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

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THESIS:
The Misunderstandings about the Role of the Middle Classes

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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 Ouaissa understands the middle class not as a driving force per se, but as the central group of supporters for a political force.

Keywords: Middle Class; Rentier States; Revolution

Revolutions and revolts often result from an unfortunate and not always predictable chain of historical accidents. Established for more than 200 years, studies on revolutions from various disciplines have demonstrated that, as a rule, revolutions are condemned to failure. The success or failure of these revolts and revolutions depends on the stability and/or strength of intermittent alliances forged between the groups and social classes supporting the cause. In turn, these alliances depend upon whether the often conflicting interests of the involved actors collide, or whether some agreement can be found. It is in this interaction between the subjective desires of the actors and the objective structures they act in that the contradictory role played by the middle classes becomes clear. The middle classes stand between two warring, irreconcilable strata or classes: on the one side there is the ruling class, striving to maintain its position of power and acquired privileges; on the other, there is the deprived and marginalized subaltern seeking to bring about radical change or reform, using violence (Fanon) or subversive methods (Bayat). In such moments, the middle classes become at once the object and the subject of revolutions. They are a subject because their desire for advancement makes them ready to seize opportunities, and fear of social decline amongst various segments within the middle classes turns them into the main actor of revolts; and they are an object because the outcome of the revolts depends on which political actors succeed in mobilizing the support of these middle classes, or at least broad sections thereof.

For instance, French colonialism in Algeria came to an end because, from the mid-1950s, the middle classes sided with the "damned of the earth" and because de Gaulle's plans to tie Algeria economically

to France and provide the middle classes with opportunities to advance by consolidating industrialization (Plan de Constantine) came too late and proved ineffective.

The conflict between "Rabia al-Adawiyya" and "al-Tahrir Square" is in fact a struggle to mobilize the disoriented Egyptian middle classes. President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood have failed to offer a clear prospect for the middle classes and are thus now resorting to a mystical-religious project ("al-Adawiyya"). In contrast, the military guarantees protection, security, and stability. The ongoing bloody conflict in Syria is to be interpreted along precisely the same lines: as a discursive battle between the regime and the rebel groups, each trying to gain the support of the middle classes.

The main argument of this paper is that the Arab middle classes are the principal agents and supporters of the protests, yet they do not possess the structural leverage necessary to force through radical regime change. In contrast to the European middle classes that originated in consumption-oriented industrialization, the Arab middle classes' genesis is rent-based consumption, and they are thus more fragmented. Because of their socio-economical origin, the Arab middle classes continue to be susceptible to rent access and ideological discourses.

It is not easy to determine which groups make up the "middle" of a society, and it is even more difficult to do so empirically (Gay; Burris; Savage et al.). The heterogeneity of the middle strata and its ambivalent political role are well documented in literature. A distinction is drawn between "old" and "new" middle classes (Liaghat). While the old middle classes cover urban merchants and the self-employed, the new classes are made up of technological professions, and those employed in bureaucracy, education, and the service sector—designated as comprising a "professional middle class" (Robinson). The political behavior of various segments of the middle classes, and thus with it options for forging alliances, depends on the economic substrate in which they are embedded: "The new middle class segment is said to be sympathetic to the working class. The old middle class segment shows a more conservative tendency; and the marginal middle class segment expresses a desire for collective action" (Hsiao 5).

While this class is distinguished from the working class and the bourgeoisie, it is perceived, however, as being a class without a character of its own; a class whose advancement is not directly the result of struggle between labor and capital, but whose members are to be seen more as the beneficiaries of this struggle. The advancement of this class depends primarily on regulatory mechanisms of the state or the ruling class. The transformation or the rise and crisis of the middle classes depend on the relationship between the state and the market. The middle classes are characterized by a degree of "moral economy." Their members insist on security, justice and distribution, but they are also welfare-oriented. Ideologically, the middle classes are characterized as adhering to socially conservative-religious values, are hardworking and economically prudent (Earle). This simultaneously material and conservative-religious attitude makes them attractive for various actors of power, such as the military and religious groups.

Historically, Western middle classes are the result of intensified industrialization and *consumer-oriented* production. The middle classes became capable of acting on and negotiating their interests because the aristocracy was eager to increase its surplus. This attempt to increase surplus went hand in hand with an intensification of investment, which in turn depended

upon supporting measures promoting consumerism amongst broader strata of society. Such an intensifying of industrialization and thus also consumption entailed generating employment for broader sections of society. This raised political demands and fostered the participatory will of these sections. In British history, this newly gained power of the middle classes led to the Reform Act of 1832.

Politically, it is often emphasized that the middle classes are of major importance for processes of democratic transformation (Pickel 138). But middle classes cannot be characterized as democratic *per se*, as they can also support extremist and fascist movements. In his article "Panic in the Middle Class," Theodor Geiger showed how economic insecurity can lead to extremist behavior and attitudes amongst the middle classes. In 1930, wracked by crisis, the middle classes contributed significantly to Nazi electoral success. Lipset termed this "extremism of the center." Numerous examples from Asia show that democratization is not always the main goal of the middle classes. As long as a decent income and prestige are secure, the middle classes are prepared to accept authoritarian regimes. For the upwardly-mobile middle classes in Asia, a democratic development is not the primary objective—

they are more interested in state-controlled liberalization (Schwinn 213). In such cases, the desire to move upward and the fear of falling down the social ladder determine the logic of action for the middle class.

It is certainly somewhat problematic to directly compare the middle classes in Arab or non-Western societies to those in Europe, and more in-depth empirical research is needed. Nevertheless, I consider a comparison of the historical circumstances and structural conditions to be revealing, particularly for identifying contradictory political roles played by the middle classes.

Historically, the Arab middle classes have remained imprisoned in two specific structural conditions: colonialism and rentier structures. Since the mid-nineteenth century in the Arab world, their opponent was not a ruling national aristocracy, but rather the colonial powers. These powers were solely concerned with exploiting resources on their periphery, showing no interest in establishing capitalist structures and generating viable industrialization. From the outset, the middle classes emerging out of the few modernized industrial sectors that were fruitful for the colonial undertaking were marginalized

politically. After World War I, these marginalized middle classes became the main pillar of nationalist movements and the anti-colonial struggle. With the end of colonialism, the middle classes—or at least a segment thereof—assumed power. In this constellation, there was thus no struggle between the middle classes and a ruling class, for the ruling class was part of the middle classes. This marks an important difference between Western middle classes and those in post-colonial societies. The middle classes in industrialized Europe were forced to fight for their participatory rights and democracy. This was only possible because they had gained a beneficial position for negotiating their interests through intensification of profit-driven industrialization. In contrast, post-colonial and respectively Arab middle classes gained the political legitimacy to accumulate economic surplus through the role they played in the struggle for liberation. Participation in economic surpluses through political positioning alone is known as a "rentier mentality." Although the segment of the middle class in power developed into a separate "class" for itself, the broad middle class remained however a kind of organized clientele of the ruling class. Structurally, the middle classes in Europe have an economic origin, whereas in the Arab world their origin is political.

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The middle classes in Europe are oriented toward profit, those in the Arab world on ensuring rent.

In the Arab world, an ideology establishing a firm identity for the middle classes is particularly important because the mechanisms enabling them to secure their position by exploiting their property and assets as a source of accumulation, generating greater income, are limited; mass consumerism and an economy driven by property and investment are lacking. In such societies—Egypt being a prime example—alignment to one camp or another running along cultural-oriented agendas (nationalism versus Islamism) is of great importance to the middle classes.

The Arab middle classes have become a medium of grand ideologies. Up since the 1930s, they were the support base for Arab socialism and nationalism, as well as political Islam. The crisis befalling the rentier state and the forced *infitah* policies, entailing implementation of grave structural adjustments in the 1970s and 1980s, resulted in a split in the middle classes and a turn away from the state. With the state retreating from its welfare obligations, the middle classes were divided into a marginalized segment gravitating toward the lower classes, and a business-oriented segment supporting the incumbent regime while demanding further reform. While the former segment seeks to dislodge the ruling regime, acting under the label of the religious discourse of justice and anticorruption, the latter is prepared to make a pact with reformers within the regime. This segment is hoping to share in the growth afforded by globalization under fair competition opportunities guaranteed by the state.

In reference to Egypt, Paul Amar distinguishes between a business-oriented middle class that however rejects globalization, and a frustrated middle class:

[…] [A] coalition around nationalist businessmen in alliance with the military—a military which also acts like nationalist middle-class businessmen. This group ejected the "crony globalisers" and "barons of privatisation" surrounding Gamal Mubarak. […] The Muslim Brothers represented frustrated, marginalized elements of the middle class. (18)

The Arab Spring is the result of accumulated frustration from these two segments, with their varying demands and expectations. The regimes were neither willing to reform—and so satisfy the demands of the business-oriented classes—nor were they able to meet the demands of the marginalized. The motto of the revolts—*'aish, karama, adala ljtima'iyya* ("bread, dignity, and social justice")—expresses the minimal consensus between the revolting segments of the middle class. For the low segment, *'aish* is the most important demand; for the business segment, the main concern is to establish *karama* and *adala ljtima'iyya*.

The outcome of the Arab revolts ultimately testifies to just how difficult it is to unify the divergent voices and demands into a joint political message, and how broad sections of the middle classes are willing to find a consensus among factions within the regime, far removed from any demand for democracy. In this way, the middle classes are contributing to reconfiguration of the regime.

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