

Critical Inquiry

The Language of Revolution - Tidings from the East

Ariella Azoulay¹

“The revolution is in danger” or “the achievements of revolution are in danger” these are familiar, common outcries that accompany revolutions in various times and places, uttered by revolution-supporters. “The revolution is in danger and the rights of women are still in danger,” uttered shortly after the “end” of the revolution in Egypt in late February 2011 by Dr. Nawal Al Sadawi, an Egyptian revolutionary, is a much less familiar cry, although its history is no shorter than that of revolutions as such. The first appearances of this much less familiar cry was formulated by Olympe de Gouges, a revolutionary philosopher of the eighteenth century.² The modern hegemonic political discourse consolidating in her time fated voices such as de Gouges’s to remain outside its limits. This hegemonic political discourse also included the claim, “the achievements of the revolution are in danger,” uttered by French male citizens for whom it was obvious that their civil status was different from that of others governed alongside them. The danger they indicated was not at all related to their being differentially governed, and this differential governance did not shake their universal language. Their concern for the fate of the revolution is different from the ongoing revolutionary cry made by women like de Gouges and Al Sadawi, one that demands to see in revolution a space where all governed take part not only in taking to the streets but also in shaping the institutions that enable this partnership to persist.³

A cry such as that of de Gouges or Al Sadawi is made in the presence of masses, by the mere fact of their presence, masses unidentified by gender, race, or wealth, masses that constitute the revolutionary force. However, on the morrow of the revolution they are dispossessed of the new political order that, like its predecessors, is based on a differential governing power and a constituency that does not coincide with all governed. The claim, “the revolution is in danger,” does

¹English translation: Tal Haran

² On de Gouges’s political philosophy, see “The Absent Philosopher-Prince: Thinking Political Philosophy with Olympe de Gouges.” *Radical Philosophy*, 158 (2009): 36-47.

³The media attempt during the revolution to create female icons out of a civil revolution, placing them as its symbol, is part of the effort to neutralize revolution as a living language, and no less than that, to neutralize women’s concrete contribution to the revival of the language of revolution and blurring the fact that, again, their names do not appear on the lists of candidates for senior posts, and first and foremost, for replacing the ousted president. More on the national discourse and the feminine figure in the history of Egyptian revolutions see: Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Women - Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley, 2007).

not relate to this abduction of the political body but is made regarding other aspects in those revolutions that also entailed such abduction, shows to what extent this is no chance or local oversight but an inherent element in democratic political discourse that developed since the late eighteenth century. From the eighteenth century we inherited a universal political discourse established by means of differential mechanisms that created and allowed—and made obvious—differential domination of different populations made distinct on a changing basis of race, gender, or wealth. In many of the western countries, these populations were gradually integrated into the political body. My assumption is that the inherent exclusion of certain populations from the political space in democratic regimes is related to constructing the revolution as a limited event, a temporary matter, an interim phase, a transition on the way to establishing a new regime.

Instead, I propose to see revolution as a language, a civil language, different and separate from that of the sovereign power, a language that requires the creation of a new political contract between the citizens and the various regimes to which they are subjected, both territorially and globally, created under colonialism and imperialism, that have been established in the past and continue to shape their lives and must be taken in account in the reconceptualization of their political discourse and civil existence.⁴

Here, for example, are several statements of this language which, used repeatedly, make a difference each time, sometimes even creating a new local idiom: dumpsters lying upside down in the street, wooden or metal planks placed diagonally to create shelter, hands raised in the victory sign, singing with strangers, throwing stones, graffiti on flags, uprooting of existing power symbols, overtaking thoroughfares, climbing on top of tall buildings or cars to make a show of presence there, spreading out in forbidden or designated spaces, taking over power accessories and neutralizing them, the civilian use of military means, setting fire, damaging portraits of rulers, giving testimony about the acts of the governing power, and so on. These gestures, combined with others, are articulated in a civil syntax

Conceiving what is now happening in the public space as a language, a civil language that for the past two centuries has occasionally risen to life in various places in the world, what it utters is not reducible to a series of mere external “events” that take place “out there,” whose significance is given and clear. One can either take part in them or only report them. The logic of a sovereign democratic regime cannot bear civil language being spoken by citizens and hence requires such reduction of the language of revolution to a local event that depends on

⁴ More on the revolution as language see Ariella Azoulay, “The Revolution Is The Language - The Photographs Are Its Writing Paper,” *Photoworks*, May 2011.

specific historical context, an event that has a beginning and an end, as well as identifiable causes and effects after which order—sovereign, of course—may reign once again. The political, hegemonic language spoken by those western democratic regimes that emerged as part of a world that colonialism and imperialism made global was born as a universal language. At the same time, this was also a differential language that allowed and naturalized differential models of ruling different populations distinguished on a changing basis of race, gender or wealth. These sovereign democratic regimes have nearly always preferred their commitments to a narrow elite of wealth and power in a global network of sovereign states over commitment to its own governed population. The universal language of power and the universal language of citizenship and revolution are in fact two different languages having a totally different syntax. The radical difference between them is revealed in moments of revolution. Most of the time, the sovereign language manages to subdue the inner syntax of the civil language so that it is conceived and interpreted mainly as a series of actions that have a recognized goal, such that possess meaning within the hegemonic political language—like the ousting of Mubarak and his replacement with a democratic regime.

Obama’s standing “with the Egyptians demonstrators,” or Hillary Clinton’s calling out to Mubarak to prepare the transfer of power, express that same systematic effort exerted since the eighteenth century: to remove civil language from the scene and replace it with a bundle of demands leaving no room to negotiate the conditions of global possibility for those democracies. Since the eighteenth century such conditions include sovereign national governing power, differential management of governed populations, preserving differential allocation models of resources and property along the outlines shaped by colonial logic, both imperialist and capitalist, and the promise that the movement of oil, weapons, wealth and labor will be managed along this outline. In the second week of this revolution, Tony Blair, representing the international quartet of Middle East peacemakers between the Israelis and Palestinians expressed this quite clearly: “the watchword is change with care, because at the same time we have to make sure any change occurs with stability and order.”⁵

Although one million demonstrators at Liberation Square sang, “We all stand together asking just one thing:leave, leave, leave!”⁶ the revolution cannot be reduced to being a means to that end. The sovereign regimes in the democratic surrounding countries recognizing only this goal as legitimate, hinder the conditions needed for a revolution

⁵He was quoted in an item by AP news agency of January 31st, 2010, under the headline “Israel agrees to some Egyptian troops in Sinai”.

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPhj5XnPjaU

to continue growing as a complex civil language. A civil language should be able to thoroughly change the hegemonic political discourse and undermine the opposition that organizes it, whether it is a democratic regime or tyranny. Only when this opposition is defied can the black flag raised over democratic regimes be perceived, signifying the crimes they committed against parts of their own populations since their constitution. By means of political categories which they produced and used automatically, they have turned them into alien workers, refugees, stateless persons, displaced persons, and so on, making them politically invisible and ready to be exploited or deported. We who view the revolution are usually invited to take one of two positions whose opposition is constructed as inclusive and exclusive: one may either support the old tyrant or celebrate the new democratic regime. Either way the demonstrators themselves should evacuate the public space as soon as possible, though they may be supported as means for changing or reforming the regime.

To escape this seemingly inevitable opposition, I propose reading the goings-on in Egypt both diachronically and synchronically. Diachronically, it can be read as a language that occasionally bursts forth into public space at unexpected places – like Prague, Paris, Saint Domingo, Soweto, Gaza or Budapest, but doomed to remain silenced under the political regimes inherited from the eighteenth century.⁷ Its synchronic reading is attuned to the particular civil language spreading through the Middle East in recent months, not only in Tunisia and in the pre-revolutionary rumblings in Jordan, Syria and Algeria, but also in continuum with the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli regime. This continuum arouses fear in Israel, as expressed by Israel's president Shimon Peres when he appealed to world leaders: "The dramatic events of the recent period make it necessary for us to take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict off the regional agenda."⁸

Thus understood diachronically and synchronically, perhaps for the first time in two centuries, we shall witness an uprising that might cross sovereign borders, those borders imposed first by the Anglo-French colonial enterprise in the Middle East and later by founding of the State of Israel. Perhaps it will shred to bits the "hostility among nations" which political and military leaders have ignited, fuelled and imposed upon the region. Perhaps then the Middle East will open to a new horizon where citizens write their own future and past out of the new partnership that revolution enables them to revive, and invent a new

⁷More on the analysis of the (civil) revolution not in keeping with the French Revolution, see my essay

"The Absent Philosopher-Prince: Thinking Political Philosophy with Olympe de Gouges." *Radical Philosophy*, 158, pp. 36-47, 2009.

form of political regime that adopts several institutions and principles of the democratic systems, but rejects the whole in order to be able to imagine new possibilities of civil governance, of the citizens for the citizens, and by the citizens, as a general appellation for all of the governed in a given territory.

Through the reading of revolution's complex expressions, one can see in Egypt's revolution not only a direct sequel of Tunisia or a preview of forthcoming ones in Syria, Algeria or Jordan, but rather a direct continuation of the demands by refugees the world over to get back to their countries, rewrite vision documents in order to shape ways of life shared with others, new alliances and pacts, to redefine movement in spaces, take new advantage of frontiers, ridding them of the death traps they have constituted for people forced into statelessness, and much more. All of these must and can be parts of a civil language, eager to replace the language of sovereign democratic regimes. Such civil language will grow as the tidings from the East only if all citizens of the region, Muslims, Christians and Jews, will liberate themselves of the spectacles of the sovereign regimes that recruited them to fight citizens like them on a national, gender, racial and religious basis. Only a revolution across national borders might develop into a real civil revolution that will sweep the entire region and offer an alternative model for western democracy that currently participates in oppressing the citizens of the region. However, in order for the revolution that started in Egypt to develop into a civil revolution and not end as another democracy participating in global crime against millions deprived of citizen status, the citizens who do not see their own regime as a tyranny because it does not injure them directly need to wake up too. This is certainly true for the citizens of my own country, Israel. A new Middle East will be possible only when the citizens of the Israeli state will wake up, only when they understand that they are not governed alone by the Israeli regime, that democracy they idolize and hail as the only democracy in the Middle East.