

## Has the Middle Class Been a Motor of the Arab Spring?

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The section “Anti/Thesis” juxtaposes two rivaling positions on a controversial issue related to the topic in focus. Due to the number of recent academic debates which address the role of the middle class in the Arab uprisings, this issue’s “Anti/Thesis” is dedicated to the controversy around the argument which casts the middle class as “motor of the Arab Spring.” While Benoît Challand argues that the constellation of actors in the uprisings of 2011 was too complex to be reduced to the middle class, Rachid Ouaisa understands the middle class not as a driving force *per se*, but as the central group of supporters for a political force.

## ANTI-THESIS: The False Question of the Middle Class

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Scholars of revolutions or of so-called democratic transitions all face the thorny question of what specific role classes play in the reshaping of political and social systems at critical junctures. Often the middle class is seen as a necessary stepping stone on which new alliances are forged, and thus becomes an essential “ingredient” for political change.

In this short text, I would like to offer a different view than that offered in the *Thesis* section. My argument is that it is both mis-

leading to expect, and difficult to identify, a clear role for the middle class in complex events such as those of the Arab uprisings. Furthermore, the transnational ramifications of class-making are so significant in the Arab Middle East that it becomes impossible to locate or pin down a clear role for the middle class within domestic borders. One is forced instead to adopt a larger, regional and international focus to understand how, and which classes are differently involved in these moments of upheaval. The specificities of Arab political and economic systems force us thus to transcend any too-narrow methodological nationalism. I will therefore concentrate on two sets of arguments: the first questioning normative expectations around middle classes, and the second pointing at external factors such as economic rents and the existence of a transnational bourgeoisie whose span of action and influence is not limited to domestic borders. Let us start with normative views accompanying discourses on the middle class.

There are many interpretations of what role class plays in the making and unfolding of revolutions. The danger is to selectively examine moments when the middle class appears a key component in leading political change; one could, however, select other episodes of such rebellions that

shed a less favorable light on middle classes. With regard to the Arab uprisings of 2011, some of these analyses force parallels with European history and try to defend the view that the middle class has been a motor of the Arab Spring. If by this we mean to assess whether the middle class was a *trigger* and essential component of the wave of protests, it is hard to argue against such view. Revolutions have by and large been bourgeois events—and the original moment of the Arab uprisings fits this pattern, with vast sections of the middle class (though not only) in the early months of 2011 taking to the streets for their first time—from Sanaa to Tunis, and from Cairo to Manama. Indeed, even in the latter case, where revolution is usually described in simplistic terms of a Shiite-Sunni divide, the initial protest in Bahrain included not just the disgruntled local Shiite population, but also segments of the Sunni middle class as well as organized labor (Achcar 162; Lynch 136-37). Without the support of (at least) portions of liberal professions and middle class, no revolution is likely to occur—and this has been the case in all Arab countries in 2011.

If, however, we are asking whether the middle class has supported a *continuous effort* toward more social justice and a structural change in the pattern of eco-

nomical and political redistribution, it is obvious that the middle class has not at all been a motor for the Arab uprisings. Two series of episodes can substantiate this claim. On the one hand, a look at the role of lower classes in these revolts shows the complex and overlapping composition of political activism. On the other, recent events—like those in Egypt during the summer of 2013—cast doubt on the automatically positive expectation (in terms of transition and democratization) that is often attached to middle class.

In the first series, it is obvious that the marginalized and lower classes are the ones willing to exert political pressure to keep the motor of the Arab uprisings going, so to say. Think of Tunisia, where youth and “marginalized Tunisians” were pivotal in contributing to the second phase of protests, after Ben Ali had departed the country when the second Qasbah protests in February and March 2011 forced acceptance of the fall elections and the drafting of a new constitution (Gana 18). Think of Yemen, where *akhdam* (“lower caste servants”), disenfranchised groups in the north, and excluded portions of the south pushed for realization of a similar national dialogue after the departure of Ali Abdullah Saleh (Finn; Carapico 102-10). Similarly, it is youth activists of differing

social backgrounds who since March 2011 have called for an end to political divisions in Palestine. At the end of 2011 in Egypt, when it became clear that the police state was still pulling the strings even after the fall of President Mubarak, the November street battles—such as those of Muhammad Mahmoud street—belonged to the lower segments of Egyptian societies, not the *twitterati* that were so central in January and February of the same year. Alliances have surely been formed, but not just between incumbent elites and the middle classes: shared pressures between lower and middle classes also need to be included in our comparative analyses of the Arab uprisings.<sup>1</sup>

The second series of episodes, casting a less positive light on the involvement of the middle class, stems from the end of President Morsi’s power tenure in summer 2013 and post-*Rabia al-Adawiyya*<sup>2</sup> events. To say, as my colleague does in his *Thesis*, that both the military and Brother Morsi have tried to court the middle classes to forge alliances, is to take away from the middle class its agency and comprehend this vast social group as a monolith and as simple passive weight that both sides have tried to push on its side of the balance. Let us not forget that some sizable portions of the middle class, in particular

its “liberal” segments (precisely the segment supposed to lead in the opening of autocratic systems in mainstream democratization theories), have taken an anti-liberal stance in supporting the military crackdown of August 2013. Supporting emergency measures and the massive curtailment of civil rights (freedom of expression, discriminate detention of members of the Brotherhood, and, as of March 2014, a string of massive death sentences), as has been the case in Egypt in the last nine months, is not likely to hasten reform towards more social justice and human dignity. The same charge of non-inclusion can be leveled against the Brotherhood's neo-liberal middle class, which has pushed neither for more economic enfranchisement, nor for more social justice while Morsi was in power.

Emerging from these short discussions is the view that middle class involvement in these uprisings presents a mixed balance sheet, with positive and negative contributions to a revolutionary transformation.

Let us now turn to the second part of the argument, namely the existence of external factors and the need to avoid the traps of domestic analyses only. Of interest here is the existence of variegated forms of rents and the existence of a

transnational bourgeoisie in the process of making clearly identifiable social classes. All this contributes to making quite a unique configuration in the Arab Middle East.

To understand this specificity and avoid essentialist narratives of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, a historical understanding of class formation in the region is necessary. In large part, I follow the argument that has been made elsewhere and is relayed here by Rachid Ouaiassa (257-77). Indeed, a look at the social history of the Arab Middle East demonstrates that the making of the middle class has not been connected with the development of industrial production or to tax enfranchisement, as was the case in Europe. Instead, it has been mostly based on rent economies, the latest manifestation of which is the rent attached to foreign aid and to a life geared toward individual consumption. He is thus absolutely correct in maintaining that the Arab middle classes have not been able to develop any meaningful instrument to push for structural changes in the 2011 uprisings, and thus their engagement with these uprisings has been motivated by a worldview that is based in this individualistic lifestyle (273), and the resilience of an organized clientele around ruling classes.

But one also needs to insist on a recent externalist explanation of the rather superficial involvement of the middle class in the follow-up to the revolts. The focus in many of the approaches taken in political science and sociology on the subject tends to reinforce a bias toward methodological nationalism—that is, the a priori selection of variables relating uniquely to internal political or sociological processes. For example, if the bourgeoisie (be it the “would-be middle class” of Khosrokhavar [60-91], or the “middle class poor” of Bayat [44]) is described as defective, this is due to the nature of the political system (autocracy), or to internal divisions created by political Islam. In other words, all these accounts privilege internalist processes of political change (a view reproduced in the *Thesis*' article with its focus on the making and unmaking of local alliances). What these explanations fail to recognize is that the process of class formation is connected as much to external factors as to internal ones. Sandra Halperin noted long ago that the systematic crushing of left-radical groups during the Cold War led to massive out-migration of the middle class, skewing the balance between different classes and thwarting the emergence of vivid class consciousness (a key ingredient to class participation in political processes).

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It is here that an analysis of the middle class needs to engage with regional and international influences. If rent is generally associated with oil, one needs to look not only at the rent provided by international aid (Egypt, Palestine, Jordan have received vast amounts, both from the USA and from the EU), but also at the increasing flow of Gulf capital into countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Palestine. Adam Hanieh has powerfully demonstrated that the traditional divisions of state versus society—or a vision of class formation limited to national borders—fail to capture the vivid and massive influence that transnational non-state actors (e.g. global capitalist classes)<sup>3</sup> play in shaping the future of Arab politics. We can see examples of this influence in Egypt (with the plug being pulled on the Muslim Brotherhood this past summer by some of that capitalist class fearing loss of control over their assets and joint investments with the Egyptian military), but also the reconstruction of Libya, and part of the fate of Tunisian and Palestinian politics. Hanieh uses a felicitous description for this intermingling of class formation, in the high degree of Gulf capitalists' investments in other Arab countries as “the Gulf bourgeoisie” becoming “an internal bourgeoisie into Egypt” (139).

We have now a transnational bourgeoisie playing a political (conservative) role that is often unaccounted for. Be it in Palestine with President Abbas and some of his network who made their fortune in the Gulf (Rabbani); be it in Libya with past interim Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril whose connections in Kuwait, Lebanon, and Qatar helped him become a key figure of Libyan transition (Prashad 138-40); or anti-Brotherhood sentiments expressed by the checkbook diplomacy of the Saudi family or from the United Arab Emirates, one can see that not only state rents shape and undermine the prospect of more democratic change in the region; but also that a powerful capitalist class, international in its composition and outlook, is failing the Arab uprisings' genuinely popular aspiration for political change and economic reform in order to preserve its own interests and investments in other countries.

In that sense, questioning the role of an evanescent middle class is misleading. What needs to be assessed is the flow of three different rents: oil rent in its different forms, non-oil rent that is transnational (and mostly intra-Arab) and that has deep capitalist imbrications in the national economies of countries that are part of the “Arab Spring,” and the bureaucratic degeneration linked to foreign aid. This last

aspect can be connected to a critique of institutionalized or NGO-ized civil society, which might be seen as having a detrimental role in terms of class formation. Indeed, NGOs all too often focus solely on their economic and institutional survival, and reproduce a middle class disconnected, paradoxically, from lower classes and popular aspirations they are supposed to help and represent through social work (Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society* 185-88, 192-98; “The Counter-Power” 275).

Instead, we should look for motors of the Arab uprisings in the less institutionalized type of activism, and in the revolutionary capacity of different groups and classes to come together. These processes have been termed “de-sectorialization” (Bonney and Piorier), or intersectionality. The latter term (Challand, “Citizenship”) allows us to reflect on the relevance of regional and external factors, such as rent and migration, and how these intersect with internal factors to influence the dynamics of various national uprisings. Finally, this term also reminds us that change will only come from the combined efforts of both the lower and the middle classes, separate from the state bourgeoisie and transnational capitalists' interests in maintaining a truncated social contract.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion on the role of lower classes in keeping revolutions alive, see Chibber, esp. chap. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Rabia al-Adawiyya* is the name of the square in Cairo where pro-Morsi supporters built an encampment after the massive June 2013 protests organized, among others, by the *Tamarod* ("rebel") movement. The military violently overtook the square mid-August 2013. A very polarized debate emerged in Egyptian society as to whether the use of extreme violence (victims were in the hundreds) was justified or not.

<sup>3</sup> I prefer using the plural "global classes" to show the variety within.

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