here factors as different as the form of state and government, the holding of elections and their degree of competitiveness, and whether opposition parties are repressed and to what extent. The key assumption is that different institutional structures provide different incentives to social, political and state actors. Even in this case, however, non-democratic regimes that show common traits might work differently. In 2010, for instance, Egypt and Tunisia were republican states, presidential governments and regularly held multiparty elections. Yet, due to historical and contingent factors, Ennahda was slightly more than a party in exile in Ben Ali's Tunisia, whilst the Muslim Brotherhood was by far the most important political organisation in Egypt (Wolf 2017). Once a revolutionary movement broke out, this element created a very different capacity of the Islamists to participate in protests, affecting in turn the behaviour of all other actors.

The second aspect regards the evolution and transformation of revolutionary movements in the course of a revolution. There are two main aspects here. On the one hand, the forces that take part in a protest movement vary over time. In other words, the revolutionary convergence tends to attract different classes and parties at different stages of its development (Berriane and Duboc 2019; Del Panta 2020). Assessing how a revolutionary network evolves and the strength of any constituency *vis-à-vis* the others is important to comprehend why some mass uprisings are successful in getting rid of dictators, but others are not, and to explore the different trajectories of revolutions. On the other hand, pursuing different ideological and material goals, social forces and political parties that might coalesce against a common enemy are likely to break up once this unifying interest disappears. Revolutionary convergences are therefore short-term and contingent, leading to numerous reshuffles and splits. In many cases, the emerging divisions among what Clark (2010: 101) calls "strange bedfellows" are the results of conflicting views and goals. In others, however, new cleavages might emerge as a product of what actually happens in the streets (Berriane and Duboc 2019). Ultimately, to transform a revolutionary situation into a successful revolution, some components of the revolutionary convergence that emerged against the previous regime have to take power. If this is the case, which components are able to do so and the relative balance of force among them, determine the type of revolution.

6. Conclusion

Studies on revolutions remain underdeveloped in social sciences. There are multiple reasons for this. One of the most important, however, is a growing tendency in the discipline to see revolutions as an extreme

appendix of other forms of social change: from uprisings to civil wars and *coup d'états* to movements from below. This has determined, in turn, significant transformations in the understanding of what a revolution is and in the way in which it should be studied. In particular, the view that revolutions have to be analysed as an autonomous and independent phenomenon has come under attack over the last decades. A partial reason for that was the moderate, reformist and prevalently “political” character of many revolutionary episodes between 1980 and 2010.

What has happened in the MENA over the last ten years has challenged this view. As soon as the masses took to the streets in many countries of the region, a rapid dislocation of the mechanisms of domination developed. Regimes under attack as well as regional and international powers did their best to halt these radical and class-based movements, leading to an unprecedented level of social and political conflict. In the end, revolutionary movements failed to revolutionise societies, raising the question whether the Arab events were revolutions. This article has addressed this issue, showing how the last decade in the MENA has been a revolutionary period. To explore this, a three-step strategy has been proposed. Starting from Benjamin’s view of what a revolution is, the article has firstly embraced an anti-positivist interpretation of history, representing revolutions as emergency breaks rather than locomotives. The second step has concerned the discussion of the two key dimensions of any revolutionary phenomena: movement and change. This allows to separate the beginning of a revolution from its end, making conceptually possible the idea of unsuccessful revolutions – that is, revolutionary situations that failed to deliver revolutionary outcomes. Finally, the article has distinguished different types of successful revolutions. In addition to the classic dichotomy between political and social revolutions, a third type of revolution, termed as economic-ideological revolution, has been suggested.

A second and related topic that the article has explored in detail is how revolutions should be studied. In this regard, it has shown how the fourth generation of studies on revolution tend to mainly propose historical snapshots in which the analysis of structural transformations comes at the price of overlooking the dynamic character of the revolutionary situation, while microfoundational studies propose “decontextualised moving pictures” in which the revolutionary situation is studied in a dynamic way, but little attention is paid to the social and economic context. By combining the main points of strength of these two theoretical traditions, studies on revolution might benefit significantly. A plausible solution to build a bridge between the fourth generation and microfoundational studies, this article has argued, is to scale down the level of analysis from the outcome that revolutions produce, to the social mechanism that sets in motion the phenomenon. This means to study how class and institutional transformations lead to the outbreak of a revolutionary movement and how its internal composition in social and political terms evolve over time. In so doing, scholars can provide a dynamic and changing picture of revolution, which remains nevertheless grounded in a structuralist perspective.

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