

Revolution, Or the Repetition of the Same?

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[Instincts] reveal an effort to restore an earlier state of things. We may suppose that from the moment at which a state of things that has once been attained is upset, an instinct arises to create it afresh and brings about phenomena which we can describe as a “compulsion to repeat.” (Sigmund Freud, *New Lectures*)

In a crisis, assets return to their rightful owners. (Andrew Mellon)

“The Tunisian Revolution is being twitterized...History is being written by the people.”

On January 14, 2011, tyrants from Maghreb to the Persian Gulf were forced to confront an ominous conjunction – a fed-up majority keen on usurping power from dying autocrats, and Twitter. As revolutionary demands galloped across national borders on social media’s invisible stag – “The revolution is coming!” – only the most cynical observer could deny that something massive was astir. In Tunisia, the oafishly corrupt regime of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali was dissolving in real-time before the eyes of the world. The winds of change soon reached Cairo, where Hosni ‘The Lizard’ Mubarak clung desperately to his grip on power. A terse tweet captured the mood: “#fuckmubarak.” Mubarak’s thirty-year spell, sustained by media suppression and military force, was being lifted. And thanks to Twitter, the bold defrocking of another autocrat was told in the words of the victims. Indeed, History WAS being written by the people.

As the blossoms announcing the ‘Arab Spring’ in Egypt and Tunisia began to wither, giving way to the uncomfortable summer of constitutional reform, the media went on the offensive. Cut to the grotesque visage of Muammar Gaddafi, suiciding Libya to save the status quo. Now split the frame and paste the sinister gaze of Bashar al-Assad, with captions confirming his genetic proclivity for mass butchery.

The media’s demand for spectacle is easily satisfied by identifying ‘regime’ with ‘cuckoo dictator,’ a face to rally against, a scapegoat to slaughter. But before we allow the media to hijack our capacity for nuanced judgment, perhaps the time is right for an intermission, a moment for somber reflection on what has become of Egypt and Tunisia, before projecting aspirations for “regime-change” further a field. Perhaps it’s time to ask more fundamental questions, such as what, precisely, is the nature of a “regime,” and thus what constitutes “change”? It was Socrates

who claimed justice without knowledge is a form of cunning; can the same not be said of “revolution”?

The warrens of Medina are now empty. Silence grips the colourful stalls where euros and dollars were once traded with profligacy for ornate rugs and silks. Near the Bay of Tunis, sublime ruins of Carthage have reverted to mute granite slabs, signalling a time before ‘tourism’ was an industry. In short, Tunisia’s economy is on the skids. Five percent of Tunisia’s population is economically dependent on tourism. Now, in these times of political turbulence, and the conflagration across the border in Libya, tourist money has fled Tunisia for safer havens. Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, founder of Tunisia’s Progressive Democratic Party, while acknowledging the dire situation, promises that the failing economy is a mere aftershock of the revolution. Soon a transparent government, adhering to democratic principles, will spur economic growth: “With democracy and good governance,” says Chebbi, “we will have more growth because nepotism, the abuse of power and so on hampered the growth.” Tunisia offers slim hopes of an orderly transition from autocracy to some form of constitutional democracy, and this opening towards democracy appears destined for a Pyrrhic victory, as Islamists are slated to make significant electoral gains. More disturbing for the future stability of Tunisia is a deal struck last February, when the Austrian based OMV purchased Tunisia’s petroleum industry for eight hundred and sixty six million dollars. Tunisians can now voice their grievances against the government without fear of imprisonment, and they are doubtless better off for it. But will the carrot of an editorial invective offset the stick of crushing poverty? Unlikely.

A grimmer picture has emerged in post-Mubarak Egypt, where the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), while crassly indulging in revolutionary rhetoric, has adopted the fear-mongering policies of the deposed tyrant Mubarak. The SCAF speaks of “incremental change,” they warn of “domestic instability,” and stoke fears of a festering “Islamism,” to justify continued oppressions. Moderate and liberal forces in Egypt are veering towards irrelevancy. A Muslim parliamentary bloc, both anti-Western and fervently Islamic, is on the ascent, and the economy

is swerving towards collapse. For Egypt’s Coptic Christians, women, and civil rights, the future looks bleak.

False revolutions in Egypt have deep historical roots. In the time of the New Kingdom (1550-1100 B.C.), the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten, in brazen defiance of the god Amen. The entrenched priesthood at Thebes was humiliated, as their esoteric alliance with Amen was exposed as a fraud. Akhenaten then resolved to make his revolution complete, the worship of Amen was suppressed, temples were shut down, and Akhenaten’s goons, the original SCAF, blotted out the name of Amen wherever it could be found, public festivals of the gods ceased, and a new capital was erected between Thebes and Memphis called Akhetaten – “horizon of Aten.” These radical measures were orchestrated in the belief that eliminating the name of the god Amen would secure the annihilation of the god himself – out of sight, out of mind. A similar belief has taken hold in Egypt. Oppression found its platonic form in Mubarak, and by removing the arch-image of oppression, the content is magically sundered from its roots. The tyrant is dead, long live tyranny! ‘First as tragedy, then as farce;’ Marx’s words apply to the history of Egypt with a cruel cogency. There has been no sincere effort to revamp the autocratic constitution of 1971. Egypt, post-Mubarak, is marked by the continuity of oppressive policies, rather than the deliverance from oppression tweeted so fervently from Tahrir.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud remarked how “This ‘perpetual recurrence of the same thing’ causes us no astonishment when it relates to active behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential characteristic which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences.” Like the spawning migration of fishes, and the migratory flights of birds, it appears that Egypt is manifesting a biological instinct of conservation, to repeat what has come before, regardless of its monstrous and oppressive nature, ad nauseam. But perhaps Freud is being too liberal with his application of the term ‘instinct,’ and what he claims is a natural compulsion to repeat, is, in the human sphere, more aptly called ideological domination. Akhenaten

attempted to consolidate power by effacing the memory of previous gods. Today what has been effectively deleted from human consciousness are alternative systems of economic organization. Regime-change is equated with onerous politicians, who no doubt deserve to have their powers annexed by the people. Yet the staggering profits made from the phosphates and iron ore of Tunisia, and Egypt's oil industries, will continue to be diverted away from the people who need them most. Until regime change signals a fundamental restructuring of wealth distribution, the compulsion to repeat the same vile mistakes will assert itself as ineluctably as the swallows' annual longing for Capistrano.