Université de Montréal

The Art of Living Together

On Political Engagement and the Ethics of Companionship

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Résumé

Cette thèse de doctorat propose que les mouvements ou les soulèvements populaires puissent unir l'éthique et la politique de manière directe et pratique pour constituer un domaine à partir duquel on peut avancer une théorie normative répondant aux défis de l'injustice dans notre monde. Toute étude de ces mouvements doit prendre en compte un événement spécifique et son contexte et donc renoncer à la position de l'"observateur". J'ai donc choisi d'examiner les révolutions déclenchées dans le monde arabe au cours de la dernière décennie, en mettant l'accent sur la Place Tahrir en Egypte. Pour apprécier le caractère innovateur qu'offrent ces révolutions, il est nécessaire de commencer par démonter les fondements épistémiques profondément enracinés dans la théorie politique occidentale qui prennent en considération le succès des révolutions en se basant uniquement sur leurs résultats finaux, et en particulier leur effet éventuel sur le changement de régime.

Ces mouvements populaires défient non seulement les études de démocratisation et leurs recommandations pour un changement provenant des structures du pouvoir, mais ils remettent aussi en question le domaine de la politique ainsi que ses principes fondamentaux. Cette confrontation se produit au moment où le peuple les s'aperçoivent de leur qualité d'agence et utilisent leur pouvoir politique de manière manifeste et concrète. Comme dans le cas de la place Tahrir, les citoyens créent un espace public ouvert aux désirs et intérêts de chacun, ainsi qu'à la solidarité et à la responsabilité collectives.

Les conditions dans lesquelles ces mouvements organisent leur action politique collective - horizontalement, de manière non hiérarchique et sans intermédiaire de la part des représentants

et des dirigeants – est une manière de résister à la menace que leur pouvoir soit manipulé pour des fins médiocres se rapportant au pouvoir de l'État.

Cette forme d'organisation permet également la reconfiguration des interactions éthiques de la foule, clairement exposée sur la place Tahrir, produisant ce que j'appelle «l'éthique de companionship». Cette éthique peut être reformulée et mise en pratique d'une manière sensibilisée à soi-même et autrui, et d'une manière adaptée aux besoins spécifiques et aux injustices du monde qui nous entoure. Une « éthique de camaraderie » est donc réceptive et ouverte à la négociation et à la persuasion, et constitue avant tout un « art de vivre ensemble ».

Abstract

This dissertation proposes that popular movements or uprisings can unite ethics and politics in a direct, practical manner and constitute an illuminating domain from which to advance normative theory that responds to the challenges of injustice in our world today. Any study of these movements ought to engage with a specific event and its context and renounce the position of 'observer.' Accordingly, I have chosen to examine the revolutions sparked in the Arab world over the past decade, particularly focusing on the account of Tahrir Square. In order to appreciate the novelty these revolutions offer, it is necessary to first dismantle the deeply entrenched epistemic grounds of Western political theory which consider revolutions only on the basis of their end results, particularly whether or not they effect regime change.

These popular movements not only defy democratization studies and its prescription for change from above, they also fundamentally challenge the domain of politics and some of its basic tenets. This confrontation occurs the moment the people gain their agency and use their political power demonstrably and concretely. The domain of politics is further challenged when the people create, as they did in Tahrir Square, a public sphere that is receptive to individual desires and interests as well as collective solidarity and responsibility.

The conditions under which these movements organize their collective political action – horizontally, non-hierarchically, and unmediated by representative and leaders – resist the threat of their power being instrumentalized to obtain middling results pertaining to state power. This form of organization also reconfigures the crowd's ethical interactions, unmistakeably on display in Tahrir Square, producing what I call "ethics of companionship."

These ethics can be reformulated and practiced in manner attuned to both self and other, and

adapted to the specific needs and injustices of the world around us. An ethics of companionship

is responsive and open for negotiation and persuasion, and above all, it makes an art out of our

living together.

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Introduction

The last decade witnessed many popular movements and revolutions unfolding in different parts of the world, including the Spanish Indignados or 15-M, the Iranian Green Movement, Occupy in the United States, the anti-austerity movements in Greece and Portugal, and the Arab Spring. This dissertation asks whether these movements constitute a domain of study for philosophical examination. Do they carry a challenging truth about human existence? Would this insight into human existence offer a new perspective for ethics and politics? If so, which path does a philosophy interested in political and social life need to take in order to theorize events of this nature? This last question contains two interrelated enquiries; the first is concerned with the novelty that such events might provide for political philosophy, and the second has to do with the epistemological tools available to us to appreciate such novelty. In line with these two interrelated enquiries, I argue that these movements indeed do present a new perspective for conceiving our shared being, both politically and morally. However, to be able to acknowledge this novelty and the power it conveys, certain epistemological attitudes must shift fundamentally.

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 2006), 21.

This dissertation will begin first by justifying the need for political philosophy to examine recent popular movements and revolutions, and to draw lessons from them. The justificatory argument will operate as a general framework for this project. I will then proceed to critically assess the existing methods, past and present, that analyze and conceptualize political change and the people's role in it. This will entail studying the epistemological tools that have been offered by scholars so far to assess popular movements and uprisings. By focusing on the revolutions of the Arab world – the Arab Spring – I narrow down the field of knowledge I am interested in critically assessing to that of democratization studies. I will next explain this choice and how it serves the overall argument of the dissertation.

I have chosen the Arab Spring, and not any other popular movement, uprising, or revolution, because I think that it is the most challenging movement for those of us who want to think about normative theory that is democratic and radical and takes into account the troubles of our realities. This is for two reasons. First, it is the one movement where, ostensibly, the people's demand seemed 'obvious'[2] and was understood before it was spelled out in detail: the constitution of a democratic regime like any other. A crowd living under dictatorships, despotic monarchies and repressive regimes, one might assume, has as its foremost priority the creation of entirely new democratic regimes. (It is for this same reason that these uprisings were called 'revolutions,' and not just 'movements,' from early on.) Not only was the demand clear, apparently, but also the

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[2] Although I do not agree with the final conclusion David Graeber reaches regarding the difference between the Arab revolutions and the Occupy movement in the United States, he spells out this point clearly: that the Arab revolutions were a call for liberal democracy, David Graeber, *The Democracy project: A History, A crisis, A Movement* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 108.

steps that should be undertaken to accomplish it: the establishment of a political party that would enact the wishes of the people to topple the regime and establish a new one. Thereafter, the crowd is to dissolve from the streets and go back to their 'normal life.' So, in comparison with movements that have taken place within an Anglo-European context of established democracies,[3] or others that fall under the banners of reformation or political grievance (which retain the framework of the existing political structures and demand, for example, increased accountability or participation), the Arab Spring seemed to promise a total collapse of the existing political structures, while at the same time spectators remained confident in democracy's inevitability as observed in other contexts. The Arab Spring, as will be explored here, can be interpreted as an attempt to question not only the limits of existing democratic theory and discourse, but the limits of politics itself. That is, the more assured observers of Tahrir Square were that the crowd was instating a new democratic regime, the more clearly the square could reflect for us all the trouble of such a quest, and why it diminished the real power of the people in the streets. Surpassing the basic and clear demand of democracy, the Arab Spring in fact enacted a radical opportunity for solidarity and responsibility. The second reason why the Arab Spring is an exceptional example is that the Arab world is a highly scrutinized political-geographical area, that not only had its political systems studied extensively, but had a large academic and theoretical domain invested in thinking, analyzing and prescribing change in that region. Indeed, while the democratization studies of the Arab world took a paradigm of its own, the change was never thought of in terms of popular revolutions.

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[3] Asef Bayat writes that these movements by large "expressed dissent against the effects of neoliberal policies, notably staggering inequality, unemployment, precarious work, and uncertain life that had gripped a large segment of ordinary citizens, including the educated and professional middle classes." *Revolution Without Revolutionaries* (Stanford University Press, 2017), 13.

This democratization studies paradigm issues a challenge to radical theory to look beyond the presupposed role of social movements as simply instructive of making politics "attuned to the people" and toward the radical demand of the people to gain power and show solidarity through the creation of political community. I will return to both of these points in more detail later in this introduction and in chapter one.

The lessons of the Arab Spring can and should, I argue, be generalized. The mode of ethics it manifested, which I call 'ethics of companionship' and elaborate on in chapter four, arise in a context of a collective actively asserting their freedom and humanity and bestowing value and meaning on their living together. This model of ethics is conditioned upon forms of solidarity, responsibility and agency, as witnessed for example in Tahrir Square. But they are not, to be sure, the square's monopoly. These qualities are observed in the Arab Spring revolutions in a decidedly raw, primal and intense form, because – again – what we observers think the people want and what they experienced, desired and affirmed on the ground are not one and the same. The wider the gap that exists between, on the one hand, how the crowds acted and which beliefs they affirmed, and one the other, what observers perceive as the demands and what they prescribe the crowd to do, the more it is required of scholars and thinkers to drop our existing tools and be attuned to a different set of concerns and aspirations that were born in the streets. That's assuming, of course, that we agree our current global political reality can benefit from a revived sense of ethics with political normative theory at its heart. The crowd in Tahrir Square might very well have wanted a democratic regime, but none of their doings on the ground followed the routes predicted and hoped for by either democratization studies,

with its fixation on regime change, or radical democracy, with its notions of procedure

and participation. To think, then, about generalizing the lessons from Tahrir is to think

about actively creating environments of the people's practical and unmediated

involvement in political communities, where the political has no prior meaning and no

preconceived ends but is open to deliberation and persuasion.

       The general argumentative framework of this dissertation is that these revolutions

present an opportunity to comprehend our living together as a work of art. Direct

engagement with the sphere that interests us all and relates to our life directly – politics –

has the potential for consolidating personal and communal agency and forging ethics as a

domain of practice. Political engagement motivates the subject to apprehend living

together with others as a shared responsibility and an impassioned effort. These recent

political events, I contend, present new forms of being and living together that require

philosophy to offer a normative account and theory based on those experiences.

Therefore, the first section justifying this project's significance – the need for political

philosophy to invest in studying this phenomenon – won't be fully fleshed out to the

reader before the normative and ethical argument is postulated and defended at the final

stage. This means that in attempting to justify the serious philosophical import of these

movements, some of this project's normative axioms will need to be explicated early on.

Accordingly, if the reader faces sometimes the appearance of a circular logic, it is because

there is no doing away with this circularity. The necessity for such a project lies in what

novelty it brings; without attempting to define and distinguish this novelty, there is no

justification.

Philosophizing the Revolutions

Let us begin by contemplating the requirement to philosophically engage with the historical occurrence of revolutions. This necessity is best exemplified in the works of two philosophers, Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt, who despite being from different historical eras and philosophical schools saw something tremendously intriguing and novel about revolutions. I will come to discuss their views in detail in the following chapter, but a preliminary overview of their contributions will help guide our inquiry into what current revolutions might offer to political theory, and how we ought to approach that offer, by drawing philosophically on their approaches.

Immanuel Kant argued in 1798 that revolution, setting aside its political and social achievements or lack thereof, is the one experience in the history of humanity that demonstrates our tendency as a human race toward advancement, and our ability to enact our moral faculties.[4] It is an event that human beings engage in out of enthusiasm for participating in the good; they put aside their self-interest and show a willingness to pay high prices for this impassioned involvement, despite the unpredictable nature of the whole endeavour. This habit reveals, Kant asserted, an inclination in the human race toward progress, even when this progress is initiated by others and we are drawn to it by sheer passion and enthusiasm.[5] He writes:

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[4] Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996): 297-309.

[5] Ibid.

It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself *publicly* in this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered. Owing to its universality, this mode of thinking demonstrates a character of the human race at large and all at once; owing to its disinterestedness, a moral character of humanity, at least in its predisposition, a character which not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself progress insofar as its capacity is sufficient for the present. The revolutions of a gifted people which have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry; it may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a right-thinking human being, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such cost – this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful *participation* that borders closely on enthusiasm the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race.[6]

The two fundamental points to keep in mind from Kant's description is, first, that he intentionally ignores the political objectives of the revolution and whether or not they have been achieved and, second, that he is interested in the moral dimension of revolution. Put together, regardless of the success or failure of the political project, the

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[6] Ibid., 301-302.

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revolution is at its heart a powerful reminder of a human faculty: our longing for

betterment and readiness to act ethically even when this comes at a high price.

Hannah Arendt dedicated *On Revolution* to understanding and theorizing this

phenomenon and wrote a similar passage.[7] As a political thinker she delves into the

details of the revolutions she studies, the American and the French, yet the consideration

of these historical events serve a point beyond intrigue, and that is the problem of

beginning. A beginning of something that, notwithstanding the collective's determination

and free will to carry it out, is entrenched in contingencies and the potential to unfold in

various and unaccounted for directions. Arendt's interest in revolution stems from her

belief that the creation of a public sphere by a collective is a prerequisite for attaining

equality between citizens and for the exercise of freedom, which in turn are necessary

prerequisites to humanize our existence.[8] Once again, this process is not tied to the end

result of the revolution – what it manages to achieve or not – given that from the

beginning it is a quest for freedom. Like Kant, Arendt held that "once the revolutions had

begun to run their course, and long before those who were involved in them could know

whether their enterprise would end in victory or disaster, the novelty of the story and the

innermost meaning of its plot became manifest to actors and spectators alike."[9] The

revolution represents for Arendt the political sphere necessary for human beings to show

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[7] Arendt pronounces the significance of revolution as an experience that brings together freedom and new beginnings, see for example page 29.
[8] Ibid., 31-32.
[9] Ibid., 29.

themselves to others (and to be seen by them), and to attain their equality and

freedom.[10]

In their distinct assessments, set apart by two hundred years, an analogous

message is apparent. If revolution is a form of self-discovery through passion and

enthusiasm, as Kant stresses via its moral dimension, and a political experience par

excellence that permits freedom and equality, as Arendt constructs it, then revolution is a

revelation of possible humanity not otherwise manifest in day-to-day life. They are not

seeking to idealize revolutions; rather, they hold it up against the political and moral

experiences unaccounted for in our regular existence. These moments have a different

quality to them, one which allows the manifestation of a humanity that goes undetected

when we comprehend humans as separate individuals who come together to live or

establish a protective mechanism in the form of a society, nation, or state. Is this quality

unique to these moments, only born during times of grandeur? Is it something that

existed all along and is only now making itself known? Or is it in making this humanity

appear, in its fragile manifestation, that we are able to acknowledge the conditions of its

production? No matter which definition finally prevails, both Kant and Arendt assert that

the political sense of our humanity, our collective existence, comes to be examined,

refined, and practiced in mutual action for freedom, enabling a closer and gentler

understanding of our relationships as humans and our ethical prospects.

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[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 32.

The closest model of a political theory that attends to humans in a state of a collective contingent action is perhaps the theory of social contract, however, it replaces human existence in the present with a fantasy about its origin in an attempt to do away with the dimension of contingency. As an alternative, this dissertation wishes to see what the very contingent action of revolution can reveal about us, in a way that perhaps challenges prevailing political and ethical beliefs and theories. As a starting point for my inquiry, I wish to retain the approach toward revolution found in Kant and Arendt. Revolutions carry more than just their political objectives and this 'more' must be identified and distinguished from other political phenomena and other ways we regard ethical dilemmas. In postulating that there is more to these events than is usually acknowledged and more than the logic of causality is capable of grasping, one asks about the process of coming to know and learn from political experiences; one asks what counts as valid experience for knowledge production and theorizing, and what is dismissed as uncanny, exceptional, or of no importance to human existence. Indeed, in asking what is being revealed, one asks about the nature of that revelation, but also under which conditions it is possible to recognize these revelations. In addition, one asks what one can do – how one can 'apply' this revelation – and what it means politically, ethically and also epistemically to acknowledge or to deny it.

Methodology and Historical Context

In a short essay in which he comments on Kant's thesis on revolution, Michel Foucault excavates what he understands to be Kant's philosophical interest in the

revolution. He writes the following: "the question of philosophy is not that of determining what part of the Revolution should be retained and set up as a model. It is rather one of what is to be made of this will to revolution, this 'enthusiasm' for revolution which is something distinct from the revolutionary enterprise itself."[11] The position Kant takes, according to Foucault, rejects the notion that revolution is one and the same as its stated purpose, declared objectives, or demonstrable outcomes. It is also other than its "splendid"[12] light that might persuade us to construct it as a model. Kant took a different approach to identify this 'more' and following him I wish to define my own methodological approach. Foucault maintains that Kant demarcated a new philosophical field in his political writings, notably when posing two (political) questions: 'what is Enlightenment?' and 'what is to be made of the will to revolution?' In his point of view, Kant established "the two great critical traditions between which modern philosophy has been divided," the first is 'an analytic of truth,' and the other is an 'ontology of the present.' Situating my own inquiry on the philosophical lessons of the Arab Spring within one of these domains, it no doubt belongs to the latter, which Foucault defines as a critical tradition that asks: "What is our present? What is the contemporary field of possible experience? Here it is not a question of an analytic of truth, but what one might call an ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves."[13]

To further explain this tradition of the 'ontology of the present,' I would like to use the definition put forward by political theorist Stephen K. White. White underscores the

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[11] Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," *Economy and Society* 15.1 (1986): 95.
[12] As Kant describes it, "An Old Question Raised Again," 301.
[13] Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," 96.

importance of developing ontological accounts for ethical and political theory, arguing

that "ontology refers to what persuasive argumentation in regard to basic concepts

should look like in a postmetaphysical world. What is at issue is how we should now

construct pictures of self, other and world, and link them to some affirmation of ethical

and political life; in short, how we ought to configure our most basic affirmative gestures

of practical reason."[14] Furthermore, ontology is characterized by its critical reflection, and

by the fact that it does not lay claims to truth. White explains that while one should be

aware of the limitations such a task presents, it is 'unavoidable.' Offering an important

theoretical underpinning for reviewing existing practices and prescribing alternative ones,

"the fundamental conceptualizations such an ontology provides can at most prefigure

practical insight or judgment, in the sense of providing broad cognitive and affective

orientation. Practice draws sustenance from an ontology in the sense of both a reflective

bearing upon possibilities for action and a mobilizing of motivational force."[15]

One of the central characteristics of this critical ontology is its comprehension that

humans come into being within 'certain existential realities.'[16] They are formed and

reformed, as much as they resist various practises of formation within a contextualized

experience. So much so that notwithstanding the widespread propagation of the idea

that historical events repeat themselves, such repetition can be demonstrated simply by

the extent to which the political or historical terminology used (such as the word

revolution) are consistently applied to these experiences. That said, it is not that these

various events can be fully apprehended by the simple linguistic utterance. Every

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[14] Stephen K. White, "As the World Turns: Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler," *Polity* 32.2 (1999): 156.
[15] Ibid., 157.
[16] Ibid.

experience is inherently different. It is in this sense that a defined ontology is a necessary

tool and essential methodology to appreciate and explore the current wave of

revolutions. The *more* beyond revolution's objectives and the different quality of human

interactions cannot be revealed outside a specific occurrence in time and geography.

Especially if by considering the trajectory of a revolution, we also include the way in

which actors themselves interpreted these moments and took a role in deciding their

path. Indeed, it is hardly possible to interrogate the novelty in the experience of

revolution and to conceptualize such an event and to learn from it, without tying this

inquiry to a specific incident. Novelty is part and parcel of a point in time and an

articulated experience. Certainly, both Kant and Arendt had specific historical occasions in

mind when they examined the moral bearing and political potential that the act of

collective revolt for freedom carries for humanity. It was the French revolution for Kant,

and for Arendt it was additionally the American; this dissertation intends to look

specifically at the movements emerging in the Arab world since 2010, collectively called

the Arab Spring.

There is an unmet necessity for political philosophy to conceptualize the

experience of revolutions. Our understanding of revolutions is mediated usually by the

vision proposed to us by historical, social and political studies. Habitually, these

methodologies become the first suspects, and reliable domains, to capture and explain

revolutions. But what they seek is the study of factual components and objective truths

(or at least what they deem to qualify as such), not the construction of conceptual and

theoretical foundations. This form of analysis creates lineages with the past more than it

desires to excavate a novelty bursting in present relations and realities. Put another way, what they seek from the present experience (a revolution) is an affirmation of an accurate reading of the past, a retroactive perspective, or at least the possibility to weigh it in the future. Inherently, such a starting point goes against searching for a new approach to ethics or politics, the very potential that the experience of revolution permits. In contrast, political philosophy can come to bear here not only on what can be learned from these experiences, and this is necessarily a contingent undertaking, but also on the intellectual practices necessary for this examination, both in terms of elaborating the methodology best suited for the task and exposing the sets of epistemological models that act as hindrances to viewing such newness.

In this vein, Hannah Arendt argues that a perspective on an eventful experience such as a revolution that comes from the position of an observer is one that cannot lead to the formulation of a new philosophy or new politics. By 'the position of an observer,' she means the disarticulating of the undertakings of players engaged in the event and the prioritizing of causes or factors or even the general chronology of the event as a smaller part of history. She sees Hegel as implicated in such a project, arguing that "theoretically, the most far-reaching consequence of the French Revolution was the birth of the modern concept of history in Hegel's philosophy."[17] Against a tendency in philosophy to disregard the realm of human affairs, Hegel asserted that domain as pivotal to philosophy. It was this assertion that made the German post-Kantian philosophy popular in the twentieth century, parting ways with idealism and its speculative fervour to apprehend human

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[17] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 51.

affairs as they morphed within reality. Nevertheless, Hegel's philosophical interest in

history, Arendt contends, "consisted in contemplation," turning human actions into

historical inquiry, and is not a pathway for formulating new philosophy. Hegel, like others,

assumes the role of the spectator and not that of the player, as she writes, "politically,

the fallacy of this new and typically modern philosophy is relatively simple. It consists in

describing and understanding the whole realm of human action, not in terms of the actor

and the agent, but from the standpoint of the spectator who watches a spectacle."[18] The

spectator watches the revealing of an event and tries to understand the broad direction

taken by the actors and why specific actions or choices were made and not others.

Looking at deeds from this angle, Arendt warns, makes them seem deterministic and

destined. Meanwhile, for those who are acting, everything unfolds on much more

dynamic and intentional grounds. This is what carries the possibility of freedom according

to Arendt. Freedom does not lie in what can be predicted and adhered to, but rather in

the unexplored possibilities. Arendt's comments on the interest of philosophy in human

affairs serve as an operative assumption for this dissertation; that is, that large popular

political movements, in the form of uprisings and revolutions, have not been introduced

schematically into political theory and political philosophy.[19] Their possibilities have not

been explored. They have been studied usually from the view of the spectator, not of the

actors. Moreover, they have not been studied and conceptualized in a manner that

furthers our understanding of the political domain in general, and our interpersonal

relationships in particular.

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[18] Ibid., 52.

[19] A claim that Andreas Kaylavas makes in his *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt (*Cambridge University Press, 2009), Intro.

This is why it is crucial to study a specific context—to take the actors, the forms of organizing they opted for, the communication they adhered to into account. This is necessary to offer an ontology of a revolution that can serve political and ethical theory and act as a motivating force for an engaged living-together in solidarity. In this thesis's second set of arguments, I explain in more detail my choice of the Arab Spring as the case study for developing the ontological account I am interested in. The first half of the thesis (chapters one and two) will also argue for the critical approach that an ontology of a revolution should take. After all, such an account, by the fact of its very existence, is invariably a manifestation of an already discursive domain that is and has been organized around a set of beliefs about our realities and our human relations. Hence this critical ontology will always find itself up against paradigms that it calls into question, partially or entirely. The Arab Spring is an excellent example to stress the need for such an ontology, partially because the predominant epistemological approach that assessed a possible change in the Arab world never foresaw the change in the form of a revolution. Fixated on the position of the observer, the study of democratization – the domain that considered forms of change in the Arab world – overlooked the role of individuals and groups in it. Additionally, the tendency of social and political sciences in general, and the democratization studies within that domain in particular, to prioritize organization, pattern-finding, and predictability, intensified and legitimized the study of change from the position of the observer. Arranged categories and predetermined processes keep ideas in order. But, as evidenced by the Arab Spring, the position of the observer missed

the movement from below: the people who, in their actions, assert their agency via a wide range of practices.

The Arab Spring

One has to be surprised and disappointed by the discourse that accompanied the unfolding of the 2011 revolutions in some Arab countries, namely in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. No doubt the people's revolution, which was unprecedented in its peacefulness, grandeur and intensity, was the focus of a lot of praise. However, the observation and translation of the undertakings of the masses was not fully attuned to the ongoing processes that shaped the participants' movement on the ground; the choices they made, the freedom they assumed and the solidarity they forged. With the first flame of the uprisings, the conceptual framework that was used to connect with the participants was 'transition to democracy' by way of toppling the authoritarian regime. Everything said, done, or alluded to by the masses went first through the lens of the democratization paradigm. This lens was mesmerized by top-level politics. The progression of the masses and the success of the mobilization forces were measured via the old-school criteria: Is there a visible, strong leadership? Is this leadership well equipped to control the state power and to force transformation?[20] Is the message of the masses clear and progressive, or merely negative,[21] going against the regime and what it represents? Do they have a

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[20] Barry Mirkin, *Arab Spring: Demographics in a region in transition* (United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2013).

[21] See for example Alain Badiou discussion of negative demands and how they cannot replace the existing political structure: *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2012), 51, 97.

clear vision for the future? Are these countries socially and economically ready to sustain

a democracy built from below? What forces drive the counter-revolution, and why is it

appealing to different sectors of the people? These questions and others, and the

conceptual and theoretical framework propagated to interpret the revolutionary process,

are products of pre-existing epistemic apparatuses and seldom ask about the present.

For decades now, certain branches in social and political sciences departments

have dedicated a lot of intellectual resources to studying the authoritarian and dictatorial

regimes prevailing in the Arab world. They aim to explain the persistence of such regimes

despite the global inclination toward social and economic liberalization typically

accompanied with democratic rule. They also study the prospects of democratization and

the social and economic prerequisites for it, and how ultimately a democratic

government could be instituted. Prior to the Arab Spring, the ideas and conclusions that

were reached by researchers in this field usually suggested that, given the state of affairs

in the region, change could happen through a military coup, by the elite aligning its

interests with civil society, or via initiating small steps in cooperation with the regimes.

And when years passed without an apparent change, the focus shifted toward studying

the reason behind the consolidation of these regimes, instead of their potential

overruling. Revolution (or massive social and political change) rarely appeared in the

books as a prescribed solution to the state of affairs. The very possibility of such an

occurrence was missed because the gaze of this entrenched paradigm was entirely

consumed by top-level politics. As chapter one of this thesis will show, politics did not

mean anything in these studies other than what happened on the institutional and

regime level. And when revolutions did occur, democratization studies overlooked their significance beyond easily demonstrable and calculable gains on the level of state power. This means that the new knowledges, practices, and forms of acting and being that the collective had enacted were ignored for the sake either of emphasizing 'big politics' or for asserting objective grounds for empirical research on the nature of this change.

Before going any further, why is it at all necessary, in a dissertation that argues for reading the newness current-day revolutions bring about, to go back into the historical development of the transition-to-democracy paradigm as it relates to the Arab world? Why is an in-depth examination of the evolvement of the discourse in that branch of knowledge at all relevant? It is because, in particular, the revolutions that took place in some Arab countries had their present-ness dictated to a great extent by an intellectual jargon of political change rooted in years of scholarly debate and writings. Indeed, any thoughtful recognition of what these revolutions have to offer us today, any possibility to appreciate their newness, must critically assess the history of the domain that already claims it has the required epistemological tools to acknowledge change and its processes in the region. Furthermore, I will argue that the tools of this very same domain have turned every aspect of political life into a factor of democracy-making at the regime level, and as a result denies import to people's agency and its role in public life. Concordantly, I will make two interconnected arguments; first, that the people were not recognized as political players who have agency and can act upon their reality. Democratization studies did not entertain change in the form of mass movement, popular mobilization or a revolution. Second, that if and when change was recognized (i.e. on the level of

institutions and state power) other effects, such as those on the interpersonal level which

involve solidarity and ethics, were not accounted for. The end result of this democracy-

paradigm approach is the portrayal of politics as a domain that does not involve and

engage individuals, seeing them as incapable of creating and changing their lives and

political spheres.

These two arguments point to the necessity of historical examination. A real

challenge to philosophy or political thinking, when it comes to conceptualizing new ways

of connection between people and new ways of making politics, must undo years of

'epistemic imposition,'[22] and rectify the persistent failure to account for movements and

changes on other levels. The people's committees, reclaimed agency, and the

responsibility borne among thousands for their own lives and others' was studied

phenomenologically but not thematically. The Arab Spring has been historicized and

recorded to the point of veneration, but it was not *the basis* of political theorizing and

philosophizing. When taken as a starting point, what are its repercussions on our living

together?

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[22] Brownlee and Ghiabi use this term in their joint article in discussing the accuracy of the usage of the term 'revolution' to describe the 'Arab Spring,' they conclude that it might be inaccurate to use the analytical category of revolution because, drawing on both Arab and European history, it implies the creation of leading figures and a radical structural change—which did not happen in any of the revolting Arab states. According to the authors, 'revolution' and 'resistance,' as two analytical categories can, "impede at times the dissection of events in their political contexts and could be interpreted as categorical imposition," see Billie Jeanne Brownlee and Maziyar Ghiabi, "Passive, Silent and Revolutionary: The 'Arab Spring' Revisited," *Middle East Critique* 25.3 (2016): 303. It is worth noting that they use a rigid definition of revolution which I do not subscribe to. In chapter two I will explain the difference between understanding a revolution from a regime perspective and people' one. But for now, I use the term 'epistemic imposition' to describe (throughout the thesis) how the transition to democracy paradigm impedes appreciating the novelty of revolutions.

The gravity of this oversight becomes both clear and alarming when considering how much attention and interest this geographical area garnered for decades in political science. More than eight years since the Arab Spring began, this continuous and all-consuming preoccupation with the Arab world has yielded almost no theoretical engagement with this specific experience and what it means today to revolt, to build a movement, and to assert a collective as political agent. Most of the praise, and later the preoccupation, was again directed toward systems: class forces, the new media in the Arab Spring countries, the international community, the role of the military, the role of Facebook, etc.[23] So the historical study that will be the focus of chapter one has less to do with a general observation – i.e. the claim that to understand the present one needs to go back to the past – and more an apprehension that there is an unmet need to identify the tools proposed by years of scholarly empirical research and the conditions they forge for our understanding of present-day revolutions, and furthermore to interrogate what it means philosophically to undo certain of these epistemological accounts.

My endeavour entails looking at what preceded and followed the democratization studies examination, not historically but epistemologically. What paradigms of knowledge

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[23] See for example: Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18.2 (2013): 115-137; Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics* 44.2 (2012): 127-149; Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta, "The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective–an Introduction," *Mediterranean Politics* 17.2 (2012): 125-138; Muzammil M. Hussain and Philip N. Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring," *International Studies Review* 15.1 (2013): 48-66; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria," *Journal of Peace Research* 50.3 (2013): 337-349. Looking at studies that revised the field of democratization studies as a result of the Arab Spring, one still finds the old prescribed standards and categories, see for instance: Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, "Democratization Theory and the 'Arab Spring'," *Journal of Democracy* 24.2 (2013): 15-30.

did this scholarship allow or obscure? How do we know, intellectually, that revolutions

are important to us? Under which conditions do we come to recognize the originality of

political phenomena, even when they are frequently repeated? Fundamentally, I am

asking here about the conditions of knowing; of becoming aware of a process, wherein

the very act of comprehending it is part of making it or unmaking it. That is, an

epistemology whose unraveling is its own doing. What kind of knowledge does change

usually erect, and in what scope and manner is it usually organized? The experience of

the Arab Spring and what preceded it in terms of theoretical and empirical frameworks

will inform the first chapter. They will be dedicated to critically assessing our

epistemological tools and whether they are equipped to accept the newness current

revolutions offer. Subsequently, this inquiry will then present another general problem,

which concerns the vitality of political life and its meaning in chapter two.

Presenting the First and Second Chapters

In chapter one, I argue that the starting point of an inquiry into the Arab Spring

cannot begin in 2011. If we want to understand the lack of conceptualizing and theorizing

revolutions – what some call "extraordinary moments"[24] – in political thought and

philosophy, a retrospective deliberation is crucial. It is necessary to go back to the

moment when the politics of the region were viewed exclusively through the lens of

regime change, notably to democratize said regimes; later on, this would be replaced by

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[24] Kaylavas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary,* 12.

the concept of authoritarian consolidation. These concepts were driven by a perspective

that viewed politics as a "technique of governing," to use Giorgio Agamben's term. That

is, a domain of ruling and control. Less inspected was politics as a space of power

relations between individuals and groups, or as conscious engagement with life itself.

The word democracy might refer, according to Agamben, to two discrete things:

"A way of constituting the body politic (in which case we are talking about public law) or a

technique of governing (in which case our horizon is that of administrative practice). To

put it another way, democracy designates both the form through which power is

legitimated and the manner in which it is exercised." However, the prevailing view of

democracy in "contemporary political discourse," Agamben rules, is the latter.[25] The

confusion of the two conceptions, the "juridico-political and the economic-managerial,

have overlapped with one another since the birth of politics."[26] The first chapter of this

thesis is therefore fully dedicated to understanding the disregard for popular movements

in the democratization paradigm, and how alternatively it theorized the birth of

democracy and its consolidation. Investigating the three main schools that comprise

together the branches of transition-to-democracy, I will conduct an in-depth analysis of

its discourses and main claims. What this exposes is how theory meets practice, how it is

informed by it or ignores it. These three schools or domains to varying degrees and by

various methods disregard the role that people play in a democracy in general, and the

importance of democratic popular grounds in particular. This is also a demonstration that

political philosophy is necessary to theorize these events; that while what can be learned

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[25] Giorgio Agamben et al, *Democracy in What State?*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 14-15.
[26] Ibid.

extends beyond the region, and beyond scholarly debate on the changes and their

nature,[27] it is not that the tools to understand the Arab Spring are the tools to understand

the region, but rather the tools to understand political philosophy itself. The theory of

democratic transition that is deployed to draw a seminal portrait of the Arab Spring

disguises, I will argue, the novelty that this spring indeed offers normative politics and

ethics; it pushes us toward the imaginative limits of the old paradigms and theories.

What is true for democratic theory, in terms of the relation to popular grounds or

foundations, was true all along in Western political tradition.[28] Chapter two is dedicated

to expanding on this idea. Examining the notion of 'the people' – its evasive and

malleable nature and the authority it embodies – the chapter recounts the history of the

term and its development as an iconic concept ranging from the Roman Republic until the

American Revolution, to reveal it as a product of political struggles. A central constitutive

element of any revolution is the rise of the regular citizen to become the main political

actor, replacing in an instant political parties, leaders and professional politicians. One of

the first signs of the people's regained authority is the flow into the streets and the

seizing of public spaces, making their otherwise contested authority visible and tangible.

It is this authority that is at the heart of the notion of 'the people.' And if we are to

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[27] Peter Seeberg, "Guest Editor's Introduction: An Arab World in Transition, Political Changes and Theoretical Discussions in a Post-'Arab Spring' Scenario," *Middle East Critique* 24.1 (2015): 1-7.

[28] This is emphasized in Arendt' writings. It comes down to two interrelated ideas, in the first her claim that philosophy, since Plato had "contempt to politics." Philosophy required solitude while politics required grappling with the messiness of the world. And in the second the application of philosophical concepts to politics, in an attempt to control its uncertainty. This would include to use politics as a means to an end (to attain higher good, or common good or happiness) and to rule the crowd (for they are not capable of understanding the truth of their minds, as philosophers do.) See the first and sixth chapter of her, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005).

comprehend the power the notion of 'the people' holds in political arena then we should

question whether sovereignty can be transferred and negotiated in political life at all.

Contesting the possibility and the necessity of transferring authority exposes, on one

level, the irony in cherishing revolutionary moments on account of their being fleeting

transitional periods (thereby negating the nascent power that has just been

emancipated). And on another level, it poses more profound questions that pertain to the

nature of the political itself. Indeed, what power the people have and how they act upon

it reflects as much as it forms the 'limits' of the political sphere. These superficial and

imposed limits on the political become tangible during moments of 'change,' when the

people's sovereignty is reclaimed to institute a new rule. It becomes clear that the

political sphere is conceptualized and constructed in terms of ruling and being ruled, and

the people's political power is conceived of as a defensive and restorative force.

Consequently, chapter two will make the case that the expulsion of the people

from the political is a deeply entrenched idea in Western political thinking and

philosophy. This expulsion relies on two key assumptions; first, that political power is a

negative force, a vice that needs to be either banished altogether or vehemently

controlled by the few. This conception of power is motionless and lifeless; it remains the

same 'substance' even when it is withheld and 'reserved,' and thus it can be abstracted

and therefore transferred. The second assumption is that the public sphere is a

disinterested rational realm that has no place for private concerns, and the

demonstration of one's desires.

Making Living Together an Art

The second half of my dissertation, chapters three and four, will advance the aforementioned 'novelty' by studying the ontology of the Arab Spring through an explicitly philosophical lens. These chapters will look at the concepts and possible perspectives that can be derived from this particular political movement. At a basic level, this thesis focuses on these movements as the grounds for learning about the political meaning and ethical implications of the direct involvement of people in politics more broadly. Hence, the central question of this thesis is: What do we learn from revolutions, aside from their initial and direct impact on political life? What do we lose or gain when we portray them as exceptional instances? Are these moments Desirable? Should they be viewed as an unrealistic ideal to inform theory? Or should we aim to institutionalize them? The motivation behind this inquiry is to reveal the normative beliefs about the political sphere and the role people play in its making. The lack of theorizing these movements in philosophy is due to a tendency to be suspicious of the direct involvement of people in politics in general, as I will demonstrate in chapter three. This thesis intends to argue that political life carries an importance beyond that of serving the public; it is more than an instrument for collective gains. It carries the possibility of bestowing meaning on our lives, making a space for the subject's constitution as an ethical actor. Forsaking the lessons of popular movements, I argue, comes at a tremendous price for all of us: it deserts the opportunity to learn through practice how we can live together.

In order to be able to argue for our living together as a form of art, I want to first clarify the connection this dissertation assumes between ethics and politics, as this relation is crucial for developing any meaningful understanding of the concept of living together. In short, connecting ethics and politics is done by establishing an internal (as opposed to external) relation between the two. As Elizabeth Frazer argues, modern political philosophy is concerned with "setting ethical limits to politics," a wish to realize ethical values in the political world. Other periods in political philosophy were interested, rather, in establishing political limits to ethics, that is, thinking "what is politically possible, attending to the gap between that and what is philosophically justified."[29] Frazer writes, "all these variations on the theme share a presumption that 'politics' and 'ethics' are independent of one another, two distinct activities or modes of reasoning…[T]hey stand, as we might say, in an external relationship to each other."[30] Views that separate ethics and politics refer to them respectively as "prescriptive and descriptive, or normative and positive, or as concerned with matters of value as opposed to matters of fact."[31] Introducing an internal relation between politics and ethics will manifest in this project by inquiring about the ethico-political implications of certain practices and experiences in the public sphere. This endeavour entails also examining the ethical constitution of individuals, and how this relates to the composition of the political sphere and its prospects. Ultimately, this question can reveal what it means politically to ask about our ethical constitution, our moral propensities and our relations to each other.

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[29] Elizabeth Frazer, "Max Weber on Ethics and Politics," *Politics and ethics review* 2.1 (2006): 19.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

Moreover, it can reveal what added value can potentially be bestowed upon the individual and the collective by emphasizing the relation between ethics and politics.

The need to connect politics and ethics together stems from a claim advanced in this dissertation that our living together is not a predetermined condition, something that it simply suffices to acknowledge and affirm. It is a practice, and even better yet: we can make an art of it. This need to connect ethics and politics is founded on a concern that the price humanity pays for the separation between ethics and politics is unbearable. Ethics without politics equals a subject without consciousness. One's consciousness is not intact unless one is immersed in a web of relations that compels grappling with the very idea of self and other and the nature of their connection. Ethics without politics also presumes a depleted consciousness because if we are not generating and practicing a set of ethical values ourselves, then they are given to us as standards to follow, irrespective of their source.[32] In a political context we confront ethical dilemmas and respond to them, consequently building confidence in the values we aspire to and in our agency. It means we lose the possibility of turning fellow citizens, the people with whom we share public sphere, into companions and our very self into a reflective entity.

On the other hand, politics without ethics is a meaningless living—and a dangerous one. Without ethics, politics becomes a mere means to the end of achieving goals. People ultimately become instruments, and their agency (the possibility of being

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[32] See for example Arendt' discussion of how when moral standards become a set of acceptable social convictions they can collapse over a night, paving a way to a brutal regime like Nazism, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Social Research* 61.4 (1994): 744.

free and of exercising responsible action) is waived. The political sphere has more to it than just being a domain of governance and the macro-management of the lives of citizens. When an engagement with politics is taken seriously, our living together can amount to an art. The normative project of this dissertation is an attempt at restoring ethics right at the center of politics, its natural habitat. The idea is to find an internal relation between the two that enables us to see that politics is not a value-free structure, and ethics cannot be reduced to an external set of limitations imposed upon politics.[33] To reimagine, then, the connection between ethics and politics, this dissertation asks under which conditions our living together can be fathomed as an art. That is to say, when we might practice it, learn from it, and live under its shadow of contingency.

I borrow the idea of art and art-making in thinking about the creation of political community from Michel Foucault, who perceives of one's life as a work of art.[34] 'Art' he means in the sense of a craft and an effort. Indeed, for him "no technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; nor can the art of living, the *tekhne tou biou*, be learned without an *askesis* that should be understood as a training of the self by oneself."[35] Living together is an ethical commitment, its practice requires a political community, and making an art of it requires the continued building of spaces of agency and political power. This idea stands in direct contrast to political community born of necessity,[36] whether it be a necessity for peace and protection or a necessity for better living conditions, as the fathers of liberalism suggested via the social contract. Two

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[33] Frazer, "Max Weber on Ethics and Politics," 19.
[34] Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, 262
[35] Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, 208
[36] Arendt, *The Promise*, 84.

further terms must likewise be clarified: 'public' (as in public spaces or the public sphere) and 'politics' or the political sphere. This dissertation makes use of Iris Marion Young's definition of the public sphere, as follows:

> The primary meaning of public is what is open and accessible. For democratic politics this means two things: there must be public spaces and public expression. A public space is any indoor or outdoor space to which any persons have access. Expression is public when third parties may witness it within institutions that give these others opportunity to respond to the expression and enter a discussion, and through media that allow anyone in principle to enter the discussion. Expression and discussion are political when they raise and address issues of the moral value or human desirability of an institution or practice whose decisions affect a large number of people. This concept of a public, which indeed is derived from aspects of modern urban experience, expresses a conception of social relations in principle not exclusionary.[37]

As for the definition of politics, this dissertation makes use of Arendt's general understanding, briefly stated as that which "deals with coexistence and association of different men." For Arendt, the importance of politics comes down to two things: first that it is "based on the fact of human plurality,"[38] and second that "politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships."[39] What I would like to retain and reiterate is that politics is not a readily available and constituted space that we inhabit,

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[37] Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory," *Praxis International* 5.4 (1985): 396.
[38] Ibid., 93.
[39] Ibid., 95.

but rather it is an effort we make. My intention is to emphasize the practical and daily

aspects of the political, as something concerned with our shared existence and with the

relations we form with each other as human beings. This is the reason why Arendt

emphasizes the importance of the political sphere as a precondition for attaining

freedom. Following her, this dissertation asserts politics as a space where people

humanize their existence by producing meaning and connections.[40]

Of course, none of us choose to be born or to share this earth with others, but

apart from this biological given, do we not want to have a choice in our relations? To

practice a form of art in moulding this togetherness? By making an art of our mutual living

what we exercise is political power. We choose to refuse to surrender our political power

to an authority and instead utilize this power for crafting our shared existence. Hannah

Arendt captured this moment as one of love, writing, "the motive for assuming the

burden of earthly politics is love of one's neighbor, not fear of him."[41] To craft an art, to

forge companionships, to have hope – a desire to do something with that love – requires

that we not surrender our political power. Political power is needed to show and practice

love for others. This connection between the political and ethical, and the art of living

together as an effort that arises in politics, will be further expanded in chapters three and

four.

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[40] Mohmmed Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, Inc., 2009), 214.
[41] Arendt, *The Promise*, 139.

In chapter three, I will put forth the experience of the recent uprisings as evidence that the people as a body are suspicious of predetermined political paradigms and are interested not in transferring its authority and power, but in claiming and acting upon it. This chapter is dedicated to closely studying Tahrir Square as it became an icon of the Arab revolutions and examining what was gained individually and collectively from the active engagement in politics beyond, or perhaps despite, regime change. I recount the regained political power, agency, and commitment toward politics in general, and the ethical implications of these political gains. The ethics I am describing are those of solidarity, empathy, and care for others, all of which arose markedly in the square. If we halt for a moment the urge to categorize them as fleeting and exceptional, if we also refuse to think about institutionalizing them, can philosophy benefit from thinking about the conditions that make them possible? I claim that these ethics presuppose an open public space, not freed from conflicts and disagreements, not freed from law or order, but simply born within the collective and sustained by it.

This is the lesson of Tahrir, that such a space is possible. It does not need be on a tremendous scale, it does not even need to be a revolution. It does not necessarily hinge upon 'negative politics.'[42] It can be an act of finding meaning through an engagement in matters that affect the living conditions of the collective. This public, political, and open space established by the protesters in the streets presupposes what it actively fights for here in the present and what it will build upon in the future. Tahrir Square reinforced individual agency and responsibility, it also established solidarity through mutual

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[42] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 97.

deliberation and action. It rejected hierarchy and leaders, and for that matter any other form of imposed rule. Politics and political power bore a rational and practical dimension. Chapter three concludes with an argument against the instrumentalization of political action and for the benefits of reflecting upon politics in the present.

In the fourth and final chapter, I return to an earlier point about the need to connect ethics and politics internally. I argue that the ethical project is devalued once we examine social or political movements as a means to an end. With such devaluation we lose the prospect of an ethics that is entrenched in commitment and responsibility and move toward an ethics that is perhaps theological or prescriptive, one that comes to us after or before the political act has taken place. I argue in this chapter that the philosophical prophecy of the revolution is the reinvention of hope made possible by a collective impassioned involvement in the pursuit of freedom. Revolutions, as Kant argues, reveal us as moral agents; that is, as subjects capable of engaging emotionally with and manifesting attachment to a matter that is not of self-interest. What remains, then, is to ask about the mode of ethical subjectivity that the practice of freedom allows. I defy ethical normative theory, which relies on the operation of guilt feeling as the source of commitment toward the other. Instead, I propose an alternative: a self that is constituted in companionship, forged with oneself and others. Companionship relies on the context and conditions of our mutual living, and therefore it always takes place in a political context. The mode of ethical constitution I defend is one of choice, not persecution, and it relies on being practiced.

In this thesis, especially from chapter two, I primarily draw from the works of three writers: the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, the philosopher Judith Butler, and the sociologist Mohammed Bamyeh. Arendt's deep and passionate worry about the eradication of the political sphere and her argument about the divorce between philosophy and politics lay the groundwork for the relevance of my project as a whole. By beginning from a particular historical event (or series of connected events), the Arab revolutions, and following with an ontological account of the experience of Egypt's Tahrir Square, my intention is to make political events relevant to philosophy. The idea is to recuperate the deep connection between the two, philosophy and politics, in a way that can reflect and advance the relation between ethics and politics. Following Arendt's teachings, I look at the promise of the political sphere and the pursuit of mutual living she so cherished. After all, while certain values and norms are inherent to the political itself,[43] that does not mean we find them there, but rather that we make them there. Meanwhile, Butler's emphasis on our ontological condition of *givenness* offers us a valuable insight into the relation between the political and ethical. Recognizing this ontological condition, according to Butler, is a first step toward proposing a normative political stance that honours our vulnerability and precarious living. To Butler's argument I wish to add and argument for the importance of action and choice, so that acting within a community and for the sake of freedom is part of how we imagine our mutual living. Finally, this project is indebted to the writings of Bamyeh, for whom ethics is first and foremost a civic practice. Practice is emphasized in his writings in his theorizing of hope, meaning, and solidarity. Everything humanity wishes to be is yet to come; it relies on practice and is never given to

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[43] Frazer, "Max Weber on Ethics and Politics," 19.

us *a priori*. I build on the terminology of "practice" and "art," especially, because these

concepts help offset the possible conflict that might arise between Arendt's defense of

autonomy and the lack of it that we presume in *givenness* or vulnerability as we come to

learn about it from Butler. I propose practice, such as the practice of companionship, as a

mode of ethical subjectivity because it inheres in the space between the individual and

the collective, and it gives an account of human vulnerability without forsaking the

choices we can and do make, especially when we act toward freedom.

Chapter One

Preliminary Considerations of the Problem: Democracy Without the People

> "The presumption that ordinary individuals cannot be trusted as custodians of strategic vision, integrative philosophy, and even rationality, is ironically connected to the history of modern democracy."[44]

Introduction

The socio-political movements that erupted around the globe in the last decade, such as the Indignados, the Iranian Green Movement, Occupy, and the Arab Spring,[45] imposed some difficult and pertinent questions. These questions concern equality, freedom, justice and democracy, and encompass both their practice and their trajectory. Notwithstanding their diffuse geographical locations, their specific political-social contexts and the origins of the people's grievances, the movements epitomized their demands under the banner of 'real democracy,' 'open democracy,' or 'democracy for

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[44] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 178.

[45] For more on these protest movements and their impact, see Marcos Ancelovici, Pascale Dufour, and Héloïse Nez, eds., *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016); Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini, *They Can't Represent us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (Verso Books, 2014).

all.'[46] Democracy is, as Wendy Brown writes, "exalted not only across the globe today but across the political spectrum,"[47] to the point that it is a given that protesters around the globe convey it as *the* slogan for their movements. One could say that what distinguishes democracy from the rest of the demands (or rather, ideals) raised by the protesters, such as justice, freedom and equality, is the fact that it is structurally different; it refers to the mechanism that regulates society. The demand for democracy abbreviates the ambition of the many to gain political power—few get hold of it in the name of the same democracy. Indeed, the popular mobilizations, as divergent as they were, find themselves once and again claiming their political power and agency,[48] and posing questions about who the real political actors in society are. They modestly reiterate and emphasize the Greek meaning of democracy as simply 'the rule of the people.'[49]

Nonetheless, democracy as a concept and a practice is facing tremendous challenges, even crisis.[50] Democracy, as Brown argues, "has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow" as we see it today, despite its unprecedented popularity globally. But perhaps, as she maintains, "democracy's current popularity depends on the openness and even vacuity of its meaning and practice."[51] Indeed, the recent history of modern democracy teaches us that not every discourse that

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[46] See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "The fight for 'real democracy' at the heart of Occupy Wall Street," *Foreign Affairs* 11 2011.

[47] Wendy Brown, "We are all Democrats Now…", *Democracy in What State?,* eds. Giorgio Agamben et al. (Columbia University Press: New York, 2011), 44-57.

[48] On political agency and subjectivity during the Arab revolutions see for example, Sari Hanafi, "The Arab revolutions; the emergence of a new political subjectivity," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5.2 (2012), 205.

[49] And this does not automatically imply liberal Western democracy, as Brown emphasizes this point. The rule of the people is "a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves, that the whole rather than a part or an Other is politically sovereign." Brown, "We are all Democrats Now," 45.

[50] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 231.

[51] Brown, "We are all Democrats Now," 44.

lauds and advocates for democracy can be entrusted with the pursuit of supposedly

shared ideals such as the end of oppression and domination and a life of dignity for all.

What's more, for some the venerable ideal can come at any price; its trajectory need not

ethically or logically reflect its values. For instance, some believe that democracy can and

should be installed via wars[52] and others do not shy away from advocating democracy

through military coups.[53]

One cannot but agree with the analysis that democracy remains an "incomplete

project"[54] and "unfinished principle,"[55] yet it is extremely troubling and perplexing how

far away today's democracy is, in both theory and application, from 'the rule of the

people.' The grounds on which any political system is built are its origins and founding

power; popular grounds are not regarded as a crucial part of today's democracy. It's

optional not only for sustaining a democratic regime but also for conceiving one. As

Andreas Kalyvas argues, the subject of popular founding power does not concern

contemporary political thought, despite the modern age being depicted as the age of

democratic revolutions.[56] He writes:

> Early democratic theory, marked by the historical experience of the ancient Greek
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> *polis* and enraptured by the Roman republican legacy, at least since the time of
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> Niccolo Machiavelli and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, has elided the theme of collective

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[52] For example, David Beetham, "The Contradictions of Democratization by Force: The Case of Iraq," *Democratization* 16.3 (2009), 443-454.

[53] See Ozan O. Varol, "The Democratic Coup d'état," *Harvard International Law Journal*, 53.2 (Summer 2012): 291-356.

[54] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xi.

[55] Brown, "We are all Democrats Now," 45.

[56] Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

foundings and democratic higher lawmaking. By confining the question of new

beginnings to the instituting acts of mythical lawgivers and heroic founders,

usually located outside the *demos*, democratic theory did not systematically

address political and legal foundings on its own terms.[57]

This absence of interest in the role of the people in establishing and effectuating

democracies had, according to Kalyvas, "impoverished the understanding of democracy,

legitimacy, and freedom in modern politics."[58] But impoverishment may even be an

underestimation. At the core of this perspective we witness the alienation of people from

political participation; this alienation not only has political repercussions, but also ethical

ones, as I will explain in the chapters that follow. However, my mission for this chapter is

rather modest: showing how the disbelief in the ability of the people to change their fate

and reclaim political power is entrenched in the theory of modern democracy. To do that

I will turn to examine the field of democratic studies in the Middle East.

The ultimate aim of this thesis is to theorize the newness revolutions offer by

suggesting arguments for normative political theory and ethics; the novelty in question

can be gleaned by developing an ontology of popular movements, and I have suggested

the Arab Spring's context in particular. For this reason, the theory of democracy critiqued

in this chapter relates to that same geographic and conceptual area. Thus, this ontology

depends partly on looking back and studying the overall conceptual framework that

sustained the discourse of change in that area. From the moment this inquiry is launched

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 2.

it becomes clear that an in-depth study of the field of democratization has to be the

starting point of any profound examination. This field for years provided the focal point of

knowledge related to any form of political transformation. Critical engagement with the

epistemological tools of the field of democratization in the Arab world is necessary when

identifying how public participation is hypothesized in the discourse of democracy, and

what meaning it bestows on politics in general. In the end, the intention is to examine

philosophically the lack of faith in the political capabilities of the people and its

consequences for politics and ethics.

Unlike other popular movements that transpired globally in the last two decades,

the Arab Spring's basic demand for democracy could be immediately captured[59] because

the political-geographical context was otherwise lacking any sign of it. The last five

decades were saturated with a democracy-ridden discourse preoccupied with the Arab

world. This discourse of democratization had been flourishing and influential in both

academia and policymaking for years. "Change" was discussed and theorized, but the

change imagined and prescribed was never in the form of a mass popular movement or a

revolution. Democracy, as seen through this iteration of democratization studies is a set

of institutions that successfully manages to organize the state according to the rule of

law—without coercion. As Asef Bayat argues,

> The transition debates are preoccupied primarily with the process of shift from
>
> authoritarian rule to democracy, focusing predominantly on nonviolent and
>
> nonrevolutionary experiences, such as those in the early phase of Huntington's

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[59] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 181.

"third wave" of democratization in Latin America or the more recent political

change in Burma. Revolutionary transitions, when addressed, are often examined

within the same conceptual frame as a nonrevolutionary shift. In this model,

transitions are carried out largely from the top by political elites through "political

pacts" between authoritarian regimes and the democratic opposition.

Descriptions of the transitions are often mixed with prescriptions and

preconditions to achieve "successful" transition.[60]

With respect to the twenty-one countries that constitute what is called 'the Arab world'

the transition-to-democracy paradigm focuses on the nature of the dictatorships and

authoritarian regimes, as well as on the activities of political parties and the formation of

and developments in civil society. The question that occupies the vast majority of

researchers and scholars in this paradigm relates to the *qualifications* of a democratic

transition. The presupposition that guides this investigation is that the creation of

democratic regimes is a necessary stage in human development, it is a value that all

nations should strive for and will reach, sooner or later. The challenge for transitioning,

however, remains to formulate and create the right set of conditions and prerequisites to

reform the system, or at least to understand why the system is not yet en route to

transitioning.

The lack of any serious and meaningful transition in the Arab world region toward

democracy prompted scholars to abandon their optimistic vision and to shift their

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[60] Asef Bayat, *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford University Press, 2017), 208.

attention to the grimmer picture: the resilience of the authoritarian regimes[61] in the Arab

world. That is, instead of focusing on the factors that push the state and the ruling elites

toward democratization, this paradigm sought to describe why authoritarianism will

maintain its place in the Arab world,[62] and to explain why expected changes will instead

take the shape of gradual reform. Consequently, some scholars have even suggested that

these authoritarian regimes are actually getting stronger and are being upgraded.[63] In

addition to the transition-to-democracy and the authoritarian-resilience paradigms, there

were always those who believed that the Arab world represented an exceptional case to

the otherwise actively transitioning countries in different parts of the world. Pointing to

various cultural, religious and economic reasons, this group sought to explain why the

Arab world failed to be part of the 'democratization' wave that swept many countries.[64]

The question that drives my investigation here is how the transition to democracy

discourse affects or amends the concept of democracy itself, and subsequently our

relation to politics. What does the language and perspective of 'democratization' occult

us from observing when we look at movements of mass protests and revolutions? The

operative assumption of this chapter is that the general discourse about democracy is in

essence a discourse about politics first and foremost. Democracy in the general sense is a

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[61] See Oliver Schlumberger, "Dancing with Wolves: Dilemmas of Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Contexts," *Democratization and Development: New Political Strategies for the Middle East*, ed. Dietrich Jung (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006), 33-60; Michelle Pace and Francesco Cavatorta, "The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective – an Introduction," *Mediterranean Politics* 17.2 (July 2012): 127.
[62] Mehran Kamrava, "The Rise and Fall of Ruling Bargains in the Middle East," *Beyond the Arab Spring: The evolving ruling bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27.
[63] Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Analysis Paper 13 (Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007).
[64] For example, Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (Routledge, 2013) and Bernard Lewis, "Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 36-51; Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Democracy*, 7.2 (1996): 52-63.

mode of enacting politics. Although clearly democracy refers to the way political power is organized and managed in a given system, and thus must refer to *one* mode of enacting politics, it is today perceived as *the* mode of political enactment; for this reason I use 'politics' and 'democracy' interchangeably henceforth.

The next chapter will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts of the people, political power, and politics, and the way in which they are interrelated and define the political realm in general; this chapter will follow how democratization studies conceptualizes the meaning and necessity of people's participation in the public realm and thus discloses how politics is generally perceived. It will make the following interrelated arguments: first, that politics, as it appears in the democratization studies accounts, is what happens at the state level. Second, the identification of politics as primarily what happens at the state level, and the widespread propagation of this concept, undermines the role that individuals play or could play in the public realm. And finally, when democracy is portrayed as the highest goal, an end that should be reached without regard for its popular foundations and irrespective of the methods applied to attain it, the individual's agency, capacities, and desires are either undermined or plainly instrumentalized, belying the idea behind having democracy and open public sphere in the first place. That idea is, as the overarching argument of this thesis claims, making an art out of living together. For that idea to have any potential, people must have power and agency and be involved in the matters that affect their lives and those of others, which is to say, politics.

Democratization Paradigm

In explaining the region's failure to transition to democracy, which is associated

usually with restricted political and civil liberties and severe constraints on human rights

and freedoms, several explanations are offered. The economic factor undoubtedly

occupies a considerable place in these explanations, given that theorists by and large link

the viability of a successful democratic regime with a functioning market-based

(capitalist) system.[65] The vast majority of the Arab states have no liberal industrial

economy and their markets cannot stand independently of the ruling regime. Moreover,

it is a region that relies heavily on government subsidies, and many of them were able to

sustain the bargain of subsidized food and services in trade for internal stability due to

natural resources, such as oil and gas, found in their prospect countries. Raymond

Hinnebusch explains here the standpoint of economic prerequisite to democracy:

> Current democratization theory owes much to the early Modernization Theory (of
>
> the 1950s and 1960s) that examined the requisites of democratization in
>
> developing countries. It argued, based on the experience of the developed states,
>
> that beyond certain thresholds of economic development, societies become too
>
> complex and socially mobilized to be governed by authoritarian means. What MT
>
> demonstrated convincingly was that high-income countries were most likely to be
>
> democratic and that rising literacy, urbanization and non-agricultural employment
>
> (indicators of 'social mobilization') were associated with an increased propensity

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[65] For the relation between the economic system and democracy see for example, Dietrich Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

to political participation (greater desire for it and efficacy to seek it). Conversely,

democracy would be unviable in, and authoritarianism possibly congruent with,

the features of many pre-modern societies.[66]

Similarly, Larry Diamond explains that eleven of the sixteen Arab countries are 'rentier'

states: "they depend heavily on gas rents to keep their states afloat,"[67] which makes

them less accountable to the general public as they do not depend on the people's

money for ruling. But the gas money affects the economy and the political system from a

different angle as well. As Diamond shows, the oil wealth needs a central state to manage

it, clarifying why we find that the oil-rich Arab states are heavily centralized and spend

"lavish [funds] on a huge and active state-security apparatus,"[68] thus making the

governing structures difficult to penetrate with attempts at democratization. Moreover,

the region continues to receive substantial support from Europe and the United states in

exchange for oil and political relations. These political relations in turn bestow much

needed political legitimacy, in addition to aid in security for Arab autocracies.[69]

Furthermore, those who believed that the structure of the economy and the

proliferation of the middle class is not what will drive democracy but, rather, the strength

and actions of civil society, have been let down. The region suffers from a weak civil

society and inadequately organized workers unions making them ill-equipped to carry a

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[66]Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique," *Democratization* 13.3 (2006): 374.

[67] Larry Diamond, "Why are there no Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy* 21.1 (2010): 97.

[68] Ibid., 98.

[69] Ibid., 101.

political transformation.[70] Moreover, the proliferation of non-governmental organizations

and the apparent pluralism of political parties did not mean they were away from the

strict control of the state. It meant, rather, that the middle-class is appeased by activities

with restricted impact and with no real mobilizing power. As for political parties, in some

cases the pluralization of parties means a split in society and a stronger hold for the

state.[71] Not least of all, the socio-economic level presents a grim picture. The Arab world

is still battling illiteracy, especially in countries that are characterized by large populations

and shortages in financial resources,[72] in addition to high rates of inequality and poverty.

Illiteracy is usually stressed in the literature to support the argument that a lack of

education and awareness deters people from wanting to change the regime, as they

prioritize food and shelter over political freedoms.[73] All of this is coupled with the elite

disinterest in any future change since the current status-quo serves their interests well

and they have a lot to lose.

Exceptionalism Outlook

The factors mentioned earlier – economic, education, and the existence of strong

civil society – in addition to others that I will elaborate upon later, are presented by those

subscribing to the transition-to-democracy paradigm as objective and identifiable

hindrances to the building of a real and stable democracy. Nonetheless, for others these

reasons alone are not sufficient. Some analysts claim that the wave of democracy that

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[70] Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36.2 (January 2004): 139.
[71] Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence", 386.
[72] Hassan R. Hammoud, "Illiteracy in the Arab World," *Adult Education and Development* (2005): 7.
[73]Muwafaq Abu Hammud and Amani G. Jarrar, "Fighting Illiteracy in the Arab World," *International Education Studies* 10.11 (2017): 120.

swept various regions around the globe, from southern and eastern Europe to Latin

America, from East Asia to Africa – that is, regions that suffer from similar social, political

and economic problems – is proof that the Arab world stands out as an exception. For

them the answers, the lack of a democratic transition, lies in the region's culture and

religion. They argue for what came to be known as the "region's cultural

exceptionalism."[74] They perceive in the cultural and religious characteristics features that

are 'unique' to this region, unlike the socio-economic ones. These unique factors are,

therefore, the best lens to understand the lack of progress. This enigma of

exceptionalism[75] can be solved, according to these analysts, by focusing on the political

thought influenced by Islam. Islam is used both as a religion and as a cultural component

to explain the failure to transition, because it is seen by many as incompatible with

democracy. Those who advocate the idea of incompatibility between Islam and

democracy put forward various reasons for their claim. A reoccurring one is the absence

of traditions of self-government and popular participation in political affairs in Islam. Eli

Kedourie who defends this view, writes:

> There is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world - which are the
>
> political traditions of Islam - which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the
>
> organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government. The notion of a
>
> state as a specific territorial entity which is endowed with sovereignty, the notion
>
> of popular suffrage, of political institutions being regulated by laws laid down by a

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[74] Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian persistence", 375.

[75] For more on this view see, Sanford Lakoff, "The Reality of Muslim Exceptionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 15.4 (2004): 133–139. Alternatively, others identified the exceptionalism solely in relation to culture not religion, see Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "Arab, not Muslim, exceptionalism," *Journal of democracy* 15 (2004): 140-146.

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parliamentary assembly, of these laws being guarded and upheld by an

independent judiciary, the ideas of secularity of the state, of society being

composed of a multitude of self-activating, autonomous groups and associations-

all these are profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition.[76]

Like him, Bernard Lewis supports the idea that the lack of democracy in the Middle East

at the present time has to do with the region's previous constitutive political tradition.

Although Lewis admits that democratic institutions have not been blooming in the Middle

East because of authoritarian regimes, which actively impede any real change, he does

not consider this problem to be one of the present, but rather a long-existing problem; a

'traditional one,' not a political reality that can be negotiated and altered. He writes that

this problem is caused by "the absence in classical Islamic political thought and practice of

the notion of citizenship, in the sense of being a free and participating member of a civic

entity….the concept of choosing individuals to represent the citizenry in a corporate body

or assembly was alien to Muslims experience and practice."[77] Hence, the terminology of

citizenship, and citizens as participants in the making of political life, does not exist in

Arabic, Persian and Turkish.[78] In fact, "the use of 'freedom' as a political term was an

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[76] Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, 6.
[77] Lewis, "Freedom and Justice," 36-51.
[78] Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy," 55.

imported novelty,"[79] he writes. It has been used only in the social and legal connotations, and remained alien to the local culture in political configurations.[80]

What Kedourie, Lewis, and others who subscribe to this school of thought do not explain overtly is why the tradition of this region must determine its future. They capture current political realities only through the lens of the past, never with consideration for the fundamental changes that are taking place both within the region and outside of it. Kedourie for instance writes in the concluding remarks to his book *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*:

> The breakdown of a constitutional order, or rather its violent destruction in all the
>
> countries mentioned above, as well as in Sudan and Libya, where comparable
>
> vicissitudes afflicted the polity, has been followed by ideological politics, whether
>
> secularist or fundamentalist, which provide no alleviation for the ills of the Arab
>
> world, nor can promise anything but heavy-handed rule conducive neither to
>
> welfare, nor to freedom, nor to prosperity. On the other hand, those who say that
>
> democracy is the only remedy for the Arab world disregard a long experience
>
> which clearly shows that democracy has been tried in many countries and
>
> uniformly failed. Until European ideas and the European example spread in the
>
> Middle East, the Arab world together with the rest of the Middle East was

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[79] Lewis is right to point out, regarding freedom, that: "another complication surrounding the term 'freedom' is a legacy of imperialism. When outsiders ruled much, though not all, of Islamic world, freedom came also, or even primarily, to mean communal or national independence, with no reference to the individual's status within the body politic." In "Islam and Liberal Democracy," 58. Elsewhere he notes, "to be liberated, or freed, meant to be manumitted, and in the Islamic world, unlike in the Western world, "slavery" and "freedom" were not until recently used as metaphors for bad and good government." Lewis "Freedom and Justice," 38.
[80] Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy."

governed by regimes which were no doubt despotic, but whose methods were

understood and accepted. Those methods were discredited and irremediably

damaged by the power and influence of Europe. Nothing as lasting, or even as

satisfactory, has succeeded in replacing them.[81]

Not only does he think that the alleviation of the Arab world's ills is an impossible

mission, but also that these ills were tolerable and permissible to its inhabitants until an

external power intervened and exposed the nature of the authoritarian regimes they

lived under, deeming them illegitimate and unfit for the epoch. According to Lewis, the

West's alternative, democracy, was clearly unattainable and destined to fail as a

modernizing project for the Arab world.

As Abdou Filali-Ansary argues, the aforementioned view is based on two

assumptions. The first is that when dealing with Arab or Muslim nations and their political

realities "the past is ever-present and is much more determining than present-day

conditions" and the second is that "the character of Muslim societies has been

determined by a specific and remote period in their past during which the social and

political order that continues to guide them was established."[82] The current status of

these societies, when examined by the exceptionalist model, is perceived (and thereupon

prescribed) as a repetition of the past, a static image. The past dictates both present and

future in perpetuity; regardless of the immense changes these societies are going

through, the internal dynamics, and even the social relations affected by economic and

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[81] Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, 105.

[82] Abdou Filali-Ansary, "Muslims and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 10.3 (1999): 19.

political changes, remain stable. It is as if the Arab world can remain shielded from how political developments are shaped and reshaped around the world.

But does that mean the exceptionalist school abandons the democratization project in the region altogether? We should note here the rather clear position the exceptionalist school holds concerning the role that citizens of the region could play in bringing about political changes to their political system. A similar outcome other schools on the spectrum of democratization studies will arrive at, albeit prompted by different motivations and discourse all together. Indeed, despite the belief that democratization attempts in the region might be difficult, the exceptionalist school does not desert the plea to democratize the region. Democracy is believed to be a form of political good, a universal one that all nations, despite their experience or background, should attain. The question that remains is, then, how to transform the region to democracy?

If democratization efforts are not abandoned, and since the humans and societies who make up the citizens of the region are not capable of initiating such a transformation due to their political, cultural and religious traditions, then a direct or indirect (military) intervention is vital to bring about political transformation, according to the exceptionalists. Depicting the local forces of the region, its civil society, and its social movement as incapable of transforming their political systems and instituting democracy strips them, rhetorically and practically, of their political agency and the ability to carry out actions in public sphere. Within the exceptionalist perspective, the natives of the region, its people are perceived as prisoners of the past, losing their ability to act on their present and future. Ultimately, it is only through various forms of external interventions that a lasting change can be granted. It is thus no great surprise that despite what might

at first glance appear to be contradictory claims, the perception of democracy as a common universal good can be easily reconciled with an exceptionalist outlook.[83] To reconcile them is to call for a 'superior power' to implement democracy where the citizens are deemed to fail because of their 'exceptional background.' This power can be the elite or the military or external intervention (direct and indirect). As Asef Bayat explains:

> The idea of Middle Eastern exceptionalism is not new. Indeed, for a long time now, change in Middle Eastern societies has been approached with a largely western Orientalist outlook whose history goes back to the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Mainstream Orientalism tends to depict the Muslim Middle East as a monolithic, fundamentally static, and thus "peculiar" entity. By focusing on a narrow notion of (a rather static) culture—one that is virtually equated with the religion of Islam—Middle Eastern societies are characterized more in terms of historical continuity than in terms of change. In this perspective, change, albeit uncommon, may indeed occur, but primarily via individual elites, military men, or wars and external powers.[84]

But even those who disagree with the discourse being perpetuated by the exceptionalist school do not necessarily transmit a different message about the prospects of democracy in the region and how it should be established. Take for example the work of Larry Diamond. On the one hand Diamond disagrees with the operative assumption of the

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[83] Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization: The Future of Middle Eastern Political Rule Through Lenses of the Past," *Middle East Critique* 19.3 (2010): 192.
[84] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 3.

exceptionalist view regarding the role that religion plays in delaying or hindering

democratic transformation, and on the other hand he agrees with the need for external

saviours to implement the project. On the first of these two matters, he writes:

> The most common assumption about the Arab democracy deficit is that it must
>
> have something to do with religion or culture. After all, the one thing that all Arab
>
> countries share is that they are Arab. They speak the same language […], and it is
>
> often suggested that there are cultural beliefs, structures, and practices more or
>
> less common to all countries of the region. Moreover, they share the same
>
> predominant religion, namely Islam […]. But as I will show, neither culture nor
>
> religion offers a convincing explanation for the Arab democracy deficit.[85]

Diamond's disagreement stems from what he understands as a failure to give an account

of the democratic experiences in Muslim countries that are not Arab. That is to explain

why democracy took hold in Asia and Africa with no real precedents, but not in the Arab

world.[86] Diamond writes, "if the problem, as Kedourie went on, is that Arab countries

'had been accustomed to . . . autocracy and passive obedience,' why has this remained an

insurmountable obstacle in the Arab world while it has not prevented democratization in

large swaths of the rest of the world that had once also known only authoritarian

domination?"[87] Nonetheless, when it comes to the methods of instituting democracy and

initiating political change, Diamond resorts to similar tools proposed by Kedourie and

others. He believes that elites, foreign intervention, and the military are the key players

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[85] Diamond, "Why are there no Arab democracies?," 94.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 95.

for establishing democracy in the region. He holds that the 'principled engagement' of a

U.S. policy might encourage democratic reforms, pointing toward Iraq as a good model

for the rest of the Arab countries.[88] If we attempt to categorize Diamond's claims, his

account belongs to the transition paradigm, yet the solutions he offers are part and parcel

of the exceptionalist position. This underscores the point that Bayat makes, that "the

whole edifice of the "democracy promotion industry" in the west"[89] does not see

democratization processes as actions driven by citizens and social networks, nor as a

project that is fought for in the social-political arena by passionate and engaged

individuals. Rather it is a top-down program that can be implemented, even by outsiders,

as long as they follow the right formula.

The exceptionalist stance can be extended in order to apprehend certain positions

which proliferated during the unfolding of the Arab revolutions in 2011. While the

protesters were still occupying the streets, many observed these events with a cautious

joy. The nightmares about 'the day after the fall of the regimes,' and the received wisdom

about change and its prospect in the region were now being discussed openly as an

inevitable fate. Those 'nightmares' were in fact a mixture of scenarios that the

authoritarian regimes and their allies used to instill fear of the mere thought of a change.

These scenarios became part of the collective imaginary of the region's inhabitants and

their political discourse. One strongly held belief was that in the aftermath of any

democratic change, the Islamists would win elections and destroy the institutions of

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[88] Ibid., 102.
[89] Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 3.

democracy and instate another authoritarian regime, this time in the name of religion.

Raymond Hinnebusch describes these scenarios as follows:

> Except in government circles in Washington, few now believe that if only
>
> authoritarian rulers are removed democratization is a natural outcome; indeed, an
>
> alternative might well be failed (or destroyed) states such as civil war Lebanon,
>
> Somalia and occupied Iraq, giving credence to the old Hobbesian (and medieval
>
> Islamic) 'heresy' that the alternative to tyranny is even worse, namely, anarchy.[90]

Fouad Ajami explains this tendency, to imagine the alternative of tyranny as chaos, in a

rather sarcastic tone; he notes, in the Egyptian context, that "in the scenarios of

catastrophe, the revolution will spawn an Islamic republic: the Copts will flee, tourism

revenues be lost for good, and Egyptians will yearn for the iron grip of pharaoh."[91] These

expectations[92] testify to the deep disbelief in the people's ability to initiate a change with

the hope of real, lasting transformation; a disbelief in the will of the political actors and

their capacity to continue the struggle in the present and future, even if met with

setbacks and obstacles as all transformations usually are. The scenarios of catastrophe

circulated, as credible lenses through which to see the potential of the future should the

people decide to take part in the undoing of their political system. Quickly, however, the

scenarios of catastrophe came to be presented as the only realistic readings of the

present. They dictated the conceptual analysis of the incidents of 2011 onward. The

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[90] Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian Persistence," 374.
[91] Fouad Ajami, "The Arab Spring at One: A Year of Living Dangerously," *Foreign Affairs* 91.2 (2012): 62.
[92] Heydemann writes how attempts at democratization in the region ended up with set-backs see, "In the Shadow of Democracy," 146-157.

possibilities of the future turned into traces of old scenarios and fears, and the newness

offered by either the act of revolting itself or the particular forms of organizing quickly

evaded.

The discourse of exceptionalism is doubtlessly still flourishing and retains its

strong hold on academic rhetoric and popular consciousness. It seems that just about any

event can be easily added to its readily available volumes of interpretation.[93] As such, the

fact that revolutions did not lead, yet, to an established democratic regime in any of the

states where they have occurred – with the exception of Tunisia – only emphasizes the

state of exceptionalism the Arab world represents. As Steven Heydemann claims, the

hopes for democracy had "faded almost as rapidly as they had appeared," he continues:

> Barring the Tunisian case, the Arab uprisings have led in only two directions: state
>
> collapse in the midst of violent conflict, as in Libya, Yemen and Syria, or an 'Arab
>
> Thermidor' and the reassertion of authoritarianism, as in Egypt, Bahrain and a
>
> majority of Arab cases in which protest movements initially arose.[94]

By this account, the Arab revolutions not only failed but also led to the entrenching of

dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, dispensing with the enthusiasm, sacrifices, and

gains people experienced on an individual and collective level during the revolutions. The

logical outcome of such an account is a disbelief in the possibility of mass popular

movement itself as a tool of change. As Tarek Masoud reminds us, we have to weigh

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[93] For more on challenging the exceptionalism outlook before and after the Arab Spring see, Imad Salamey, "Post-Arab Spring: Changes and Challenges," *Third World Quarterly* 36.1 (2015): 112.

[94] Steven Heydemann, "Explaining the Arab uprisings: transformations in comparative perspective," *Dynamics of Transformation, Elite Change and New Social Mobilization* (Routledge, 2018), 193.

reality back into the picture by recognizing that uprisings are not the path of change in

the Middle East:

> One thing that the Arab Spring and its aftermath have made clear is that we
>
> should not expect democracy to come as a result of an intifada that sweeps
>
> dictators from power and enables the masses to erect liberal institutions. As the
>
> last three years have demonstrated all too well, in no Arab country are autocrats
>
> or their militaries so weak as to be rendered ciphers amid fleeting moments of
>
> revolutionary enthusiasm. They crack down (as in Syria or Bahrain) or bide their
>
> time (as in Egypt), but they never disappear. If democracy is to alight in that part
>
> of the world, it will likely be through a process that is more evolutionary than
>
> revolutionary, one in which authoritarian elites dictate the pace of reform.[95]

In one example after the other, scholarly and theoretical interests stress, first, that the

necessary transformation that ought to happen in the political sphere remains the

concern of the state and its apparatus. Politics is what happens at state level, and its

modification can be tackled only on that same level. The people's involvement in the

public sphere, and their ability to act and to influence their reality, was undermined on

the bases of 'no demonstrable results' on state's level. Second, democratization

processes, as they appear in the democratization paradigm, are not driven by passionate

individuals who care about the society they live in and the people they live with. Indeed,

if the exceptionalist school promoted one lesson repeatedly, it is the inability of the

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[95] Tarek Masoud, "Has the Door Closed on Arab Democracy?" *Journal of Democracy* 26.1 (2015): 83. A similar point can be found in Heydemann, "In the Shadow of Democracy," 148.

inhabitants of the region to get involved and initiate a change in their political system, with some going so far as to claim that transformation is not even an aspiration. But are these arguments shared by the whole democratization paradigm? Are they shared by those who have studied more closely the objective factors that are real obstacles to the establishment of democratic regimes, such as the nature of the existing political systems, economy, and educational system? Would refusing the cultural and religious assumptions made by the exceptionalist school drive a different general outlook regarding democratization processes, something more attuned to its popular grounds and to the rearrangement of the political sphere in general? I will answer these questions in the next section.

Democracy as a Universal Good with Few Preconditions

The intense interest in democracy can be attributed to the fact that democracy is perceived as the best governing system politically, morally and even economically. An 'attainable ideal' that should be universalized, all nations should strive for it, and sooner or later it will dominate the globe. Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* is one of the most famous writings that presents democracy as the ultimate governing system. Fukuyama defends liberal democracy as the final form of government for all nations, arguing that humanity has not found, and will not find, a better governing system.[96] As Morten Valbjørn and André Bank contend:

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[96] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Simon and Schuster, 2006).

In line with Francis Fukuyama's triumphant statement that the end of the Cold

War also marked the 'End of History' in terms of 'the endpoint of mankind's

ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the

final form of human government,' the predominant view of that time [the 1970s]

was that democracy in principle can and should be promoted everywhere. As a

consequence, political development increasingly was perceived in terms of a

dichotomous autocracy/democracy transition scheme.[97]

Through the lens of democratization, events in the region were understood as an

inevitable "linear path from authoritarianism towards democracy."[98] Representative

democracy moved away from being an exceptional political system, one that only few in

the West were able to master and to supervise its extension to the rest of the world,[99] to

a kind of universal good that all nations aspire to have. Indeed, up until the mid-twentieth

century democracy was "widely viewed as an exceptional political form." There was a

belief that nations needed to come under the aegis of the Western mandate in order to

master it.[100] However, Heydemann contends "as stage-theories of economic and political

development became prominent, democracy had become simply the final phase of a

developmental sequence through which all states, and all peoples, were expected to

pass."[101] This conception came to control how the political situation in the Middle East

[97] Morten and Bank, "Examining the 'Post' in Post-Democratization, " 185.
[98] Pace and Cavatorta, "The Arab uprisings," 127.
[99] Heydemann, "In the Shadow of Democracy," 150.
[100] Ibid., 151.
[101] Ibid.

would be assessed thenceforth, leading researchers in the 1950s and 1960s "to study the social and economic preconditions of democracy in the Middle East."[102]

The position of a 'universal common good' that democracy acquired propelled scholars, interested in the Middle East, to ask why this form of governing did not prosper in that region. Previously in this chapter, I explored answers that were invested in the culture and religion of the region, claiming that it does not encourage such a transition. Yet others found the answers in material factors, such as socio-economic and education levels. The latter looked, in an almost natural and uncritical way, at nations that had succeeded in establishing democracy and from there deduced a set of structures, institutions and conditions that, they argue, help democracy flourish. Comparing those democratic nations (usually in North America and Europe) to the Middle East, they searched for what is lacking in the latter and produced a set of preconditions that the region needs to fulfil in order for it to join the ranks of democratic nations worldwide.

This view gave way to what we can call the precondition school in democratization studies. It has under its roof all those who believe that a set of economic and social conditions ought first to exist in order for a nation or a country to transition to democracy. This view established a relation between development, democracy and capitalism. A leading figure in this school was the American political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, who argued in the 1960s that "in dealing with democracy, one must be able to point to a set of conditions that have actually existed in a number of countries, and say: democracy has emerged out of these conditions, and has become stabilized

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[102] Ibid.

because of certain supporting institutions and values."[103] This list then indicates whether a country can be considered a democracy or not.

Following these guidelines, Charles Issawi, an economist and historian of the Middle East believed that democracy has not thrived there because certain conditions or 'sociological factors' are not yet ripe for it to take hold. These factors are: "size of territory and population, level of economic development, distribution of wealth, industrialization, homogeneity of language and religion, degree of education, and habit of co-operative association." He stresses for instance the relation between the expansion of capitalism and the development of democracy in the West, arguing that they have been "intimately connected." He adds that democracy cannot prosper in an agricultural country and that it requires a high per capita income, or in other words, a functioning industrialized economy. He argues that the struggles of the middle classes around the world are the reason behind the emergence of democracy; for the middle class to appear and lay roots, the landowner-peasant relationship should be broken by industrialization and commercialization.[104]

This position identifies certain features in the Western market-economy model – such as industrialization and an established middle class – and deems them necessary conditions for a transition toward democracy. It follows a causality logic, rather

[103] Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy" *The American Political Science Review* 53.1 (March 1959): 69.
[104] Charles Issawi, "Economic and Social Foundations of Democracy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 32.1 (January 1956): 34.

deterministic, that for the wheel of change to get started some crucial socio-economic factors have to be ripe and ready.

Notwithstanding the prevalence of the precondition school, we can find some variations on this position within the broader transition paradigm itself. These variances reach the level of discarding the preconditions altogether. In Latin America, some Asia Pacific countries, and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratization trended upward during the 1970s and 1980s—the 'third wave of democratization' as coined by the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. These changes prompted the U.S. democracy community to embrace "an analytic model of democratic transition."[105] Critiquing this model Thomas Carothers argued that it had arose from "their own interpretation of the patterns of democratic change taking place, but also to a lesser extent from the early works of the emergent academic field of 'transitology,' above all the seminal work of Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter."[106]

Per Carothers, this model can be defined by five elements, three of which are sufficiently important to elaborate on in order to advance my claims. The first assumption is that any country "moving away from dictatorial rule" is a country in transition. The list of such countries surpassed three digits, and many among them were not only far from any form of transition toward democracy but were facing harsh situations of conflict and economic difficulties. The second assumption is that there exists a set of stages that all transitioning regimes will go through. This path proceeds from the opening, when the regime shows signs of a breakthrough (eg. internal contradictions and disagreements), to

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[105] Thomas Carothers, "The end of the transition paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13.1 (January 2002): 6.
[106] Ibid.

the actual collapse of the regime, and then finally to the consolidation phase, when democratic institutions are built and developed. Even when countries fall back to a certain phase and relapse, those who adhere to the ubiquity of these phases believe the countries will eventually go through this path, because democratization is a 'natural process.' The third assumption postulates that pre-existing conditions will not foster or prohibit countries from attaining democracy. According to this view, political, social and economic levels are not central to democratic transition. All that is necessary is an elite enthusiast: one person who is willing and able to drive forward the change.

Whether it is sociological factors or analytical transitology, at the heart of this view politics is a calculated, rigid and static endeavor. Its unpredictability and contingency are undermined, and the first faculty to be affected is action—particularly political action that depends on the participation of the many. People get involved in matters that relate to the public realm because they have grievances and wishes they want to realize. They recognize a wide gap between what they can expect from the societies they live in and their dreams and desires. What drives people to action is always a passion, not a pre-existing road map that details how to reach a goal or a set of preconditions. One maybe can anticipate an objection to this claim by arguing that these forms of analyzing, understanding and hypothesizing about the present and future status of change do not necessarily contradict the ability of individuals and communities to be engaged and active. Not only that they contradict, they perpetuate an illusion and make possible continues oppression, I argue. By producing once and again politics as a soulless domain, foreclosed to the influence and involvement of the many, with an eye fixated on the regime and its institutions. It also inhibits the many from having the opportunity to gain

political power and agency, two fundamental components for the creation of one's

subjectivity both politically and ethically. These two arguments will be fully fleshed out in

the coming chapter, namely by developing the concept of politics following the work of

Hannah Arendt. For this chapter however, it suffices to mention that for Arendt politics is

the sphere that is produced between human beings and what sustains their relationship

together.[107] Politics, thus, is the most basic and practical domain bringing people

together—not an institutional set-up or an instrument to attain an end. To appreciate

politics, we need to appreciate human actions; one's capacity to act without knowing in

advance the consequences, leaving open the possibility for further action in the future.[108]

Action, then, is a prerequisite for the establishment of a political life. Arendt writes,

"action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of

things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men,

not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."[109] She adds, "action alone is the

exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is

entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others."[110] To speak of predictable

paradigms and models, is not to give an account for the human capacity of action and the

impossibility of engineering and predicting it. Arendt believed that crushing this capacity

can be traced back to the tradition of political science and political thought, as they

ceased to be interested in human actions and deeds.[111]

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[107] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 95.
[108] The aim of action for Arendt is to preserve the very possibility of acting in the future, George Kateb,
"Arendt and representative democracy," *Salmagundi* 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 25.
[109] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.
[110] Ibid., 22.
[111] Arendt, *The Promise*, 45.

Returning to the transition paradigm, reality quickly exposed the deep faults of this analytic model that sought to implement a universal frame to assess the process of democratization. As Carothers shows, many countries that were dubbed 'transitional' were not at all transitioning toward democracy, and many of those that were indeed transitioning were not following the model in reality. Carothers, who belongs to the traditional branch of the transition paradigm, critiques this model and advocates an approach that does take socio-economic conditions into account, believing that former legacies and practices do affect the chances of a country to transition to democracy. Yet, despite the different approaches taken by those who think that prerequisites are necessary to initiate a transition and those who do not, they both offer a rigid framework to assess democracy, a model that treats democracy as a mechanism with clear-cut goals and processes. As Steven Heydemann rightly points out:

> At the core of democracy promotion literature—even literature critical of the way it is being carried out at the moment—is the conviction that democracy can and should be promoted. Democratization, moreover, is seen largely—though not exclusively—as a matter of technique, of procedure, of program design and implementation.[112]

It is a program that can be implemented, if the right actors are found, under what looks like controlled laboratory conditions. Both approaches agree that democracy can and should be supported, be it through funding institutions and NGOs or promoting democratic discourse. This program dictated terminology around democracy and the

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[112] Heydemann, "In the Shadow," 150.

democratization process, shifting the discourse. It is not anymore a process that needs an

active engagement of citizenry; the political involvement of those affected by the political

system; the existing government and its laws. Rather it is a model developed with specific

variables, one requiring a certain amount of promotion and aid to achieve success. Thus,

it is not at all foreign to this branch of study to use terminology such as 'democracy

promoting,' 'democratic supportive community,' aid and intervention, and so on.

Despite the fact that the Arab world was very much held by authoritarian rulers,

scholars did not stop thinking and writing about the democratic transformation in the

region. Indeed, there was a belief among many Middle East scholars that the Arab world

was transitioning toward democracy in the last three decades of the twentieth century,

despite "the depressing pattern of half-step forward, half-step back," that has defined its

pace of transitioning.[113] The signs were there for those who wanted to interpret them as

opening paths: a growing civil society, liberalizing the markets and holding elections.[114]

But a closer and more cautious look would reveal that civil society was controlled by the

state and functioned to validate the status quo; the liberal markets were not meant to

open communication but rather to be controlled by the few close to the top, only

increasing corruption; and the elections were a facade to relocate the same regime, but

with a democratic disguise.[115]

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[113] Ibid., 147.

[114] See for example, Francesco Cavatorta, "The Convergence of Governance: Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World and Downgrading Democracy Elsewhere?," *Middle East Critique* 19.3 (October 2010): 217-232.

[115] Ibid., 226.

One of the pillars of democratization according to the transition paradigm is civil society. It was thought to be among the leading engines of 'democracy promoting mechanisms' in addition to opposition parties. Adherents to this paradigm believed that the Arab states would be prompted to change or reform under pressure from civil society. However, they disregarded the fact that these movements need a good amount of freedom to be able to function properly and influence the political milieu, something the authoritarian regimes were not keen to grant.[116] And when the spark of the Arab Spring caught fire, it became clear that civil society (in the sense of non-governmental organizations and institutions) would not play a major role as previously prescribed. Not only that, but the uprisings proved either wrong or irrelevant many of the preconditions deemed necessary by this paradigm.[117] The traditional opposition was surprised by the mass movements in the street and was reluctant to join, in some cases acting as mediator between the protesters and the regime in order to make some political gains. Instead, this opposition was replaced by horizontal networks of youth, women, political activists and unions. Much the same can be said of the elite who resisted the change to the extent it was possible, yet when necessary followed the crowd in order to not risk its interests. In addition, the neoliberal economic modernization that was dubbed essential for a transition to democracy in fact was a "key element in triggering the uprisings, rather than a positive contributor to democratic demands."[118]

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[116] Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 250.
[117] Pace and Cavatorta, "The Arab uprisings."
[118] Ibid., 130.

Authoritarian Resilience

After decades without evident progress toward democracy and liberties, doubts

arose regarding the path the transition paradigm had taken. A new branch of democracy

promoting studies surfaced, one interested in explaining why authoritarian regimes

continue to survive.[119] While scholars who belonged to the transition paradigm focused

on why the Middle East had not evolved to democracy and prescribed sets of economic,

social and political prerequisites, it became clear that these remedies were by no means

unique to the Middle East and instead should be shared by other regions in the world

including Africa and Latin America.[120] Some countries in these regions did indeed initiate

a kind of transition, which prompted scholars within the existing paradigms of

democratization studies to rethink their approach. As a result, some scholars thought it

was time to focus not on necessary variables of democratization, but rather on why "the

vast majority of Middle Eastern and North African states have failed to initiate transition

at all."[121] Instead of asking why the Arab world had failed to transition to democracy,

scholars stepped into a new zone: looking into the resilience of the authoritarian regimes.

They shifted to look at the "various mechanisms, or survival strategies, used by

authoritarian regimes to maintain their power successfully."[122]

The democratization/transition paradigm maintained its domination during the

1980s and 1990s, when it was "successfully challenged by the paradigm of 'authoritarian

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[119] See, Paul Aarts et al., *From Resilience to Revolt: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (University of Amsterdam-Department of Political Science, 2012).
[120] Ibid., 12.
[121] Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism," 142.
[122] Aarts et al., *From Resilience to Revolt*, 13.

resilience' in the 2000s."[123] Indeed, from that point until the eruption of the Arab Spring,

most of the scholarship in the region focused on the durability of authoritarianism in the

region.[124] Many of these analyses focused on so-called 'ruling bargains,' a concept

asserting that the goods and services people were getting in the region were actually in

exchange for surrendering their social and political rights. These bargains were among the

many survival strategies of the authoritarian regimes. At the same time, more services

and goods were given to the elite to keep them loyal and protect the interest of the

regimes. The regimes were able to sustain these bargains because they used despotism,

as Mehran Kamrava attests, "the bargains had several components, but fear and coercion

were undoubtedly among the most important. As states could deliver on fewer and fewer

of the promises and premises of their rule from the 1970s onwards, fear and repression

became more and more pervasive."[125]

The authoritarian resilience paradigm names additional reasons and strategies

that kept the transition to democracy at bay. By examining how the authoritarian regimes

had survived so far, they sought to indicate that a change in these factors ought to occur

in order for the transition process to kick-start. Eva Bellin, a leading figure within this

school, argues that "the exceptionalism of the Middle East and North Africa lies not so

much in absent prerequisites of democracy as in present conditions that foster robust

authoritarianism and especially a robust and politically tenacious coercive apparatus."[126]

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[123] Pace and Cavatorta, "The Arab Uprisings," 127; Aarts et al., *From Resilience to Revolt*, 15; Iliya Harik, "Democracy, "Arab Exceptionalism," and Social Science," *Middle East Journal* 60.4 (Autumn, 2006): 664-684.
[124] Kamrava, *Beyond the Arab Spring*, 1.
[125] Ibid., 3.
[126] Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism," 152.

As for these present conditions, we find on the economic level for instance that no

country in the MENA region is on the brink of total fiscal collapse, despite the economic

hardships that people face. They still enjoy enough revenue to maintain their security

apparatus; in fact, as she mentions, their security expenditures are among the highest

worldwide. And the average number of citizens involved in the security apparatus is also

high. They are countries rich in gas and petroleum or the recipients of Western aid that

sustains them well enough. In addition, for geopolitical reasons these regimes benefit

from the aid and military support of various Western countries. Furthermore, institutions

in the MENA region are structured as patrimonial state institutions that rely heavily on

the heads of the states and their family and close circles. The higher the degree of

institutionalization the more it is capable and willing to cut ties with the authoritarian

regime if it is required.[127] As she points out "where patrimonial institutions are wedded to

coercive capacity, authoritarianism is likely to endure. In this context, regime elites

possess both the will and the capacity to suppress democratic initiative,"[128] prolonging

the life of the authoritarian regimes.

Bellin notes one more 'present condition,' and that is the level of popular

involvement. The more people on the streets, the less the security apparatus is capable of

maintaining its legitimacy and the less it would be tempted to use sheer violence.

However, she immediately notes the obstacles facing the emergence of a mass

movement to oppose an authoritarian regime and bring it to an end. Due to the high

percentage of illiteracy and unemployment in the MENA region, the people's priorities

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

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are different from most those interested in a regime change. This, as Bellin maintains,

explains the meager number of street demonstrations and participants in opposition

activities witnessed in the last decades. Add to that the lack of labour unions and the

threat of Islamists, the latter of which leaves many among the middle class and secular

circles worried about possible power shifts and alluding to the previously mentioned

'nightmare scenarios.' In addition, Bellin argues that in order for the massive popular

movements to succeed, it requires the backing of the elite. The fate of massive popular

movements is related to how the elite perceives the changes taking place on the ground.

Is it a safe and secure reform that will keep up some of their power? Or are they heading

toward a total change that will shift the powers to their disadvantage? Bellin writes:

"clearly, the high costs of massive repression will not deter an elite that believes it will be

ruined by reform…however, where the elite does not perceive reform to be so

devastating, the higher cost of repression posed by high levels of popular mobilization

may serve as a tipping mechanism, pitching the elite onto the side of reform."[129]

It is worth noting that although the authoritarian resilience paradigm wishes to

break away from the previous transition paradigm, when it comes to giving an account of

a possible change on the regime level, they resort again to suggesting certain necessary

prerequisites. Bellin for example writes that certain conditions ought to be ripe for any

initiation of a transition. It is necessary to have a minimal level of elite commitment, and

national solidarity, and per capita GNP, as well as the "creation of impartial and effective

state institutions" which should include "effective bureaucracies, police and judiciaries

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[129] Ibid., 146.

that can deliver predictable rule of law and order."[130] In the absence of these structures

and conditions, the writer claims, the change will not yield democracy but rather a

different version of authoritarianism if not worse: chaos.

While some authors within this paradigm focus on how the authoritarian regimes

maintain their grasp of power, others look into how they are becoming stronger and far

more powerful. Steven Heydemann for instance argues that the "Arab regimes are

converging around policies that are explicitly designed to stabilize and preserve

authoritarian rule in the context of ongoing demands for political change."[131] Autocratic

regimes maintain their stability through the process of "authoritarian upgrading," a

process that revolves around the ability of these regimes to use the changes taking place

on the social or political levels, instead of resisting them, in order to boost their regimes

and make sure that they are not seriously challenged. Heydemann designates five

features which define authoritarian upgrading: "(1) appropriating and containing civil

societies; (2) managing political contestation; (3) capturing the benefits of selective

economic reforms; (4) controlling new communications technologies; and (5) diversifying

international linkages."[132] It is his belief that a mix of these elements is employed by all

Arab regimes.

While Bellin focuses on the level of institutionalization and how it affects the

authoritarian regime, claiming that patrimonial ties like the ones found in the Arab world,

especially in Syria, make it very hard for the regime to reform itself, Heydemann suggests

[130] Ibid., 152.
[131] Heydemann, *Upgrading authoritarianism*, VII.
[132] Ibid., 5.

that the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world are not only strong but adapting quickly to the changing environment surrounding them. This led him to believe that:

> Democratization in the Middle East is less likely to occur through rapid, Eastern European-style mass uprisings than through the slow, patient chipping away at regimes that are both more adept and more broadly consolidated than is often acknowledged. They also remind us just how deeply resilient these governments have been, how effectively they have managed in responding to changes and pressures that have produced massive political transformations in virtually every other part of the world.[133]

Regardless of their particular choice of emphasis – whether they believe that the Arab regimes are efficiently resisting any reforms, or whether they are in fact successfully deepening their despotic roots further and becoming more resilient – closely examining scholars of the authoritarian resilience helps us home in on some of the arguments this chapter set out to advance. First, that the prevailing wisdom of this paradigm dictates that if a transformation were to happen it would be driven by a reform led by the elite, non-governmental organizations working in sustainable development and democratization programs, or parts of the military (a coup-like change), or at least supported by them. Popular movements, social networks and ordinary people, on the other hand, rarely appear as possible catalysts of a change. Evidently, this is what made the uprisings in 2011 a shocking event. It certainly caught most observers by surprise, but especially so within democratization circles because it was a scenario that, in fact, was

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[133] Heydemann, "In the Shadow of Democracy," 148.

never entertained. The only possibility that was thought of and advanced was a change that started at the top, with limited involvement at the bottom of the pyramid.

Objective Despair

Why was the Arab Spring not predicted? Undoubtedly, the oppression and violence authoritarian regimes employ and the long periods they remain in power make them seem eternal. The hardships people go through to live a dignified life despite the harsh socio-economic conditions give the impression that all people want is just survival. Yet, the end of these regimes also seemed inevitable. As Paul Aarts puts it nicely, "during the rule of authoritarian regimes their collapse appears inconceivable, while after they have fallen their demise appears to have been inevitable."[134] Nonetheless, how did the vast genre of democratization studies, dedicated fully to measuring every minuscule dimension of the regimes, not see this coming? Various answers have been suggested. Aarts cites several Arab authors, including Farid Boussaid, Al-Sayyid Yasin and Fahmi Huwaidi, who believe that the all too easy tendency to explain every aspect of life in the Middle East, including politics, via culture and religion is to blame for scholars missing stress factors that indicate a possible explosion. The same exceptionalist outlook, mentioned earlier, that stereotypes Arabs as "politically backward, apathetic and submissive to their authoritarian regimes"[135] plays a major role in their inability to foresee such a grand event.

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[134] Aarts et al., *From Resilience to Revolt*, 6.
[135] Ibid., 10.

Another contributor to the unexpectedness of these events is the tendency of late, especially among the authoritarian resilience paradigm, to stress the robustness of the authoritarian regimes over the build-up of stress factors.[136] Gregory Gause argues that scholars had overemphasized the "persistence of undemocratic rulers" to the point that they underestimated the "forces of change that were bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics."[137] While he admits the mistake of believing that the authoritarian Arab regimes are stable, he claims that he and others had missed the Arab Spring because scholars had not been studying the role of the military in Arab politics. Implying that the military played a major and detrimental role in these revolutions, Gause jumps directly to analyzing the reasons why the military sided with protesters in some cases, overlooking the fact that the absence of military support, for example in Syria, did not stop the people from protesting. This is in addition to the fact that the military would not have stepped in were it not for massive protests in the streets; meaning that studying the military and their role in the Middle East would not have changed the predictions regarding the potential for an Arab Spring.

While it is certain that the institution of the military played a role in all the Arab countries both before and after the revolution, and that it can be a factor in predicting how the revolutions might develop, this does not in itself explain why the Arab Spring revolutions were not predicted – let alone identified as a viable option – by the democratization field. An answer that is more in keeping with the experience of the

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[136] Ibid., VI.
[137] See Gregory Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 90.4 (August 2011): 90.

revolutions and the way such transformation is being theorized is proposed by Michelle

Pace and Francesco Cavatorta. They argue that the rigidity of the paradigms made it

harder to see the social networks and actors that were central to the occurrence of the

Arab Spring and to its understanding. Scholars' hopes for elite or military intervention

hindered their observation of the fundamental transformations that were taking place

between wider sectors of the people. This rigidity can be seen as a form of epistemic

imposition; certain views and possibilities were not only absent but actively unexplored.

This demonstrates, as I have shown throughout this chapter, first, a preoccupation

among all the democratization studies branches with state politics. Politics is formulated

as the space occupied by the state[138] and its allies, and in that sense is a hierarchal

domain that is constructed top to bottom. Democratization studies omitted, almost

completely, the category of 'the people' that was in fact at the forefront of the Arab

revolutions. These paradigms believed that democratization can happen via a quiet, slow-

paced reform carried out by the regime itself or its close circles. They continued to

perpetuate this thought despite the regime's obvious rejection and disapproval of any

meaningful change. Second, when the regime was not the addressee of these hopes, the

only political players offered were institutions and well-established organizations—

economic elites, educated professional employees of NGOs, or branches of the military.

In short, they emphasized the role of the state and the "ruling elites and traditional

political and civil society actors to the detriment of societal forms of unstructured

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[138] This point is emphasized by Francis Fukuyama when he argues that "the democracy-promotion community needs to pay much more attention to the building of modern states," in "Why is democracy performing so poorly?," *Journal of Democracy* 26.1 (2015): 20.

mobilization and non-traditional, leaderless and horizontal social and political actors."[139]

Third, an emphasis on socio-economic factors continued to be played as background for

a common disbelief in the ability of humans to act and be involved in their realities. This

fixation on paradigms and structures of power renders individuals and societies helpless

and more dangerously hopeless.

Concluding Remarks

We should recall that the first time the two words Arab and spring were put

together was under the Bush administration, when the ostensible reforms that took place

in a few Arab countries in 2005 were dubbed an 'Arab Spring.'[140] This was perceived as a

"turning point for the Arab world,"[141] that is, a transformative measure, and a building

block for prospective democratic regimes. However, the scope and nature of the mass

protests that started in Tunisia in late 2010, and which spread quickly to other

neighbouring countries, proposed a fundamental different kind of 'Spring' than the one

the Bush administration was referring to and eager to support. They were revolutions

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[139] Pace and Cavatorta, "The Arab Uprisings," 127.

[140] The Bush administration was referring to the large-turnout general elections that took place in Iraq in 2005 and to the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon, whose death prompted a massive popular movement to demand the end of Syrian control over Lebanon. It was also the year that witnessed the Saudi authorities – long-standing ally of the United States – agree to hold municipal elections for the first time. In the same year another ally of the US, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, introduced a reform concerning the election of the president that allowed voters for the first time to choose between several candidates. Nonetheless, any serious observer of the region knows that these changes do not amount to any fundamental or long-lasting impact on the governing system in Egypt or the broader Arab world, nor do they affect the intention of the various dictators to continue cling to their power. For more see: Gilbert Achcar, "Arab Spring: Late and Cold," *Le Monde Diplomatique* July 2005. Available: http://mondediplo.com/2005/07/06arabworld

[141] Seattle times staff, "The Arab Spring of 2005: The democracy project is, of course, just beginning.," *The Seattle Times* 21 March 2005. Available: http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/the-arab-spring-of-2005/

sparked by decades of oppression, impoverishment and lack of liberties aimed at the

complete overthrow of the regime. Reforms and reconciliation proposals were not part of

the protesters' agenda or jargon. Moreover, the democracy they were demanding was

essentially different from the democracy that for decades now was the focus of

theoretical debate and study in political science and Middle East studies departments,

which circled around notions of reforms and top-down amendments. In fact, it should be

noted that these massive peoples' movements occurred *despite* this field of prosperous

and prolific scholarship, the overwhelming majority of which never predicted or

prescribed mass civil mobilizations or revolutions as viable routes for democratic

transitioning. On the contrary, in the last few years before the revolutions broke out,

these studies were preoccupied with what they agreed to call the 'regime consolidation'

or 'authoritarian resilience' paradigm.[142] This paradigm addressed 'objective' factors –

social, political and economic – that explained why the regimes held their ground and did

not face any major dissent, and why prospects for change are rare. As I have argued,

these factors always lacked one important component: popular grounds for change, that

is, the participation of the people. The will of the people, their aspirations and

involvement, their actions, and unaccounted for voice, are a major factor that did not

play a role in the democratization paradigm and its theoretical foundation.

The field of democratization studies is vast. For this reason my investigation is

limited to the transition to democracy paradigm, the authoritarian resilience paradigm

and those who advance an exceptionalist view. I examined their discourse in regard to

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[142] See, Peter Seeberg, "An Arab World in Transition, Political Changes and Theoretical Discussions in a Post-'Arab Spring' Scenario," *Middle East Critique* 24.1 (2015): 1-7.

the democratic model they envisioned and defended for the Middle East, and the prospects of democracy in the region. It is important to note that in assessing the democratization studies accounts, the aim is not to assess where these paradigms went wrong empirically, but rather to evaluate what common foundation they have on the theoretical level and how this foundation affects our imagination of democracy and politics in general. These studies, I maintain, have translated the interest in democracy into an interest in regime change. Regime change happens at the top of the pyramid, divorced from civil involvement, and accordingly the catalyst of such a change is usually the elite, the military or civil society. Furthermore, external pressure or direct intervention are thought of as effective and legitimate methods of prompting regime change. That being so, uprisings similar to the ones witnessed in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia or Bahrain are not incidents that were imaginable within these circles—a position shared by the various branches despite their theoretical variances.

Indeed, the analytic failings of democratization studies in this realm are not simply a matter of oversight, but also the active prediction or prescription that the only viable solution to the region's despotic regimes is reform, led by either the elite in collaboration with civil society or the military or both. Meanwhile, others continue to believe that an external intervention will salvage the region.[143] These are not merely objective predictions, but normative prescriptions that have widely influenced academic circles, activists, and social and political parties and movements.[144] Once some countries started

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[143] Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?"

[144] Asef Bayat argues that these revolutionaries were not as revolutionary or radical in nature compared to, for instance, the Iranian revolution. They did not use, according to him, the discourse of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism that was widespread in other twentieth-century revolutions. Bayat, *Revolutions Without Revolutionaries*, 11. This decreased radicality has to do with decades of pacification by studies that

such a transition via a different route than had been previously envisioned, these studies

and their works came under scrutiny. Democratization studies, and the assumptions its

adherents made about the political realities in the Middle East and North African region,

are back on the table.[145]

One cannot but agree with Ian Shapiro's assessment that "for all the difficulties

that have been identified in the theory of democracy, its political legitimacy is seldom

seriously challenged in the contemporary world."[146] I hope that it is clear by now that this

chapter did not intend to challenge the theory of democracy as is. I am interested in

revealing the contradiction – to the extent of lost meaning – not between the praxis and

theory, but the entire conceptual apparatus as it attempts to translate and make sense of

both theory and praxis. This decade's global protest movements clearly demonstrate that

the problem with democracy does not pertain to its practices and institutions, but rather

to the insufficiency of its institutions to reach the concept itself. As Michael Hardt and

Antonio Negri argue,

> What the various protests make clear is that democracy cannot be made or
>
> imposed *from above*. The protesters refuse the notions of democracy from above
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> promoted by both sides of the cold war: democracy is neither simply the political
>
> face of capitalism nor the rule of bureaucratic elites. And democracy does not
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> result from either military intervention and regime change or from the various
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> current models of "transition to democracy," which are generally based on some

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concentrated on democracy as a route of reform and top-down peaceful installation of democratic
governments.
[145] Pace and Cavatorta, "The Arab uprisings."
[146] Ian Shapiro, *The state of democratic theory* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 146.

form of Latin American *caudillismo* and have proved better at creating new

oligarchies than any democratic systems. All of the radical social movements since

1968 have challenged these corruptions of the concept of democracy that

transform it into a form of rule imposed and controlled from above. Democracy,

instead, they insist, can only arise *from below*. Perhaps the present crisis of the

concept of democracy due to its new global scale can provide the occasion to

return it to its older meaning as the rule of everyone by everyone, a democracy

without qualifiers, without ifs or buts.[147]

By interrogating the analysis and recommendations of these three incongruous schools,

my intention was to demonstrate that the prospects of democracy were conceptualized

without due consideration to the role of people and popular actions—neither in initiating

the process, nor in directing its destination. Furthermore, putting these schools of

transition in historical perspective places the recent events of the Arab Spring in light of

this field of study's developments. We can fairly assume that the chosen mechanism each

branch of 'democracy promotion' sought to advance is part of their understanding of how

democracy works, and maybe more substantially, what the democratic project is all

about. This becomes more apparent when we learn that the differences between them

are marginal when it comes to how they envision the role of civil engagement and

political participation of the many in democracy-making.

    The domain of democratization studies, not only affects but indeed reflects how

democracy is perceived, envisioned and theorized. The paradigms that were dominant for

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[147] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 237.

decades in Middle Eastern studies departments, which specialized in apprehending the

obstacles to democracy in the region, had envisioned it in terms of program design and

technique; if and when the right conditions are met, democracy can be successfully

implemented. This image of democracy as a mechanism and program goes hand in hand

with the belief that democratization can be carried out via reform, emphasizing the role

of the traditional actors in bringing it about. It also underscores the vision of politics as a

top-down system that favours those closer to the circles of power, as is indeed the case,

but one that is incapable of imagining a different scenario.

The disregard for the potential that is latent in human will and human action is not

a symptom of looking at one region or another, although this aspect cannot be entirely

disregarded from the overall analysis; it rather reveals streams that run deep in

democratic theory specifically and in political theory generally. On a more fundamental

basis it reflects how politics and the public sphere are viewed, practiced, imagined and

theorized: with restricted access to the general population. As this will be a major theme

over the course of my thesis, one that I will refer back to and explore slowly, this chapter

has sought to accomplish a humbler and more specific task, which is to see how the non-

involvement of people in public space is grounded conceptually and prescribed

theoretically—this must be addressed before we even come to consider the question of

praxis.

Chapter Two

Untransferable Sovereignty

> "The political operation par excellence is always going to be the construction of sa 'people.'"[148]

Introduction

The preceding chapter concluded that the existing epistemological tools are unsuited to appreciate the political novelty of popular movements and mass mobilizations, and in many ways act as hindrances to engagement with the new insights, experiences and knowledge these moments make possible. To prove the validity of this claim, chapter one focused on the Arab spring, examining the analytical and conceptual paradigms that for decades dominated the discourse of political change in the Arab region. This discourse, situated in political and social sciences, examined the obstacles that delayed the emergence of democracy in the region, and in turn delineated the standards that would be characteristic of democracy's possible inception. The proposed solutions by these democratization studies seldom included forms of change from below—an active and engaged political participation by the many. This ostensibly objective reading of reality became a prescription for the Arab region's political maladies, with military coups, elite power shifts, and civil society alliances with dominant political elites deemed the most feasible strategies toward change. Thus, the previous chapter

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[148] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), 153.

prepared the ground to unravel an important history and political reality: the story of the

exclusion of people from politics. To recount this story and understand its implications for

both theory and praxis, we need to remain firmly grounded in political philosophy, which

provides us with the opportunity to make sense of and distinguish experiences and

phenomenon while keeping an eye on our contextualized present and political history.

Within the overall project of this dissertation, the ultimate goal of which is to

investigate and theorize the new political and ethical lessons the recent popular uprisings

communicate, this chapter aims to disentangle three important concepts in the

experience of any revolution: people, politics and power. However, it is not the intention

of this dissertation to offer precise definitions for these concepts that are untethered

from time and place. In fact, I will not be defining them per se; standpoint I suggest

interlocks them in a manner that the act of conceptualizing one without the others

already reveals an epistemic and moral problem. Although my theoretical discussion of

these concepts draws partially upon the ontology of the Arab uprisings, I will not present

any insights derived from the uprisings until this chapter first satisfies its goal of

problematizing the exclusion of popular grounds in constructing the political. A coherent

theoretical account that addresses the exclusion of people from politics as *the* problem of

political philosophy is a prerequisite to learning from and appreciating praxis. The

relationship between theory and practice is reciprocal; praxis cannot teach us something

new if there is no willingness to identify the shortcomings of current theories in

appreciating the role of people in politics. And without developing a certain theoretical

attunement to praxis, the latter cannot yield a different form or interpretation. This

chapter will deal with the first part of this relationship, weighted toward theory, while the

subsequent chapter will be dedicated to how the practice of participation both challenges

and enhances our political theory.

Let me begin by briefly charting how the argument of this chapter will be

developed, starting with an outline of what we mean when we say 'politics.' The common

understanding of the term prescribes it as that which relates to regimes, manners of

ruling, and the attainment of certain collective goals[149] (the common good). A different

meaning, usually presented in opposition to the aforementioned common one, is politics

as procedure[150] or as an arena of power contestation. The first meaning is more

omnipresent and hegemonic, and the latter is subsumed under the first rather than

providing serious contestation as an alternative. As I will argue, politics as procedure

seeks to broaden up the frontiers of politics as regime, drawing our attention to the

peripheries; nonetheless, in doing so it can be viewed as having a legitimizing effect,

offering a justification to the whole edifice of politics as power concentrated on the state

level, and constituting the public realm as a mechanism by which certain goals are set and

attained by the state. In the midst of this debate, which is presented as if between two

equal representations of politics, I look to the philosopher Hannah Arendt whose concept

of action, and collective acting in public, offers a unique view on politics. Following her

perspective, I situate politics to where it belongs: the people.

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[149] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34-35.
[150] See, Cornelius Castoriadis, "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime," *Constellations* 4.1 (April 1997): 1-18.

Fully answering the question of what politics is also requires introducing the

history of the concept of 'the people.' For this purpose, I engage Margaret Canovan's *The*

People[151] to introduce a short history of the emergence of the concept and the various

developments it went through. By way of mapping its history, the term is revealed to be

implicated in political conflicts and struggles and is unraveled through them. Of particular

interest to my discussion is the shift that happened in the Roman republic to the status

people enjoyed in the political system: from active participants in public affairs, to an

abstract entity grounded in common interests and law. This moment diverted the power

and authority the people had from its practical mode to an idealistic realm—that of the

sovereign.

The history Canovan illustrates is crucial to clarifying the moment active

participation in public matters ceased to constitute the life of a citizen and the soul of a

people. Nevertheless, we need to understand how this exclusion was grounded

philosophically, and why it persists in our thinking about politics today. To do so, I discuss

the teachings of political theorists and fathers of liberalism John Locke and Thomas

Hobbes, who despite their apparent theoretical differences both conceived of the

people's political power in terms of a prerogative handed in to an overarching authority.

Out of fear or out of trust, yielding this or that government, the people in this account do

not possess power but rather act as its custodian. Irrespective of the form of governance

that is defended by social contract theorists, the rudimentary assumptions speak to a

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[151] Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Polity, 2005).

perception of power as fundamentally a negative force[152] that needs to be banished from the public and controlled by the few (i.e. the state and its administrative apparatus). The punitive nature of power sets it up to be non-transitional and abstracted. Contrary to this view, I argue that for people to participate in politics, as they do in times of revolutions and upheavals, power needs to be conceptualized positively and constructively as a building and enabling force.

Another philosophical and political underpinning that facilitated the banishment of people from politics – and which must be challenged likewise – is the dominance of reason in the public sphere and its depiction as impartial and free of emotions.[153] To exercise power in the public sphere and in affairs concerning the many is to display passion regarding a cause. It is not difficult to ascertain that those who take to the streets on a whim, in a decision of mere seconds, when revolutions spark give voice to their passions and desires by exercising power. To judge desires as anti-political and anti-rational is a precursor to asking people to 'mind their own business' in their private spaces and hand the task over to the professionals. Indeed, to talk about abstracting

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[152] I will explain in detail in this chapter why I use the term positive or productive to describe power rather than negative, for now suffices to say that I borrow this insight from Michael Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, eds. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1997), 167. Stewart Clegg expands on Foucault's understating of power as a constructive force, see, *Frameworks of Power* (Sage, 1989), 2, 28-29. And Todd May also makes an argument against understating power as negative in, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Penn State Press, 1994); Saul Newman, "The Place of Power in Political Discourse." *International Political Science Review* 25.2 (2004): 139-157.

[153] An argument I will develop using primarily, Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory," *Praxis International* 5.4 (1985): 381-401.

power is to talk about neutralizing the imaginative, creative power of the many, of citizens in public and political spheres.

Conceiving of the public sphere as rational, ostensibly clearing it of desires and emotions, is another way in which it is removed from power and ultimately from the people. Desire encapsulates power and is activated by it; desiring is a powerful act and actualizing what we desire requires a force, a will, an agency…which, in turn, needs political space to be practiced and realized. Thus, the emancipatory dimension of the category 'the people' lies primarily in the power individuals have, and the power of the collective when acting together. This view takes into account that the passions and desires of individuals are forms of power, a force to organize their own lives and those of others; these are preconditions to engagement in politics. Revolutions hand us a unique opportunity to scrutinize and reorganize this truth. An opportunity, too, to query our knowledge of the concept. The political theorist Kevin Olson writes:

> Popular politics is based on a set of fragile, changeable associations: forms of mobilization, collective action, public opinion, and symbolic protest. These are framed as different forms of collectivity—peoples, nations, publics, crowds, masses, mobs—which inhabit our collective imagination in different ways. They differ in their durability and rectitude: the composition of various groups, the ways they act, their forms of association, the normative nuances of our attitudes toward them. *Among these, the people is one with a storied and privileged history.*[154]

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[154] Kevin Olson, "Fragile Collectivities, Imagined Sovereignties," in Alain Badiou et al, *What is a People,?* trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 107.

During moments of change it becomes all the more possible to draw attention to the boundaries of the concept, and to the superficial, oppressive, and imposed order of the political sphere when it comes to reinforcing certain understandings of the people. It is in these moments that we understand that if the political is thought of only in terms of ruling, then the people's sovereignty is reclaimed during upheavals to institute a (new) rule. Or to defend an existing one, or replace it and restore peace. The people's political power is conceived as a defensive and restorative force.[155] They are presumed to act to assert and manifest their otherwise abstract and ideal sovereignty; they defend their rights, and stand against their violation, and are supposed to reinstall order. When this finally happens, the people are expected to 'go back home.' Oddly then, at the very moment the people attain power and act upon it, in times of revolutions, they are required to surrender it. They mediate its concrete existence in their hands until the next power apparatus is formed. But this is not the destiny those revolting in Tahrir Square, for instance, had in mind. The potential and actual power a revolting crowd carries pushes repeatedly against the wall of politics-as-rule and offers a new way to theorize the political realm altogether. When the political has been fundamentally agitated and questioned, suddenly it appears open and welcoming; the envisioned suspicious relation between the people and the political becomes instead natural and necessary. What is and what ought to be become questions for today's real human beings, not distant personas and entities. In moments of upheavals and revolutions the political appears in more realistic and practical terms; it is a matter that concerns individuals, something they

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[155] Canovan, *The People*, 21.

relate to and are moved by, something they wish to deliberate on or modify. These are

the moments that theory can learn from praxis, can change and adjust. These are

moments that suggest that what the political is, after all, is what the people are capable

of doing with the power they have individually and collectively. It is the art they make out

of their choice to live together, as I will argue.

Politics and the Political

What is politics? Or what is the political, or the political sphere? An elucidation of

this rather monumental project can lead in many directions; however, since our goal

remains to study the political and ethical newness of a revolution (which I have assumed

to be otherwise unrevealed on a daily basis within the web of relations between

individuals), then an initiative into this question should take 'the people' as its premise.

Therefore, this inquiry will be guided by the linkage between people and politics: how one

is understood in terms of the other, and under what conditions they can prosper.

The widespread understanding of politics is that it is a system of governing a

population, tied to a regime and its apparatus. As Bernard Crick put it, the "common

usage of the word might encourage one to think that politics is a real force in every

organized state."[156] Meanwhile, Carl Schmitt underscores that "in one way or another

'political' is generally juxtaposed to 'state' or at least is brought into relation with it. The

state thus appears as something political, the political as something pertaining to the

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[156] Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 4.

state."[157] It is hence no surprise that left-leaning theorists and political philosophers have been interested in questioning this notion of politics so as to broaden its limits to account for popular forms of participation. They have done so by introducing a division into the field of politics as regime, enabling them to mediate different reflections on it. Thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis introduce politics by disentangling politics as regime from politics as a procedure, presenting the latter as more attuned to reality as an arena of power conflicts. Castoriadis writes:

> *Politics – la politique –* does not exist everywhere and always; true politics is the result of a rare and fragile social-historical creation. What does necessarily exist in every society is *the political sphere in a general or neutral sense*, "*the political*" *– le politique –* the explicit, implicit, sometimes almost ungraspable dimension that deals with power, namely the instituted instance (or instances) that is (or are) capable of issuing sanction-bearing injunctions and that must always, and explicitly, include at least what we call a judicial power and a governmental power.[158]

A similar distinction is found in the jargon of Lefort. The political for him is "politics-as-regime," while la politique is the domain that harbours "competition for public power and decisions about its use."[159] Agamben too argues that the "Western political system results from the coupling of two heterogeneous elements, a politico-juridical rationality

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[157] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of The Political*, trans. George Schwab (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 20.

[158] Castoriadis, "Democracy as Procedure," 1.

[159] James D. Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy," *Thesis Eleven* 87.1 (2006): 35.

and an economic-governmental rationality, a 'form of constitution' and a 'form of government.' Incommensurable they may be, but they legitimate and confer mutual consistency on each other."[160] Furthermore, he informs us that this ambiguity between politics – *la politique* – and the political – *le politique* – has appeared since Aristotle who described them sequentially: constituent power (*politeia*) and constituted power (*politeuma*).[161] Yet, how are we to understand this division? What forms of knowledge and power does it serve? One way to approach this query is to read it as a function of liberal versus radical-democratic views on politics, where the first iteration views politics "in terms of the common good and the proper constitution of the community. This understanding underlies the main current of political philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Rawls, with its focus on 'constitutional essentials' and its search for a just and stable order. This view is holistic and normative," writes James Ingram. Meanwhile, he continues, the radical-democratic view "conceives of politics in terms of power, as competition for rule and resources and the jockeying of different interest and ideologies."[162]

Undoubtedly, the suggested distinction between the liberal view on politics and the radical is not a value-free one. The first is usually portrayed as contributing to the development of a normative outlook and as a stabilizing feature for the otherwise untrustworthy world of politics. On the other hand, the second acts as a form of critique, seemingly tending toward an idealistic form of organizing public life while still illuminating

[160] Giorgio Agamben, "Introductory Note on the Concept of Democracy," in Giorgio Agamben, et al, *Democracy in What State?*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.
[161] Ibid., 3.
[162] Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's," 35.

real fears and actual processes. If we follow the same division further, the one between

politics and the political, it becomes apparent from the moment this insight is brought to

bear on politics that it carries with it the place it presumes people should occupy and

offers a different outlook altogether on this distinction. The political in effect is subsumed

under politics and is not proposed as a replacement to it, or a challenge to its

foundational premises. Here Andreas Kalyvas's depiction of Schmitt's political and

constitutional theory and of the latter's concern about the role of popular assemblies in

democratic states is useful to clarify what I mean by 'subsumed,' and why this view

remains problematic: "[Schmitt's] argument that the nearly awake sovereign acts outside

the established political system and circumscribes the existing procedural mechanisms

and legal limitations points to the need to supplement formal, instituted democracy with

peripheral, participatory, and quasi-direct practices of popular intervention and collective

power."[163] 'Supplement' is a key word here, clarifying what it means to subsume the

political under politics; the popular engagement and participation of individuals in the

process of politics is not a different way to see politics but rather to see what is missing in

it. Politics remains a domain where the state is the main bearer of legitimate political

power, but it now must account for some form of public participation without allowing

that participation to influence and reconfigure the whole apparatus of the political realm.

Then, regardless of the signifiers used to describe the 'antidote' to the effects of politics-

as-regime, if that be by introducing politics as a procedure or emphasizing its conflictual

nature and the need for deliberation and participation, these remain secondary and

complementary to the sense of politics as regime. The distinction only acts not to bring

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[163] Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 185.

apart, or to differentiate but to assume a rupture in the same structure, and that is politics as a mechanism of governing.

The difficulty in teasing apart the two outlooks of politics, which Agamben attests to, is a difficulty faced especially by those who belong to the radical-democratic tradition, because the same categories that are used to define politics – as rule, as governing, as prohibitive power of the state – are either accepted or contested. That is, although radical political philosophy is concerned with the place people occupy as active citizens in the political system, politics nonetheless is not defined in terms of the people and their active participation. I will expand upon this point later, but suffice it to say this is neither an argument to oppose the state nor to suggest an alternative to it. Rather, the aim is to focus on the concept of politics: what it can generate in terms of our mutual living; if the whole process is thought to be initiated from bottom up and not vice versa; if it questions whom it wishes to serve.

It is on this subject that I find Arendt's thoughts on the political to be the most intriguing and illuminating. Despite critiques that she is "a political philosopher of nostalgia, an anti-modernist for whom the Greek 'polis' remained the quintessential political experience," and that her thinking is 'irrelevant to contemporary concerns,"[164] her insights revitalize an important domain of our living together that cannot be ignored. For obvious reasons she is considered part of the map of the radical-democrats: much of her work was spent writing against politics as rule and politics as means to an end,

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[164] Selya Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), x.

instead emphasizing the role of action and of carrying out activities in the public sphere.

Some read Arendt as a thinker who in fact wanted to bring together the two streams of

politics, the liberal-constitutional and the radical-critical, which I have demonstrated

above; Andreas Kalyvas advances this claim. He argues that she was interested in forming

a "relationship between the constituent power and those extraordinary instances of

radical political and constitutional innovation."[165] That, although she was a thinker who

hailed popular moments of action, "she was able to recognize the benefits as well as the

threats that revolutionary undertaking pose to freedom." And that she was deeply

concerned while observing revolutions unfold in modern history with "the paradoxes and

perplexities of all founding ruptures that often take the form of what she called a 'vicious

circle' between the constituent power and the constituted powers, the creator and the

creation, the extraordinary and the ordinary."[166]

Again, it is not the intention of this dissertation to defend or condemn revolutions

as a form of doing or undoing politics. The question that continues to direct this inquiry is

what is revealed in and about the political. And for that to be revealed I suggest we keep

in line with Arendt's fascination with new beginnings, that is demonstrated through her

strong defense of the category of action, and its bewildering potential. Arendt was

occupied with what a concentrated collective action can achieve. Action for her enables

individuals to "see themselves as the agents and the originators of their own political

world. They become lucid and conscious historical actors."[167] Kalyvas adds:

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[165] Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics*, 196.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid., 204.

[The] recognition of active participation in revolutionary times is at the very heart

of Arendt's understanding of freedom, viewed as an extraordinary deed of

collective self-institution. By seeing themselves as the exclusive creators of their

own world, as the ones who have a clear, untransferable responsibility toward it,

the members of a political community intervene consciously and directly in their

making of their collective existence.[168]

To make my case clear right at the beginning, what I find most useful in Arendt's account

is that she refrains from deciding on and introducing a definition of the political per se,

instead approaching the task of understanding politics through the lenses of other

categories that she introduces into her political writings, such as acting and action.[169] I

intend to use her method, that is to introduce an understanding of politics via a different

category – in this case 'the people' – so that politics will be perceived from the outset as

the domain that enables people to be engaged and active, adding meaning to their living

together.

Action for Arendt is a political faculty. It mediates our relationship to the world

and the web of human relationships around us, giving us the possibility to influence it,

change it or merely leave a trace on it:

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[168] Ibid., 204-205.

[169] Alice MacLachlan emphasizes the point that the category of action is central to Arendt's political writings, because only through action we come to be acquainted with fundamental moral principles, that cannot be formed and judged *a priori*. Action itself is considered according to the principles it enacts and not its consequences. See, Alice MacLachlan, "An Ethic of Plurality: Reconciling Politics and Morality in Hannah Arendt," in *History and Judgement*, eds. Alice MacLachlan and Vienna I. Torsen, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 21, 2006.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion

is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact

of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by

necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be

stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it

is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came

into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning

something new on our own initiative. To act in its most general sense, means to

take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, "to begin," "to lead," and

eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original

meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners

by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.[170]

Regardless of how we act and toward what, Arendt believed that action "has an inherent

tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries."[171] It is this tendency

of action to render unstable and unpredictable any re-established boundary, and to cut

through every limitation that makes action a political category. The body politic cannot

safeguard against action,[172] because its capacity to establish new ties is founded upon it

being unbound.[173] Accordingly, "the political realm rises directly out of acting together,

the 'sharing of words and deeds.' Thus, action not only has the most intimate relationship

to the public part of the world common to us all but is the one activity which constitutes

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[170] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176-177.
[171] Ibid., 190.
[172] Ibid., 191.
[173] Ibid.

it."[174] The category of action conveys how, from the perspective of carrying out an action

with others in the public realm, politics as regime falls short of reflecting and representing

what true politics is:

> [W]hether we know it or not, when we speak and think of action, which after all is
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> one of the most important and perhaps even the central concept of political
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> science, we have in mind a categorical system of means and ends, of ruling and
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> being ruled, of interests and moral standards. This system owes its existence to
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> the beginning of traditional political philosophy, but in it there is hardly any room
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> for the spirit of starting an enterprise and, together with others, seeing it through
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> to its conclusion.[175]

Equally, Arendt's depiction of action clarifies the shortcomings of politics as procedure;

while she questions the hierarchical nature of politics with demands for inclusion and

deliberation, her account remains faithful to the perspective that politics is a path to the

good life or means to a higher end, and that power is a force that needs to be controlled.

This instrumentalizes political action and restrains it, failing to clearly acknowledge the

public realm as an open space for the many to act and think together.

The lesson to draw from Arendt's account on action is her emphasis on the

"inherent unpredictability"[176] of the category of action and its central position in

constituting the body politic. Actions lead us to view more clearly that there cannot be

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[174] Ibid., 198.
[175] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005), 45.
[176] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191.

any clear-cut, defined and protected "common good" in politics, that any political project pretending to advance such a belief is highly questionable. The common good is revealed, learned, practiced and comes under scrutiny; it might go through changes and modifications. All of this collective action allows. Indeed, "the question of the common good belongs to the domain of social-historical making/doing [*faire*], not to theory."[177] This is the principle of the concept of acting, that knowing and doing are coupled up; the analytical position of the knower, be that the ruler or the philosopher, are useless. The political is then revealed as that which keeps the common good open and does not arrive at all-inclusive conclusions.

Thus far, Arendt has flipped upside down our conception of politics; it is itself the common good. Politics is the only common good that can be agreed upon, with everything else open for contestation, deliberation, for doing and acting on practical issues that concern human affairs, and not ideals. The common good is not decided upon because once it is then praxis loses its meaning, making us lose our curiosity to find out how to live together, which is what bestows meaning to the state of being together. As Elizabeth Strakosch argues, Arendt was interested in reinstating "political action as a positive enduring condition, and offers an account of politics as the good life rather than as pathway to the good life."[178]

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[177] Castoriadis, "Democracy as Procedure," 15.
[178] Elizabeth Strakosch, "Beyond Colonial Completion: Arendt, Settler Colonialism and the End of Politics," in *The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation*, eds. Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark, and Ravi De Costa (Springer, 2016), 15.

Notwithstanding Arendt's depiction of action as unbounded and free, she was aware that certain conditions encourage, and others hinder, individuals and collectives to act. It is that understanding that brought her to believe that the only common good is politics itself. Politics not in a specific physical location or city-state, but in that space that "lies between people living together."[179] The political should therefore always be open and flexible, but open to whom? Who gets to act on it? These are foundational questions left unanswered. The category of action as a phenomenological concept does not reveal how the political sphere is constructed and saturated in power relations, nor how power is used as an invitation to act, but mainly as a warning to refrain from doing so. Arendt did not delve into questions of power relations and others of inclusion and exclusion as political categories. While keeping in mind the importance of the category of action Arendt proposes to define politics, I argue that authority, self-determination and sovereignty are better revealed as spaces of power relations when the category of 'the people' becomes, instead, the parameter for understanding and forming politics. The category of the people reveals, as will be argued, that a definition of politics has to push against the limitations of theory and what it makes possible.

Preliminary Questions on The People

"The people want to depose the regime." This slogan and many others, all prefaced with 'the people,' echoed in the squares occupied by protesters throughout the

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[179] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

Arab world from the end of 2010 through the beginning of 2011. But who are *those*

people? They are both the signified and the signifier: pouring into the streets and squares,

climbing on top of buildings and institutions, blocking the streets to protest, declaring in

their collective gathering the creation of 'the people' here and now. The stark emergence

of 'the people' into the public discourse, which coincided with the very first spark of

demonstrations, affirms what we already knew about the term—it "remains solidly

rooted on the side of emancipation."[180] It appeared as an imperative. To legitimize any

argument, to dare to announce any idea, 'the people' had to precede or to follow it.

Any examination of the novelty that the current revolutions offer on the ethical

and political level must study the category of 'the people,' as it is a fundamental

component of addressing politics in general and change in particular. Thus, this inquiry

has to start by asking how we can define 'the people.' Why did observers refer to that

gathering of protestors as 'the people'? Was it simply the basic numbers? (We were

confronted with millions, not a few.) Or was it their act of self-assertion, their vocal

announcement 'we are the people' that left no place for doubt? (They demanded from

us, the spectators, to recognize and circulate their newly emerging association as 'the

people'.) Maybe what defines 'the people' is not the subjects or their consciousness

knowledge of themselves, but rather their subjective actions in the present moment. The

people are coined in the courageous act of deposing the regime, a radical demand that in

its gravity acknowledges something larger than the 'I' and the 'we,' something that ought

to represent sovereignty. Could their demands for freedom and justice, as universal and

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[180] Alain Badiou, et al, *What is a People?*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Vii.

inclusive demands, represent the authority of the whole body of citizens? In its noble formation – spontaneous, peaceful, and solidaristic – the gathering resisted reduction to anything less than 'the people' in its widest and most abstract form. But it also refused to be anything less than its immediate and specific manifestation—the people gathered in action here in the square.

Despite the term's malleable nature, and the difficulty in pinpointing precisely to whom it refers, it bursts onto the political stage in an unavoidable, recurring, and effusive manner. Indeed, the term 'the people' is inescapable in contemporary politics,[181] despite a lack of agreement on its exact meaning. It transforms into a volatile material during the constitutive moments of popular movements and is invoked by the entirety of the political spectrum. In point of fact, it would not be possible to discuss political change without discussing the terminology that holds it together, inciting the project, realizing it, or deconstructing it altogether. These junctures call upon us to understand its scope and meaning and, on the way, comprehend why it escapes being fully grasped. Why, that is, 'the people' is hard to capture until it's already conspicuous and in the making.

The ambiguities that accompany efforts to define the term reveal a history of ongoing political disagreements.[182] The most obvious conflict over the term's delineation, is over its authoritative mode. Almost all social and political movements, gatherings, and parties lay claims to being true to, even embodying, the people. The greater the group's material or visionary project, the more heavily it will rely on claims of representing the

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[181] Canovan, *The People*, 1.
[182] Ibid., 2.

people. Whether in the street or in parliament, speaking on the people's behalf enables

the speaker to lay claims to power. When a collective of individuals come together, as in

moments of upheavals and revolutions, they perceive in these moments a powerful act

that is sufficient to avow authority. It is this authority that is at the heart of the notion of

the people. The power encapsulated in it is fought over, revoked, confirmed, attested,

manifested, subjugated and liberated, once and again. The history of the term is without

a doubt a history of power struggles. It is envisaged in these struggles, as much as it

discloses glimpses of their clandestine gestures. It is doubtless that 'the people' is a

political category,[183] but this becomes all the more evident when it is contested; as

Jacques Rancière attests, "being fought over is what makes a political notion properly

political as I see it, not the fact that it has multiple meanings. The political struggle is also

the struggle for the appropriation of words."[184] What power the people have, and how

they are to act upon it, reflects as much as it forms the 'limits' of the political sphere.

On the Meaning of the Special Reserved Power

The terminology of 'the people' is used, according to Canovan, in three different

senses: first, the people as sovereign; second, the people as a nation; third, as an entity

that is opposed to the elite. In addition, and within the anglophone tradition, the notion

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[183] Bruno Bosteels, "The People Which is Not One," in Alain Badiou, et al, *What is a People?*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1.

[184] Jacques Rancière, in "Democracies Against Democracy," in Giorgio Agamben, et al, *Democracy in What State?*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 78.

takes the meaning of 'human beings.'[185] From a historical point of view, the political

language of the people is descended from the Roman *populus.* It referred to plebeian

citizens in contrast to the patrician class and the slaves. The plebeians exercised political

power in republican Rome granted to them by the mixed constitution. Their power was in

their ability to influence politicians and policies by pressuring aristocrats to take a certain

path and abandon another.[186] Communication with the people was open and important:

"The scope of the political elite in the Roman Republic and the individual social progress

of every single aristocrat with political ambitions depended on successful and persuasive

communication with the people."[187] However, the territorial expansions of the Romans

brought new populations to its borders, making it difficult for those located at a distance

to participate in the sovereign assemblies of the people. This brought about, as Canovan

argues, a conceptual turn in the language of the people. The active political participation

of the populous in the city-state was nearing its end. It was no longer the direct

participation in the republican institutions that constituted the people, but an

"agreement on common law and common interests," as Marcus Tullius Cicero claimed.[188]

The Roman people came to be seen as a lofty and vague body in contrast to their

previous "active exercise of political power."[189] Nonetheless, the Roman Republic

managed to keep the two dimensions of the people's political power, the abstract and

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[185] Canovan, *The People*, 12.

[186] Nikolaus Jackob, "Cicero and the Opinion of the People: The Nature, Role and Power of Public Opinion in the Late Roman Republic," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 17.3 (2007): 297.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Cicero quoted in Canovan, *The People*, 12. A point made too by John North, he writes: "the fact beyond dispute is that the lower-class Roman citizens living in and around Rome had lost such voice as they had possessed in political decision-making and were never to regain it," in "Democratic Politics in Republican Rome," *Past & Present* 126 (February 1990): 4.

[189] Canovan, *The People*, 12.

the active, until its last day. On the one hand, they were participants in active self-governing institutions, and on the other, simply a grand abstraction represented in Cicero's words as a common body with common interests.[190] The undesirability, it seems, of direct participation necessitated an exchange of value. The people henceforth would delegate their power in exchange for an abstract sovereignty. This abstraction is depicted in sublime language and symbols, that of the supreme power or the source of all authority.

The Roman Republic left an important legacy, one implying that all governance should draw legitimacy from the people, even when the people are not its direct designers. This legacy is entrenched in the Roman law *lex regia,* "according to which the sovereign power exercised by the emperor was derived by delegation from the Roman people," implying that the people are "the source of *all* legitimate governments, even that by emperors and kings."[191] It is important to note, as Canovan justly does, that the *lex regia* was meant initially to legitimize absolute power, but it nevertheless has the seeds of an early understanding that individuals, not governments, are the actual holders and initiators of political power:[192]

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[190] It is beyond the aim of my discussion here to pose the question whether or not Republican Rome manifested truly a democratic system, and whether the people's assembly had effective authority or rather a superficial one. For more on that see North, "Democratic Politics in Republican Rome."

[191] Canovan, *The People*, 14. Daniel Lee describes it as "an enabling act" see his discussion of the *lex regia* in the first chapter in, *Popular Sovereignty in Early Modern Constitutional Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[192] Daniel Lee claims that there was no de facto *lex regia* in Roman law, rather it was invented by later imperial jurists to create a coherent narrative for constitutional Roman history and to legitimize the transition from a republic into an empire, based on the free will of the Roman people, Ibid., 27-30.

The *lex regia* that had been designed to legitimize absolute power turned out in

the longer run to provide conceptual tools for popular resistance. [It] offered a

theoretical possibility of eroding the boundary between 'popular governments'

and others by implying that all government could be seen as drawing legitimacy

from the people. Within the predominantly theocratic culture of the early Middle

Ages this was a very small seed, but one that would later show spectacular

potential for growth.[193]

Roman law and particularly the *lex regia*, was recovered in the twelfth century.[194] While

popular consent was not vital for theocratic authorities, it played a major role in enforcing

the rivalry between the papal authority and the monarchy. That power struggle saw the

two rivaling authorities referring repeatedly to "the people as the ultimate source of

power" which eventually "made the idea almost a commonplace."[195] Nevertheless, this

does not mean that the definition of the people and their power became clear, nor that

exercising sovereignty was possible. With the rise of the Protestant Reformation in the

sixteenth century came a doctrine that would actually refer to the people as the source of

political power, justifying resistance against kings who interpreted Christianity wrongly.

Described as "the most notable expression" of the Protestant resistance, the 1579 text

Vindiciae contra tyrannos argued that "kings rule by the authority of the people and for

the sake of the people's welfare and that their authority is therefore conditional."[196]

From the moment the medieval idea of the people as the source of all legitimate

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[193] Canovan, *The People*, 14.
[194] Ibid., 16.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid., 17.

governing led to the position that people can overthrow kings and take back their power, the people came to be thought of as a defensive and restorative power. It's the people up against whichever current ruling party or government policy, the people restoring the constitution or status quo and rescuing what they perceive as their natural right. Their ultimate authority is tied to holding the king accountable, and by no means is it about their own rule.[197]

It took another political crisis, according to Canovan, to crown the people as the ultimate sovereign. The process started with the British Civil War and peaked in the eighteenth century during the American Revolution. From a historical perspective, the American Revolution revived the Roman traditions and developed them by viewing the people as constituent power and rulers at once. "In their state constitutions and in the US Constitution itself, a mobilized people apparently exercised sovereignty by establishing entirely new institutions, replacing the authority of antiquity with the authority of present popular consent,"[198] she writes. Nonetheless, people remained at a distance from their newly established 'popular government,' despite choosing it in elections.[199] One could perhaps even say that choosing their own representatives was the first move toward their divorce from exercising direct involvement. From that point on they were excluded from governing, a 'legitimate exclusion' as they chose others to act on their behalf. Canovan, referring to the Federalist Papers, explains that, "although the people were in a sense to be present and active in a government that belonged to them, they were also outside,

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[197] Ibid., 22.
[198] Ibid., 27.
[199] Ibid., 28.

behind and above their government, still the sovereign in reserve. For the crucial difference between classical republics and the American model lay in 'the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity' from the latter."[200]

The historical lineage Canovan draws postulates how the term 'the people' acted as a mirror for political processes and power struggles at various historical junctures. It tells a tale of the vague, elusive, indeterminate existence of the sovereign people that could, as an abstraction, legitimize any form of governance. It also depicts moments where concrete human beings, with concrete rights and demands, actualized their power to institute their own government, choose their own representatives, and question their doings. And yet they remained at a distance from government and from governing, "all government was the people's and that the people had withdrawn from government altogether."[201] The idea of 'holding governments accountable' has since risen to the level of sanctity, and yet, however important it may be to question governments' accommodation of people's aspirations and demands, the issue of an abstract sovereignty remains a conundrum. A crucial one, at that. From the point of view of the legitimacy grantors, the people, their existence remains abstract albeit to a different degree—the people's direct involvement is not warranted, or desirable. Governments are not premised on this or that form of actual and practical participation. If anything, it is premised on the citizens' lack of active and involved participation.

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[200] Ibid.
[201] Canova, *The People*, 28.

To say governments are established at a distance from the people is to say that the people are excluded from politics altogether. The political, hence, presupposes the exclusion of the people. After all, the state level – where governing happens and various institutions are thought to mediate the relation between civil society, local communities and the state – is referred to as the level of politics. These institutions organize, reflect and deliver the political. And they do all of this at a distance from the people. In the forthcoming section I revisit the origin of this separation and examine how deep this idea of politics without the people goes; how it is entrenched in political theory, not just in political practice. It is incumbent on us to interrogate the concepts and ideas that promoted the division of people and politics, and to look at both the liberal-progressive and conservative accounts that continue to pervade our political thinking and philosophy. The separation of people from politics, I will demonstrate, presupposes the following: first, that political power is a negative force that either needs to be banished altogether, or vehemently controlled by the few and/or the state; second, that the public realm is in opposition to the private, with the former governing the 'common good' and the latter encompassing our personal desires and interests; third, that the political realm is a soulless, cruel arena unsuitable for the engagement of the many (who, in spite of this, remain the sovereign in reserve). The first two presuppositions set the stage for the third; politics is rendered an impoverished sphere, lacking imaginative and energetic fervour that can only be brought upon it by those who get involved out of desire and passion.

The Prohibitive Nature of Political Power

It is natural, in thinking about people's political power, especially in the specific

context of political changes and revolutions, to revisit the political theory of John Locke,

whose philosophy is said to have influenced the French revolution and the American

constitution.[202] After all, his ideas were quite radical[203] to the political era and climate

wherein they first appeared. He defended the people's right to overthrow an

untrustworthy authority, claiming "that it is lawful for the people, in some cases, to resist

their king."[204] Moreover, he argued in favour of the people's right to dissolve a

government by a direct act carried out by the people themselves, not just by their

representatives in parliament, as was accepted at that point.[205] According to Richard

Ashcroft, Locke's main objective, though not the only one, in writing the *Two Treatises of*

Government, was "to supply a justification for *active* resistance to the illegitimate

authority of the king."[206] His defense against tyranny, and his emphasis on consent in

building political community, are of influence on our political imagination about the

possibility and even the necessity to change the ruling authority. Nonetheless, his

treatises do not express a vision of the people at the center of politics. It is this tension at

the heart of his political theory that offers us an opportunity to disentangle the complex

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[202] See for example, Richard Ashcraft, *John Locke: Critical Assessments* (Routledge, 1991).

[203] Richard Ashcraft argues in favour of reading Locke as a radical thinker, see his "Locke's Political Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, eds. Chappell Vere (Cambridge University Press, 1994): 226-251.

[204] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 115.

[205] Julian H. Franklin, *John Locke and The Theory of Sovereignty*: *Mixed Monarchy and The Right of Resistance in The Political Thought of The English Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.

[206] Ashcraft, "Locke's Political Philosophy," 227.

workings of the relationship between political power, theorized in terms of a negative

force, and the people, theorized as power in reserve. This tension also sheds light on the

relation between political power, the people and political action. When the people are

not perceived as active agents, and their political power is a force used only in

exceptional moments, political action is considered a restricted action, directed at

overthrowing existing governments and constituting alternative ones. That Locke stressed

the point of people's direct involvement and responsibility in the dissolution of corrupt

governments no doubt had a radical connotation and effect. And had this belief not

collided with a problematic notion of political power, which he formulates as something

to be avoided altogether, it would be possible to see in the involvement of the people an

empowering act that could redefine the political sphere. His theory could, I will argue, see

the benefits of envisaging the people as the key player in politics if only the exercise of

power was understood as virtue and not vice.

In his second treatise, Locke's well-known argument for the formation of political

community is premised on a mutual agreement, a 'contract' that creates the body politic

and ends the state of nature. Individuals consent to establish a shared community so they

can be safe and live in peace. But this goal is not achieved solely by creating political

community and confining one's power to its construction and maintenance. The collective

political power has to be handed to a legislature, which upholds rule and order and

preserves citizens' properties, lives, and liberties: "the great purpose for which men enter

into society is to be safe and at peace in their use of their property; and the great

instrument by which this is to be achieved is the laws established in that society."[207] The

idea of having a mutual agreement between individuals, to create their own community

first and according to that establish a contract with the legislator, is stressed throughout

the text to emphasize that one cannot submit to an authority if one did not consent to it

in the first place.[208] When and if the self-preservation premise is violated by the

legislature, Locke holds, "the trust is automatically forfeited and the power returns into

the hands of those who gave it."[209] The political community remains, at all times, the

supreme power; they are not, however, to use their power until the moment the

government is dissolved or action needs to be taken to dissolve it.[210] He explains, "the

people can never come by a power over the king unless he does something that makes

him cease to be a king,"[211] at which point the power returns to the people, who can

"make a new assignment of it,"[212] and hand it to another legislature.

In reading Locke's account, we see traces of the *lex regia*. Locke places the

constituent power of authority and governments in the hands of the people, without

excluding any specific form of governing that could stem from this call, something

suggested also in the *lex regia*. That said, Locke adds a meaningful and substantial factor,

bestowing upon the people the power to intervene directly and dissolve the government.

So, it is not any government that can claim to rule in the name of the people, but rather

one that does not infringe on their property and does not act through arbitrary laws and

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[207] Locke, *Second Treatise of Government,* 66.
[208] Ibid., 61.
[209] Ibid., 75.
[210] Ibid., 108.
[211] Ibid., 117.
[212] Ibid., 75.

force.[213] Locke also grants the people the possibility and the legitimacy of acting against such a government should it abandon the public good. He states that "the community never loses its supreme power of saving itself from the attempts and plans of anybody, even of their own legislators if they are so foolish or so wicked as to develop and carry out plans against the liberties and properties of the subject."[214] Hence the authority, the supreme power, in principle remains with the people, but the actual and practical power is in the hands of the king. This is true as long as the king continues to work for the common good,[215] but if the reason for granting this power is violated then the people can act to restore a new order by claiming their abstract authority. Once again, the people ensure that the power is handed over to a new king or government. This transferring of their power occurs continuously; it is therefore reasonable to ask what it really means to hold power? Furthermore, what precisely does Locke have in mind when he says 'power'?

Locke's account unveils political powers an actual physical force reserved for the legislature to defend the political community. He writes: "I take political power to be a right to make laws – with the death penalty and consequently all lesser penalties – for

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[213] Ibid., 109.

[214] Ibid., 75.

[215] It is never clear what the common good really means in Locke's theory, nor how exactly the king can be said to violate it. However, we can assume a very general and basic sense, which Locke alludes to: the moment the people are given over to a tyrannical regime is the moment they—their common good—are not served anymore. Within the scope of this chapter, it does not matter greatly how this is defined. Elsewhere Locke claims that people do not revolt for minor reasons, hinting that the common good is only violated by the king with extreme measures of injustice. He writes: "revolutions don't happen with every little mismanagement in public affairs. Great mistakes by the rulers, many wrong and inconvenient laws, and all the slips of human frailty—these will be born by the people without mutiny or murmur. But if a long series of abuses, lies, and tricks, all tending the same way, make the *design* visible to the people so that they can't help feeling what they are oppressed by and *seeing where they are going*, it's not surprising that they should then rouse themselves and try to put the ruling power into hands that will achieve for them the purposes for which government was at first established." Ibid., 111.

regulating and preserving property, and to employ the force of the community in enforcing such laws and defending the commonwealth from external attack; all this being only for the public good."[216] This force, to legislate, regulate and penalize as protection demands, is a power that individuals always enjoyed in their state of nature according to Locke. They are asked to give it up and abide by the rule of the newly established legislature. Thus, political power is not a power that originates *within* and *in accordance* with political community; it does not originate the moment one chooses freely to leave the state of nature and create or join a political community; it is not this power that in itself creates political community. Rather, it is a power that man always had in the state of nature to defend himself and his belongings, but now, in the moment of abiding by the rules of authority, he is asked to withdraw from it.[217] It is the *means* by which one protects one's property and liberty, before it becomes the means by which the legislature secures its citizens. What is oddly missing in this portrayal is the role that political power plays in political community, in its creation and flourishing, prior to the establishment of a government. It's missing the identification of political power as what brought individuals together in the first place, to establish bonds between themselves; the power to decide, in free committed will, to build a mutual community and live together.

If instead this union is understood in terms of a free-willed decision (or many constant decisions), one taken by individuals out of interest, choice and desire, then we can imagine that the means to take such an action (i.e. to have the power to act upon and influence the world and those surrounding you) ought necessarily to be acknowledged as

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[216] Ibid., 4.
[217] Ibid., 85.

the creator of political community. What's more, it must then be recognized as a force

that each individual has and retains for future decisions and choices. On the other hand, if

the establishment of a community is taken to be a necessity and not a human choice, that

we are "forced to live together and form a political body," then power is rendered

unproductive and passive. Power is, in this understanding, responding to an external or

internal threat—a "decisive defect"[218] in our reality. Thus, neither living together nor

having the force to do so are acknowledged as possibilities and choices that carry positive

meaning. Accordingly, political power is not comprehended as the sustainer and catalyzer

of political community, nor is its role as the initiator of relations between individuals and

groups perceived as a constructive practice that formulates the ethical constitution of the

subjects and the political desires they have. Locke's account, and social contract theory in

general, portrays power as a natural force that one has and uses to protect one's

property and liberty. But it does not play the role of a productive force in a shared

community, irrespective of there being a contract with the legislature. Political power

does not appear as the driving force behind individuals wishing and deciding to establish

ties and bonds between themselves for the advancement of their shared living. This

absence is a result of configuring political power, both in Locke's account and generally in

political theory, as a negative force. With the sole aim of warding off the misconduct of

life in general and authority in particular, political power is regarded as a physical force

and a violent tendency that needs to be restricted and regulated by law.

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[218] Arendt, *The Promise*, 60.

Political power is simply the "power of a government…over a subject."[219] This view presents the body politic as a negotiation tactic between the consenting individual and the newly established legislator, and not as a sphere where political power circulates and is reproduced by the members of community. The creation of the body politic is an instrument that advances and predicates the loss of political power, by suggesting that it is possible to retain power in the societal body while it has been actually withdrawn from it. The body politic assures the loss of power by its members to the higher authority and legitimizes that capture. For power to be useful and creative, capable of building and initiating it needs to be practiced. Beautifully capturing its innovative and captive possibilities, Hannah Arendt argues that power arises between those who act together, and it "vanishes the moment they disperse."[220] The mere fact of coming together does not suffice to yield power; the potential exists but it is contingent and temporal.[221] It must be "actualized" to remain alive, as she elaborates, "what first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence; and power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away."[222] Then, for the body politic to be something other than power 'over a subject' a shift in understanding how power operates, to what end, and why people form a collective together, has to occur.

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[219] Locke, *Second Treatise of Government,* 3.
[220] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.
[221] Ibid., 199.
[222] Ibid., 200.

Locke's discourse challenges Arendt's interpretation quite drastically. The creation of the political community, per Locke, ensures that power is guarded against those who might misuse it, such as the legislature itself – seemingly the only group interested in using and misusing its authority by his account – but it is kept alive through citizen engagement. For him, once we reach this conclusion – i.e. keeping power in the hands of the few instead of the many – what remains is to ask whether or not there is consent. Arendt on the other hand, believes that "power is what keeps the public realm…in existence."[223] Without it we cannot speak of a public realm or, for that matter, politics.

Considering the negative nature of political power as it unfolds in Locke's account, the social contract is disclosed as simply a reality of power erosion, both of one's own and that of the collective. It is theorized and justified as a collective agreement that transfers power from the majority in return for law and order. The power is hence reserved for the few who act to protect the many, on their behalf, for the realization of the common good. The majority continues to be the defensive and restorative force. They intervene in moments of aggravated cruelty and injustice; they prevent disaster and replace the authority as required. Political reality is therefore reproduced within these lines; political power is a prohibitive force that can get out of control, so it is better amassed and restrained. The people meanwhile safeguard this process so as to hold the authority accountable at all times. Consent is required to equalize the prospect of outright prohibition lurking in power: instead of letting power circulate sporadically between individuals, as in the state of nature, it is given over to an all-encompassing authority to

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[223] Ibid., 200.

apply it equally on everyone. There is no doubt that Locke's account is far more radical

than the *lex regia*. To say 'people are the source of all legitimate governments' as we find

it in the latter, is not to say, as Locke argues, that people have to create their own

contract, assert their own consent, and hand it to a certain entity (government) while

retaining in some instances the ability to withdraw from it. The contractual degree of

Locke's account lends itself to a far-reaching radical stance between the people and the

authority they have consented to.[224] But this stance is tremendously confined by a view

of power as protective and punitive.

The necessity and high priority placed on rule and order – contrasted with a

contractual, consensual relation – prompted social contract theories to produce an

account, held as common ground among political theories today, that conceptualizes

power in negative terms, and theorizes methods for its regulation, control and

banishment altogether. Regardless of the exact form of governance or mechanism, the

people remain the power in reserve and in moments of upheavals act as a defensive and

restorative force. Andreas Kalyvas goes as far to argue that moments of upheavals did not

interest contract theory, he writes that "the idea of a social contract was predominantly

used to explain political obligation, to justify obedience, to describe the consensual basis

of authority, and, in few cases, to legitimate resistance, rather than to account for those

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[224] Mohammed Bamyeh notes that from a historical point of view there was never such a contract between society and the state. However, we can approach this contract as "an expression of hope" between society and the state, that their relationship remains within the confines of an actual existing contract. This assumes that the two entities, are not the same, meaning that the state cannot subsume the society and its role. It also means "that the only aspects of the state that are justifiable are those that are clearly not society: managerial agencies fulfilling specific or technical functions or services." See, Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, Inc., 2009), 87. Then the people delegate not their power, or sovereignty but certain services they find this entity capable of. Again, this view is, more radical than the notion of 'the people are the source of all legitimate government' because it is limited and practical, not symbolic and abstract, it can also be fully revoked.

historical moments of genuine rupture and transformation."[225] To give an account for the

transformations is to give an account chiefly to those who make possible these changes,

through the creative manifestation of power and its productive capacities.

The Loss of the Political

Within the same tradition of social contract theory and natural law, the concept of

political power as having a prohibitive nature is most evident in the philosophy of Thomas

Hobbes. If political power for Locke served the creation and application of law to the

political community, and the community's force was used to implement the common

good, in Hobbes we find that political power is 'monarchical' and power serves one

purpose: to attain subjugation.[226] Hobbes writes in *Leviathan* that "because the power of

one man resisteth and hindereth the effects of the power of another: power simply is no

more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another."[227] Power has no effect

but that of conferring fear, initiating war and conquering others. It is a direct threat

deployed to control others, understood "as occurring when one powerful individual

succeeded in imposing his or her will on another."[228] It is for this reason he justifies

relinquishing power altogether and amassing it in the hands of the monarch: "Power is

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[225] Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics*, 2.

[226] Pasquale Pasquino argues that "the entire genealogy of modern politics has arisen" for Hobbes on the basis of abandoning the possibility of self-government by individuals: "Political Theory of War and Peace: Foucault and the hHstory of Modern Political Theory," *Economy and Society* 22.1 (1993): 84; Saul Newman, "The Place of Power in Political Discourse." *International Political Science Review* 25.2 (2004): 140.

[227] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, eds. John CA Gaskin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxx.

[228] Stewart Clegg, *Frameworks of power* (Sage, 1989), 35.

best concentrated in one person, natural or civil (i.e. *one* centre of sovereignty, not a divided and potentially conflicting power), which embodies the powers of the greatest number of separate men."[229] Hobbes is usually discussed by looking at the immediate implications of these claims, such as the justification of absolute authority, which is easily depicted in his writings. It is this justification of tyranny that sparked voluminous replies among opponents, then and now, and Locke is but one of them. However, it is beyond this immediate political 'result' that I wish to place Hobbes (and thus Locke) in my argument. What interests me precisely is his account on political power.

Hobbes advanced a notion of power that is far reaching and substantial. Indeed, as Stewart Clegg argues, Hobbes is the most influential and formative figure when it comes to the mainstream conception of power. "[Hobbes's] work on power and his conception of the problem of order," Clegg writes, "have thus shaped our understanding and experience of the modern world."[230] As a "classic legislator," he is "the archetypal early modern theorist of power … He provided a rationalized account of the order which state power could produce."[231] Hobbes's conception of power brought him to imagine order "constructed as a totality," and monarchy as the ultimate system that fits his discourse of sovereignty.[232] His notion of power "was irrevocably bound up with the institution of the monarchy. Hobbes' *Leviathan* necessitated the vesting of architectonic power in the body of the sovereign as the solution to what was seen as the 'state of

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[229] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xxxv.
[230] Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 21.
[231] Ibid., 5.
[232] Ibid., 24.

nature.'"[233] His interest was in creating and justifying this 'monarchial power.' As such he was viewing and conceptualizing a world where power can be traced back to one center and it can be weighed and ordered; it is "a world of eurythmic (as in harmoniously ordered and proportioned) power."[234] The core of Hobbes's theory, thus, was his concern with sovereignty, and the system of power that is best suited to serve it.[235]

It is not a coincidence then that the body politic plays no role in Hobbes's account. What we find instead are rational individuals, who comprehend that the power they have is solely of destructive nature—to subjugate others, or to be brought under their control. The reality of the state of nature, portrayed as a state of war, does not enable reaching a collective consent, and thus it does not necessitate the creation of body politic. The constitutive parts of the would-be collective are at odds at every moment of existence. What is pursued is individual salvation. According to Hobbes, I want to get rid of my power before I, or others, destroy life. As such life is not created out of power, (individual life, communal life), but is solely destroyed by the operation of power. One is not investing one's political power to create a community to serve all those who decided to join and act within it. Authority, thus, is not premised on forms of exchange – compromises, so to speak, which require consent – it is rather when one abandons power that authority is established. That being so, we should be relieved of the power we have. In fear, in an absolute fear, political power is voided; it is nothing good unless it is amplified to an extent that cannot be identified.

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[233] Ibid., 27.
[234] Ibid., 22.
[235] Ibid., 36.

This is what becomes of the political space, and how it is theorized and

maintained in reality. With the loss of one's political power comes the loss, too, of the

'the political.' Individuals who fully understand the fear lurking in the power they have, in

the power others have, deliver their power to political systems so that they may be

absolved. Political apparatuses are invested in 'keeping us alive' with all that this requires,

and in return we evacuate the political sphere. Arendt, too, ruminates on the role of fear,

writing that "fear as a principle of public-political action has a close connection with the

fundamental experience of powerlessness that we all know from situations in which, for

whatever reasons, we are unable to act."[236] Although we might remain the abstract

holders of power – more abstracted or less so – we are nonetheless unable to act freely.

Again, this is not a question of justifying tyranny, it is rather the effect of conceptualizing

political power as a negative force that needs to be coopted, limited and traced back to

one center. That being so, the differences that do exist between Locke and Hobbes (their

general view of mankind, the state of nature, the need for consent, and the ultimate

political apparatus that is being created) are still philosophically and politically founded

on similar grounds: the notion of power as a negative force which needs to be confined in

the hands of the few and regulated by them. Power encapsulates the political and

politics—they are one and the same according to social contract theory. One cannot be

redeemed from the violence latent in one's own power without also being stripped of its

positive and productive effects, that is, without losing access to the political sphere. The

political field is then precisely dependent upon the variability and aliveness of this power,

[236] Arendt, *The Promise*, 68.

otherwise nothing can be created and reimagined in it. The prevalence of the concept of power as that which can be kept in reserve and abstracted negates the possibility of having a public realm open for all. We cannot speak of an open and inviting politics that relies on alive and practical power, and another form of politics that is not. Rather, when power is restored, politics is not possible. What we have are the effects of its void: governing, ruling and policing.

While political theory continues to portray power as a force that should be abolished, and it continues to conceptualize the relationship between individuals and political systems within that scheme, it is important to imagine the possibilities that open up when we conceptualize power as a positive, creative and productive force. It is in so doing that we realize again that an epistemological stance regarding a concept carries more than mere knowledge—it has political repercussions.[237] One of the immediate effects that we would witness when power and its reclamation is welcomed is the inclusion of more people into politics. Furthermore, we would find that when the political remains a practical domain accessible to the many, power continues to circulate and create. But before going any further, I must argue for power as positive, creative and productive force.

In his book *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, Todd May makes a persuasive and attentive argument for politics as positive and productive.[238] I argue that the framework he proposes to understand the workings of power more closely reflects how power is interpreted by individuals in daily life, and is better suited to

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[237] May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist*, 68.
[238] His account relies heavily on the philosopher Michael Foucault.

portray the nature of political power than the prevailing negative conceptualization of the

social contract theorists. May differentiates between restraints, which do indeed have

negative impact upon individuals, and constraints which do not preclude individuals from

being and attaining freedom, he writes, "that power is always a matter of constraints

upon action does not imply that we must define those *con*straints in terms of

*res*traints."[239] The restraining impact of power does not incorporate all that power is,

"what we have called the 'suppressive assumption' regarding power, if appropriate to

understanding a certain historical period, is mistaken when it is taken to be the definition

of power rather than one of its modes of enactment."[240] Power "does not merely

suppress its objects; it creates them as well…if power is conceived as operating not upon

its objects but within them, not 'from above' but 'from below,' not outside other

relationships but across them, this entails that power is not a suppressive force but a

creative one, giving rise not only to that which must be resisted but also, and more

insidiously, to the forms resistance itself often takes."[241] Clegg echoes this understanding

of power, that May presents, noting that:

> [A] theory of power must examine how the field of force in which power is
>
> arranged has been fixed, coupled and constituted in such a way that, intentionally
>
> or not, certain 'nodal points' of practice are privileged in this unstable and shifting
>
> terrain… [T]he view of power is of a far less massive, oppressive and prohibitive
>
> apparatus than it is often imagined to be. Certainly, such effects can be secured by
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> power, but nowhere near as easily as some 'dominant ideology', 'hegemonic' or

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[239] Ibid., 67.

[240] Ibid, 68.

[241] Ibid, 73. It is worth noting that May builds his analyses regarding power as constitutive and enabling using both Michael Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

'third dimensional' views would suggest. Power is better regarded not as having

two faces or being layered into three dimensions but as a process which may pass

through distinct circuits of power and resistance.[242]

Power hence is better understood when we ask what it does, and not what it is;[243] when

we understand its logic through its movement not through its fixity. The connections

between what it does, how far it is taken, and to what end it is applied should not be

overlooked. That political power is thought of in constrictive terms, as a force to protect

or to control, makes subjugation to authority a matter of a regulation. Within these lines

Michael Foucault shows that when power is analyzed on the basis of political institutions

then one "can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law. One then has a subject

who has or does not have rights, who has had these rights either granted or removed by

the institution of political society; and all this brings us back to a legal concept of the

subject."[244] And again, the institutional aspect of political power makes regulating a

precise effort, carried out by the few, because it is to everyone's benefit to give in to a

system that can protect us all. We find, in this case, that the people are deprived of

fundamental and constitutive values which political power can initiate and enable. In

contrast to that subject of law described by Foucault, we should imagine a subject that is

a result of various apparatuses of power and yet can resist and contradict and create

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[242] Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 17-18.

[243] This differentiation between what power is and what power does is refereed in Clegg as a difference between how Hobbes perceived power (asking what power is) and how Machiavelli on the other hand interpreted it (what power does), *Frameworks of Power*, 5.

[244] Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, eds. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1997), 300.

something new. Political power is their means to create themselves and their

communities, and to determine the values they want to live according to. Chapters three

and four will expand upon this idea through a discussion of the process of creating a

political community during times of popular revolt, also addressing the implications that

reclaimed power and agency bring to bear on the individual and the collective.

So far, my argument concerning political power has been preoccupied with the

following question: when people's power is comprehended as a negative force and one

that should be limited, then what is left of the concept 'the people'? I have used Todd

May's illuminating concept of power, which relies heavily on Michel Foucault's theory,

and I have also relied on Hannah Arendt's idea of the political sphere as an arena of

power and action, without which we are back to the 'prepolitical.' Although it might be

hard, ostensibly, to see how Arendt and Foucault might have a similar view on power, as

Amy Allen rightly notes, there is still much to learn from brining their thoughts on the

subject matter together. As Allen eloquently writes:

> Although Arendt and Foucault develop different ways of conceptualizing power,
>
> each conception is ultimately rooted in a critique of one and the same
>
> understanding of power, an understanding that Foucault labels the juridical model
>
> and Arendt refers to as the command–obedience model. This model equates
>
> power with the rule of law and presupposes that the paradigmatic power relation
>
> is that by which a sovereign imposes his will on his subjects. When power is
>
> conceived of in this way, the primary sphere in which power is seen as operating is
>
> that of the State. Furthermore, insofar as this model views the exercise of power

as the imposition of the will of a powerful individual on that of a powerless one, it

tends to conceive power as fundamentally restrictive, repressive, negative force.

As Arendt puts it, the command–obedience model rests on the assumptions that

power 'is an instrument of rule', that 'the essence of power is the effectiveness

of command', and 'that men can lawfully and politically live together only when

some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey'. Similarly, Foucault

claims that this model views power in terms of 'an essentially negative power,

presupposing on the one hand a sovereign whose role is to forbid and on the

other a subject who must somehow effectively say yes to this prohibition'. Both

Foucault and Arendt begin their own analyses of power by challenging this notion

of power as sovereignty.[245]

Accordingly, when power is thought of as coercive it is subjected to operating on the level

of the state (which the rest of us are asked to obey). The people's drive, their force, and

their ambitions as a collective are thought once and again, in negative terms. Within this

frame we are left with a very limited scope of the power of the people. It's an abstract

power, albeit supreme; it is also restorative and defensive. It is a power that should be

relinquished in favour of order and sovereignty, either in its absolute totality or in a more

moderate sense. That power is seen as negative, fixed, and causal – instead of creative,

circulating and enabling – privileges a political theory that understands politics as rule, as

hierarchy, and as minimally involving the people. Indeed as Foucault argues "the only way

to avoid the reaffirmation of power is precisely to reject explanations that confine power

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[245] Amy Allen, "Power, Subjectivity, and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault," *International journal of philosophical studies* 10.2 (2002): 132.

to central place."[246] The philosophical accounts that theorizes power as central prioritize a hierarchal system in the political, consequently putting on the margins active and engaged individuals who wish to be directly involved in politics as a practical affair that pertains to their lives. This is evident in so many instances of daily life, but is perhaps most visible in the lives of social movements and moments of grand revolutions.

It is here that I return to a claim I made at the outset of this chapter, in regards to relying on the philosopher Hannah Arendt and her thoughts on the political sphere; specifically, why the two views on politics – politics as regime and politics as procedure – are not sufficient to illuminate the novelty popular movements suggest. I argued that her perspective on politics is unique as she *tout court* rejects the notion that politics is a domain for gaining certain goods or goals, and that it should be organized around ruling or commanding. She holds that by focusing on the faculty of action we understand why politics cannot be any of those; this is because it is unpredictable and it relies on the many to happen at all. While recognizing the importance of the faculty of action to further advance this outlook on politics, I contend that we must replace action with the people as the one category that should above all animate the relation between politics and power. Recall that the history of the concept of the people previously presented here – from the Roman Republic, to social contract theory being fraught with struggles over the creation of political community, to political systems restricting public participation – all speak to the idea that what is supposed to be limited is not action but those who act. From the point of view of power's *circulation*, 'the people' is an amenable category

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[246] Saul Newman, "The Place of Power in Political Discourse," 143.

because it is formed by subjects who act and are acted upon; they continue to be a

reflexive entity, constituted by power relations as much as they constitute those same

relations. As such, power retains this tension and carries it forward as people practice

living together through both being able to act and, at times, through being prohibited

from getting that to which they aspire.

Desire as Power: On Rationalizing the Public Sphere

The perception of power as a negative force is not the sole presumption that

sustains politics as a hierarchal system of command and obedience and of rule and being

ruled, and which results in the curtailing the people's political engagement. Another

presumption regarding the nature and purpose of the public realm yields a similar

conclusion. As Iris Marion Young has argued, the way the public realm is conceptualized

in modern political theory puts it in opposition to the private realm and to the human

desires that are thought to belong to the private dimension of life.[247] At the heart of

modern political theory and its conceptualization of the public realm, Young argues, lies a

promise and an ideal of impartiality and universality that does not account for our

heterogeneity. Writing that "the ideal of the civic public exhibits a will to unity, and

necessitates the exclusion of aspects of human existence that threaten to disperse the

brotherly unity of straight and upright forms," Young is primarily concerned here with the

exclusion of women from the public realm. The ideal of impartiality and universality is

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[247] Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public," 383.

thought to express the point of view of "man as citizen."[248] Yet, drawing on my earlier

conclusions, one can hardly say that the public realm in modern political theory is an

open and inclusive domain for almost anyone. This rejoinder does not in any way

contradict her conclusion regarding the exclusion of women from the existing ideal of the

public realm, it rather proposes to widen the perspective of critique to ask how this ideal

is in fact oppressive to the majority of human beings. It supposes that the ideal of

impartiality, premised on the eviction of desires and affect, oppresses even more

individuals, making the public-political life uninhabitable for most of the citizens. This

exclusion also results in the general impoverishment of politics itself, a point to which I

will return later.

The dichotomy between reason and desire appears in modern political theory in

the distinction between the universal, public realm of sovereignty and the state, on the

one hand, and the particular private realm of needs and desires, on the other. Modern

normative political theory and political practice aim to embody impartiality in the public

realm of the state. Like the impartiality of moral reason this public realm of the state

attains its generality by the exclusion of particularity, desire, feeling and those aspects of

life associated with the body.[249]

It is not only that when one acts in the public realm one cannot get rid of one's

feelings and desires; the very fact that one has these feelings and desires is what prompts

involvement in public affairs in the first place. The desires we have as individuals, which

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[248] Ibid., 383.
[249] Ibid., 387.

rule and organize our private concerns, do not disappear the moment we engage with others and act upon the web of relations we have in common. They are manifest in things we say and do, just as our rational motivations cannot really be said to exist in one realm – public or private – and vanish in the other. Young and other feminist philosophers[250] have previously refuted the false notion of impartiality in general, especially as a moral ideal, deeming it illusory and oppressive.[251] This means practically that it cannot be that the realm of politics is 'impartial,' but rather that certain modes of acting in public, of employing reason and influence, are regarded as neutral. Further, positing impartiality as an ideal to strive for suppresses the engagement of those who clearly see that to be an active and responsible citizen requires passion for a cause. It is no surprise that times of popular upheaval are almost instantly associated with the involvement of people full of enthusiasm and spirt. What we identify in that moment as power is in reality a desire. The world of the protesting crowd cannot be created without a force, and this force has to emanate from desire; indeed "power does not suppress desire; rather, it is implicated in every assemblage of desire."[252]

Many theorists, and feminists specifically, find Arendt's firm division between the public and the private spheres "untenable."[253] I, however, find her defense of acting out of passion to be instructive in this context. Arendt's philosophy was deeply and intimately

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[250] Fraser's discussion of the public sphere reiterates the idea that the public sphere can be "an instrument of domination." Elsewhere she notes that "critical theory should expose ways in which the labelling of some issues and interests as 'private' limits the range of problems, and of approaches to problems, that can be widely contested in contemporary societies." Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 59, 77.

[251] Young, "Impartiality and The Civic Public," 383.

[252] May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist*, 71.

[253] Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 172.

concerned with the destruction of politics, and the loss of the possibility to be free as a result of that destruction; this no doubt made her aware of and spend considerable time defending the effect of passion in politics to the degree of deification. In her enthralling epilogue to *The Promise of Politics*, she refers to the destruction of the possibility of living-together (i.e. politics), as transforming our world into a desert. Here she acknowledges, maybe for the first time in the whole book (at least to this degree of forthrightness and clarity), that the conjoined faculties of and action are capable of changing the world: "Only those who can endure the passion of living under desert conditions can be trusted to summon up in themselves the courage that lies at the root of action, of becoming an active being."[254] Here one might reasonably ask how could politics be defeated? The answer is through distancing people from the public sphere. Through the insistence that people's individual, daily concerns lie strictly in the private sphere. This means that the political realm is attended to by the few, remaining the preoccupation of an exclusive circle who advance the claim that their concept of the general common good and concern for all will reign above their own desires and interests. Young discussing Hegel's political philosophy and his concept of the public realm imparts a similar lesson:

For Hegel the liberal account of social relations as based on the liberty of self-defining individuals to pursue their own ends properly describes only one aspect of social life, the sphere of civil society. As a member of civil society, the person pursues private ends for himself and his family. These ends may conflict with those of others, but exchange transactions produce much harmony and satisfaction. Conceived as a member of the state, on the other hand, the person is not a locus of particular desire, but the bearer of

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[254] Arendt, *The Promise*, 202.

universally articulated rights and responsibilities. The point of view of the state and law

transcends all particular interests, to express the universal and rational spirit of humanity.

State laws and action express the general will, the interests of the whole society. Since

maintaining this universal point of view while engaged in the pursuit of one's own

particular interests is difficult if not impossible, a class of persons is necessary whose sole

job is to maintain the public good and the universal point of view of the state.[255]

The oppressive dimension of this exclusion lies in shutting out a domain of action, of

imagination, and of creation that individuals and collectives can be involved in. One's

desires and interests are prohibited from being demonstrated, let alone allowed to

become potentially influential among the many. What results is a state of scarcity and

poverty, both to the people and to politics. Consequently, politics is "often regarded as a

poor relation, inherently dependent and subsidiary; it is rarely praised as something with

a life and character of its own."[256] Politics as the net of relations that sustains and grows

out of these relations, is impoverished; we think of it as "nothing more than a necessary

evil for sustaining the life of humanity."[257] As such it is absent its fundamental character

as a domain for creation and evolvement: the potential for practicing how can we

maintain and develop our mutual existence, how can we make out of living together a

form of art.

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[255] Young, "Impartiality and The Civic Public," 388.
[256] Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 36.
[257] Arendt, *The Promise*, 111.

Are Revolutions Revolutionary?

We should go back now to the question of the people. Who are they? What

constitutes 'the people'? Are they unified, assuming a similar identity? Trying to define

this group raises more problems than it resolves, but it seems that these same obstacles

are part of what makes this category political and meaningful.[258] There is an "inescapable

play of difference at the heart of this fundamental category of modern politics,"[259] and

yet "the difference or discrepancy inherent in categories such as the people is precisely

what offers a place for political inventiveness – a heterotopian space or stage where the

'play' that such words give, like a door that stands ajar or a window that cannot be shut

tight, opens itself up to productive displacements and transformations."[260] The first

productive parameter that comes to mind, witnessing the movement of hundreds of

thousands marching in the streets, is that this group is usually defined by its lack of

power, its passivity.[261] This is maybe the most common characterization across theory,

practice and the imaginary, yet here they are being captured as 'the people' *precisely*

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[258] Bosteels, "The People Which is Not One," 4.

[259] Ibid., 9. A claim sustained as well by Sofia Näsström, she writes that "contrary to what is assumed by many liberal and deliberative theorists of legitimacy, the gap in the constitution of the people is therefore not a problem. It is *productive*, a generative device that helps to foster ever new claims of legitimacy." see: "The Legitimacy of the People." *Political Theory* 35.5 (October 2007): 626.

[260] Bosteels, "The People Which is Not One," 13.

[261] It is interesting here to read John P. McCormick's notes on the conception of people as political agents in popular government: "Two criticisms of the people as a political agent pervade the history of popular government: traditionally, oligarchs bent on completely excluding the people from participation in government denounce the latter as inveterately envious, ignorant, licentious, and prone to arbitrary displaces of aggression toward prominent citizens. Alternatively, writers and statesmen who consider the common people merely unfit to exercise substantive political power emphasize popular deference and passivity and link these qualities to a certain lack of initiative or ingenuity. The first view rejects the idea tout court that the people are capable of sensible political judgement; the second suggests that the people's deficient but not insignificant capacities should be exercised in strictly circumscribed ways." *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 66.

because they have the power: to act, to be visible, to be pronounced. They are concrete individuals with material power. In addition to passivity it is hardly uncommon to define the people by negation and exclusion, indeed, "whichever way we designate those who are either not the people or other than the people, there is no way of circumnavigating the fact that, both historically and conceptually speaking, this category is constituted on the basis of a necessary exclusion."[262] It is this exclusion that I believe Arendt's faculty of action, as it attempts to define politics, does not take into account. But, I contend, the moment the political is defined as that which is attached to power, the play of inclusion and exclusion become part of how we understand the category of the people and its necessary formation through political power.

Some might see in this 'sudden' appearance of the people and their mutual action as adding more layers to the already difficult task of defining the people and understanding popular movements and the scope of sovereignty. Canovan, for instance, writes that the problem of popular sovereignty is "the attribution of ultimate political authority to a people that manages somehow to be both a set of concrete individuals, taking action in a particular place at a particular time, and an abstract collective entity with a life beyond such limitations."[263] This view brings her to contend that "the notion of the sovereign people is credited with a quality that lifts it above people as ordinary human beings."[264] It is as if the people in ordinary life, she explains, are different in nature from the people forming a collective. Or that the collection of people endowed with sovereignty is different (in nature) than ordinary people. This is one way to see

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[262] Bosteels, "The People Which is Not One," 2.
[263] Canovan, *The People*, 91-92.
[264] Ibid., 6.

popular movements, however I propose to see the moment and its importance in the

collapse between the ordinary and the sovereign; a moment where they meet, where

they actually assert their existence as one and the same; a moment that lives the political

as it should be lived, via an issue that concerns everyone, relates to their daily life and has

a practical nature attached to it. That the sovereign people are attributed 'this quality

that lifts it above people as ordinary human beings' is in effect a consolidation for the

view of people as abstract, non-active, non-engaged human beings. It also consolidates

the political as disengaged and divorced from the people, that it is built around ideals of

rule, order and hierarchy. There is no doubt that constitutive moments, such as the one

witnessed in Tahrir Square, are hard to capture and understand because of their rarity

and contingency—they are moments of extreme sacrifice and brevity.[265] This is part of

what makes them unforgettable historical incidents, monumental pictures that carve

their way into our living memory; but they are crucial moments precisely because they

keep on pointing to the potential lurking in action, and to the oppression of depriving

people of their political power. Such moments point, even more importantly, to what is

possible but not actualized. And among the many options, we see that politics can indeed

be referred to as that which is being created and nurtured between people and for them.

Popular movements and resistance are indicators of the perpetual role the people

play as the abstract holders of power, the supreme sovereign, and thus the defensive and

restorative collective. They are an indicator, too, of the potential for real engagement

that goes beyond a defensive and restorative role to actually redefining their agency and

the political sphere altogether. There is no essence of 'the people' that is hidden and

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[265] Ibid., 9.

about to be discovered in the popular movement; nor is it the case that their appearance

– grand, determined, fierce and capable – is all there is to this moment. It is the

movement of asserting a foundational quality they have, in holding political power and

actualizing it, performing it and believing in its ability that marks this multitude march. If

anything, this essence of the people is about to be *made*, not discovered, and that comes

through the remaking of the mutual space called the political. Of course, what strikes us

first and foremost about popular movements is the reclamation of the political. In simple

sequence of both words and actions they reconstitute the political through reclaiming

their power. They have political views, demands, ideas, slogans because now their power

is actualized and no longer abstract. They are not an intangible entity that grants

sovereignty, yet stays far from where the sovereign rules. Their power and the political

are one and the same. Instantly, the political appears as something alive, something that

cannot be hidden behind closed doors, and something that concerns the many, not the

few.

The collapse between abstract and concrete power, and the attendant

reclamation of the political sphere, call us to examine the concept of revolution. In and of

itself, revolution may or may not be revolutionary. Within the framework of the people as

a restorative and defensive force, and the people as abstract holders of the supreme

power, revolution is read as a (re)establishment of a new authority/regime.[266] It is not

thought of as a mode of reconceptualizing the whole relation between authority and

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[266] Ariella Azoulay critiques the concept of revolution as a superior form of understating collective action. She notes that the concept is adopted from a ruling power perspective, that is interested in the end result of the process: the newly established regime. Accordingly, the concept stabilizes rather than threatens existing regimes. See, "Revolution," *Political Concepts a Critical Lexicon* 2 (Winter 2012).

people, nor of questioning ideals of rule and hierarchy. In critical moments, the people are supposed to take back control and act to restore order and establish a new government, while not threatening the political sphere's established status quo. This idea of a revolution does not disrupt the framework that sees people as passive holders of political power, uninterested and disengaged. The lack of disruption is in fact at the heart of this view. People play a role, but only insofar as it does not question the foundations of the political and continues to uphold existing hierarchy. Returning to Locke, he argued that his ideas regarding the creation of the legislator based on the people's consent do not spur on rebellion. That when the legislature fails to preserve people's liberties, and the people act to change it, this actually protects against an ongoing state of upheavals. He adds that people get used to their ways and traditions and even when it is clear that the system is not acting properly, they are reluctant to seize the opportunity and revolt against it. When people have the opportunity to change their legislatures, by existing and easily applicable means, this impedes voices calling for revolt. He writes, "the doctrine giving the people a power to provide anew for their safety by establishing a new legislature, when their legislators have acted contrary to their trust by invading their property, is the best *barrier* to rebellion and the best means to *block* it. Rebellion is opposition not to persons but to authority, of which the only basis is the constitutions and laws of the government."[267] Those who might be seen as a danger to the authority, are those who lay claims to it: those who hold the power, and can use force to keep their authority. In other words, not the people. "Those who are most likely to rebel against the constitution and the laws are those who are in power, because of their claim to authority,

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[267] Locke, *Second Treatise of Government,* 112.

the temptation of the force they have at their disposal,"[268] Locke cautions. Authority in a

revolution is what this force, the people, has been trained, kept, indulged and

encouraged to be. Revolting from an authority-driven center is not a threat if all it desires

is to continue the circle of power abstraction. It is a threat, as Locke writes, only when it

makes authority suspicious of its power. And when, likewise, it questions authority's

legitimacy. For power to be viewed as a positive, productive and creative force, and for

involvement in the public sphere to account for our desires and wishes, a questioning of

authority ought to remain alive and active. And the engagement of people in politics

ought to be understood as fundamental in sustaining the political realm and making sure

that political power is not accumulated in the hands of the few. Accordingly, the one

valuable way of defining the political is by asking whether the people are active and

powerful, or distant and abstract.

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[268] Ibid.

Concluding Remarks

Equally as old as the question about the meaning of politics are the answers that offer

justification for politics, and almost all the definitions in our tradition are essentially

justifications. To put it in very general terms, all these justifications or definitions end up

characterizing politics as a means to some higher end, although, to be sure, definitions of

what that end should be have varied widely down through the centuries.[269]

Thinking together with Arendt about the meaning and fate of the political is to think

politics not in terms of state and governing – nor, it should be said, contra the state – but

to envision a sphere that sustains human relations and invites them to act in it as

responsible agents. Surely, we should be troubled with the political and ethical price paid

for excluding people from this sphere. The political domain for political theorists and

philosophers resides usually in finding and defining the common good; the appeal of

Hannah Arendt's theory is the fact that she turns this formula upside down. The common

good, given our plurality, is undetermined—but the only way in which we can safeguard

our mutual living to any extent is by keeping the political alive and active. We safeguard

our mutual existence by turning it into a choice and engaging with it as an art form.

People's political power, in authority-driven-thinking, is a regulative mechanism to

(re)install a new regime. The power of the people is of a delegative nature, acclaimed

precisely because it is transferable (more specifically, it is usually depicted as 'moving up'

in a hierarchy). This follows from conceptualizing the role of the people as that of

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[269] Arendt, *The Promise*, 115.

restoration and defense against an unjust authority. Revolting can be understood as an act to restore and keep the political sphere as an arena of hierarchy and rule. Popular movements, in authority-driven-thinking, are not radical endeavours by people who are questioning the transferability of their power, who have a need for being engaged, and find meaning in it. Rather, revolutions are intermissions between two regimes or systems, which end in sovereignty being delegated to the next power apparatus.[270] This interpretation can be challenged, however, when the pinnacle of change ceases to be the state, or authority control: when the emphasis on authority takeover is supplanted by a grappling with one's own political power in conjunction with a multitude of discordant views.

Power is used on individual and community levels to create practices and meanings that individuals and collectives harbour and sustain. Tahrir Square was such a revolution: people acted upon what they preached. They did not storm entities to declare winning the revolution, they saw the state as representing the power they were afraid of capturing. So they focused instead on creating their own free spaces animated by their beliefs and agency, even if these were sporadic and were eventually defeated. Therefore, to do justice to these movements, one must refrain from using the same epistemic categories; one must pay close attention to the workings of these movements, how they have done and undone certain concepts. First and foremost, in addition to the concept of politics, I have suggested that the category of 'the people' should be re-examined.

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[270] Azoulay, "Revolutions."

I have claimed that the authoritative interpretation of 'the people' is both a powerful tool for change, since it reminds this majority of its stripped power, as much as it is also a potential wedge between them and their political capacities, since their power can be instrumentalized to establish a new authority keeping them away from public life. 'The people' persists as an elusive concept, an obscurity that evades being captured, nonetheless every time they make a powerful appearance, they regenerate new potentials for collective action and hence for the concept itself. It is indeed difficult to preserve those fleeting constitutive moments of collective action; the mobilized people have "no continuous history," they are outside time and each of their appearances is "a fresh start."[271] Nonetheless, 'the people' as a term continues to be attached to emancipatory projects around the world, resurfacing with new promises and meanings. The most significant promise of the concept of the people lies in actualizing political power. The engaged and acting crowds redefine the relation between public and private sphere through manifesting their commitments and desires. They also revel in these moments power as a creative and constructive force, enabling individuals to come together, to constitute a community, and to act within it.

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[271] Canovan, *The People*, 44.

Chapter Three

People, Power and Participation: An Ontology of Tahrir

Square

"The motive for assuming the burden of earthly politics is love
of one's neighbor, not fear of him."[272]

Introduction

The previous chapter examined the philosophical and theoretical origins of the

people's exclusion from politics, and the foundational axioms that enabled this exclusion.

I concluded this study with two arguments: first, that conceptualizing power as a negative

force that ought to be controlled by an overarching penalizing authority had facilitated

turning the people into a defensive and restorative force. Second, that the separation

between public and private realms in the Western political tradition – in a way that

makes the former a purely rational space and dedicates the latter to individuals' emotions

and interests – leads to the handing over of political matters to a minority imagined as

capable of annulling itself, preferring the interests of others over its own (a contention

debunked as illusory and oppressive by feminist scholarship).[273] These assumptions have

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[272] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005), 139.

[273] Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory," *Praxis International* 5.4 (1985): 381-401.

the effect of vacating political affairs from the very desire that impels people to take political action in the first place, ultimately promoting the arranging of politics as a soulless, cold enterprise. Moreover, they lead to the weakening of individual and collective agency, restricting people's participation to the few exceptional moments of revolution when they take up the limited role of the sovereign power reinstating order. An alternative view of politics, which I have stipulated based on concepts in Hannah Arendt's work, is one that sees the political realm as a theatre of active pursuit by individuals and collectives who have political power to advance their desires and practice living together.

The intention of this dissertation is to look at those exceptional moments and recognize the novelty they offer beyond what registers as their immediate political gains. This acknowledgment then propels us to ask how these moments of change illuminate our political and ethical constitutions, and what normative lessons we could learn (as well as which ones we previously missed). I have suggested in the introduction that to unravel the originality of an event an 'ontology of the present'[274] is a necessary methodology to appreciate it within its historical and social context as an articulated experience in time and space. The objective of this chapter is to expand upon the theoretical foundations which contributed to excluding people from politics by giving an account of a specific event, Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011. To restate briefly, I have chosen to examine the popular movements in the Arab world as a response to the extensive scrutiny this region underwent at the hands of democratization studies. As I argued in the first chapter, this

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[274] Michel Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution," *Economy and Society*, 15.1 (1986): 96.

area of study acted as an epistemic imposition, diminishing the power and ability of the popular movements to bring about any meaningful political change. It reified the concept of politics as a regime and its hierarchical composition, albeit this time with the legitimacy that the discourse of democracy bequeaths upon such perspectives. I have chosen to work with Tahrir Square specifically, as it will become evident, because it is not only an example of a revolution, or a revolutionary moment in which the masses meet in the streets, but it acted as a microcosm of the prospective society the crowds desired. It was not solely a place; it demonstrated the ideas and beliefs the revolution called for, hence merging fully the people and politics. In narrating the experience of the Egyptian revolution I intend to look at the particular modes of organizing and strategizing that were dominant and how these reshaped the meaning of politics, the possibilities of power, and the agency people have through open and unmediated forms of participation.

Operating from an assumption that political philosophy has lessons to be cultivated from this historical event relies on the understanding that an account of a situated political experience is a matter of interpretation, not a truth-seeking scheme. Recounting experience, bestowing meaning upon it and claiming its pertinency to philosophical elucidation is *the* philosophical operation par excellence. Indeed, truth is not the objective:

> In our epoch few authors would claim such status for their work, and even fewer
> readers would demand it. This is not because all of us have suddenly adopted
> some sort of wholesale relativism which would efface the very opposition
> between truth and falsity; rather, it is because many of us have come to view
> truth, particularly the truth of the human world, as being deeply implicated in

history and temporality. We have come to regard the work of the philosopher as a

labor of interpretation and to consider this act itself as deeply implicated in the

reality of what it hopes to decipher.[275]

Interpretation is not only implicated in historical contexts and temporality but also in

power relations. The standpoint of interpretation, therefore, acknowledges its own

workings and conscious involvement in a scene. As mentioned more comprehensively in

the introduction, the methodology of the 'ontology of the present' is deployed to seek an

end to epistemological truths, which conceal their privileged positions and act to silence

other legitimate options,[276] in all cases adopting the view point of the observer rather

than the actor. For example, we can find this the function on display in democratization

studies, as described earlier. Foucault, from whom I borrow the term 'ontology of the

present,' writes that this ontology presents "another kind of questioning, another mode

of critical interrogation"—it is one that is not interested in the analytics of truth.[277] To use

such an ontology in the context of understanding Tahrir Square is not to recount

objectively the events that took place there, but to give an account for their political and

social origins and implications. As Judith Butler argues, "to refer to 'ontology' in this

regard is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are

distinct from any and all social and political organization."[278] Indeed, interpretation "does

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[275] Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), xiii.

[276] I have in mind her Miranda Fricker's depiction of the action of silencing in the context of contributing to collective knowledge and understanding, which she calls "testimonial injustice." I propose to think about the ways in which the Arab revolutions, and other popular movements to that effect, are not seen as valuable experiences to inform theory, and particularly philosophy. This can be perceived as a form of "epistemic injustice" that adhere to the current power relations within the tradition. See her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 131.

[277] Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment," 96.

[278] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso Books, 2010), 2.

not emerge as the spontaneous act of a single mind, but as a consequence of a certain

field of intelligibility that helps to form and frame our responsiveness to the impinging

world (a world on which we depend, but which also impinges upon us, exacting

responsiveness in complex, sometimes ambivalent, forms)."[279] Ontology takes stock of

the fact that there is no pure truth "unmediated"[280] and unimplicated in political and

social nets, and in histories.

The image of the philosopher as a 'truth searcher' has been questioned and

repudiated by Arendt who emphasized that philosophers need to grapple with political

reality as the basis for their political thinking and philosophy. In fact, Arendt's critique of

Western political thought centers around the tradition's neglect of political life while in

pursuit of absolute truths or categories beyond the unpredictability of social life.[281] It is

only in political reality, she held, that a philosopher's most valuable faculty, persuasion,[282]

finds its use and can genuinely bring forth radical enlightenments. Persuasion and

interpretation are key to unlocking the value of human experiences when it comes to

discerning political phenomena and making sense of them.

The goal of this chapter is to look at the Square's model of political organizing and

communications on the interpersonal level, as well as the changes that ensued on the

level of subjectivity, as this model differed from the one we witness in regular day-to-day

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[279] Ibid., 34.
[280] Stephen K. White, "As the world turns: ontology and politics in Judith Butler," *Polity* 32.2 (1999): 157.
[281] Ariella Azoulay claims that "the withdrawal from politics as a form of being-together is perhaps" identified by Arendt as the "principal character" of the Western tradition of political philosophy. See, "Outside the Political Philosophy Tradition and Still Inside Tradition: Two Traditions of Political Philosophy," *Constellations* 18.1 (2011): 92.
[282] Arendt, *The Promise*, 12.

life. The presumption that drives my account is that our subjective experience of our capacity to contribute to the general well-being goes either unaccounted for or is entirely opposed by political structures and concepts that undermine subjects' agency. These prohibiting political structures also fail to recognize that agency is produced by the practice of participation, and that politics are produced by the practice of interaction. Interpreting Tahrir ought to yield, then, an account of the new epistemic lessons and processes of knowledge production the revolution offers. Part of the operation of the philosophical interpretation of Tahrir Square is to reveal the potential latent in these epistemic lessons, and furthermore, discover what this conveys about us ethically, not least because this has real bearing on our world of experiences and also on our world of imaginations and desires. Tahrir Square will be recounted in a manner that offers a normative account, linking our actions in the world and toward other beings to the forms of political organizing, asking how this can yield an affirmative ethical and political stance.

Consequently, informing the reader with details about Tahrir Square's eighteen days aims at corroborating the two arguments of the previous chapter. That is, to identify what happens on both the individual and collective levels when politics are rendered accessible and practical; when political power is perceived as a constructive force that has immediate and practical consequences; when the public realm becomes an open space to deliberate and dis/agree upon the desires and interests of those involved. This account further elaborates upon and shows the political as a realm that can be utilized to make an art out of our mutual existence.

Following this introduction, I will look at the conditions of social and political organizing and living that make possible a model such as the one witnessed in the Square.

I will discuss modes of non-hierarchical and leaderless organizing, and explore the

vantage point that revolutionary politics should aim primarily at replacing the regime and

its mechanisms (versus offering a new meaning of politics altogether). If anything is

noteworthy in the model of the Square it is how deeply ethics and politics are connected

when they arise out of a practical action. To reveal this model in this light, I will offer a

perspective to frame the revolution. I will do so by engaging critically with the two views

on politics discussed in chapter two, politics as regime (liberal), and politics as procedure

(i.e. radical-democratic).[283] The latter will occupy a greater place since it is the one that

invests sincerely in theorizing inclusion of people in politics. However, this view is also

preoccupied with demonstrable outcomes of political actions (especially ones pertaining

to the state level), instrumentalizes the people and their action, and guards politics as a

hierarchal domain. This radical-democratic view will be represented here by two thinkers

who belong to this camp, and who notably have praised the Arab spring and wrote

specifically about the Egyptian Tahrir Square: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Having

discussed in the previous chapter the redefinition of politics from a point of view that

interlocks people and power, I will argue that the agency and new forms of politics gained

can be easily lost when state power and its mechanisms continue to be our

preoccupation. Or as Ariella Azoulay puts it, when we "pass from discussion of the various

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[283] Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung offer the following definition for radical-democratic ideas: "any mass democracy must be organized at least in part as a system of competitive representation. Radical democrats acknowledge this basic fact of political life, but seek a fuller realization of democratic values than competitive representation itself can attain…. Radical democrats are committed to broader participation in public decision-making. Citizens should have greater direct roles in public choices or at least engage more deeply with substantive political issues and be assured that officials will be responsive to their concerns and judgments. Second, radical democrats emphasize deliberation. Instead of a politics of power and interest, radical democrats favor a more deliberative democracy in which citizens address public problems by reasoning together about how best to solve them." In "Radical Democracy," *Debate: Deliberation et Action Publique* 10.4 (January 2011): 23-34.

forms that the power of the many takes in public, to a discussion of the achieved

results,"[284] Badiou and Žižek do, in addition to others. The objective with this critical

reading is to prioritize the Square's representation of itself, and its understanding of

empathy, solidarity and power, as a basis for any understanding of politics and to offer a

critique of instrumentalizing political actions.

Tahrir Square: Solidarity, Civic Ethics and Responsibility

Much has been written about the eighteen days in Tahrir Square,[285] a gathering

place that is now synonymous with the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Lasting from January

25th until February 11th, it ended when the thirty-year president of the republic stepped

down under massive popular pressure. The events were captured and followed closely,

observed and recorded[286] not only to depict the euphoric momentum of a great

revolution and its political outcomes, but also because after just a few days both the

Square and the people occupying it looked different. The sheer power of the rebelling

individuals and collectives was fascinating. But beyond the refusal and dissent toward the

long-standing regime, those who were closely observing the Square witnessed something

previously unimaginable. The story of the Square and the experience of the revolting

crowd who occupied it for days was praised and told time and again, owing largely to a

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[284] Ariella Azoulay, "Revolution," *Political Concepts a Critical Lexicon* 2 (Winter 2012).
[285] Ahmad Shokr, "The 18 Days of Tahrir," *Middle East Report* 258 (2011): 14-19; Abdel-Latif El Menawy, *Tahrir: The Last 18 Days of Mubarak: An Insider's Account of the Uprising in Tahrir*, (Gilgamesh, 2012); Hatem Rushdy, *18 Days in Tahrir: Stories from Egypt's Revolution* (Haven Books, 2012).
[286] Since then several articles, books and movies capturing those moments have seen the light. See: Mona El-Naggar, "The Legacy of 18 Days in Tahrir Square," *The New York Times,* February 19, 201, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/20/weekinreview/20tahrir.html; Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle, eds, *Tweets from Tahrir: Egypt's revolution as it unfolded, in the words of the people who made it* (New York: Or Books, 2011).

particular model[287] of bringing about this revolution and doing politics differently. The

Square was producing and *enacting* a model of "being-together" unthinkable in Egypt's

previous political and social realities.

Collectively, with the efforts of several citizen committees, the space of the

Square was reimagined, redesigned and reorganized. New small-scale institutions were

put in place to support the protesters to remain in the occupied territory and its

surroundings. Tents and mobile medical clinics were built, and people formed rotating

groups of guards to protect the protesters from police forces.[288] Media committees took

charge of covering the incidents on the ground with citizens becoming the reporters and

first hand witnesses and representatives of their own movement.[289] Art spaces and

musical stages were assembled, open to all those who wished to communicate with the

larger crowd via a range of media. Those very preliminary and simple institutions were

functional, something Egyptians rarely experienced in the old institutions run by the

state,[290] but most importantly they were perceived as *belonging* to the crowd and serving

every one of its members, regardless of their social or economic background and

influence. The protesters were responsible for the direct operation of these institutions in

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[287] Similar stance can be found in Mohammed Bamyeh, "Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson: The Arab Spring between Three Enlightenments," *Constellations* 20.2 (2013): 192. Bamyeh writes: "It could easily be said that these revolutions captivated the imaginations of the millions of actors who made them because their goals were so sensible. But more interesting is how the revolutions themselves became tools of discovery, of both new knowledge and new sensibilities." Accounts that describe and praise Tahrir's model can be found also in: Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, tras. by Gregory Elliott, (Verso Books, 2012), 82; Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* 9 (2011), 7.

[288] Ahdaf Soueif, "Protesters Reclaim the Spirit of Egypt," *BBC News*, February 13, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12393795

[289] Mohammed Rashed and Islam El Azzazi, "The Egyptian Revolution: A Participant's Account from Tahrir Square, January and February 2011," *Anthropology Today* 27.2 (2011): 22-27.

[290] For more about the corruption in Egypt, see Stanley Reed, "The battle for Egypt," *Foreign affairs* 72 (September/October 1993): 94-107.

the Square, the well-being of fellow citizens, and for envisioning how things *should* be

carried out. These organizations and institutions supported the movement and

represented "an idea of the different society that they longed for."[291]

Decisions in the Square were made in committees open to all, preceded by

deliberation among members. At an essential level, strangers and heretofore unequal

parties transformed political representation into an immediate and direct presentation.

Instead of delegating leaders and spokespeople, the protesting crowd openly interfered,

expressed their opinions, agreed or opposed and discussed with others. Decisions were

made either by unanimous agreement or were voted upon. While one cannot say that

class, gender and intergenerational inequalities entrenched in the society simply

disappeared, one can say fairly that the Square witnessed some drastic shifts in these

relations, while other inequalities were de facto neutralized by open and equal systems of

reflection and decision-making.

The patriarchal nature of the society that defined firm gender roles was

questioned and the Square succeeded in founding equalized grounds between

genders.[292] Men and women shared the responsibilities and tasks of their mutual alliance

despite the existing apparatus of gender oppression and discrimination. They carried

together the burden of all the chores and decided on the methods and prospects of the

protest.[293] Similarly, Egypt's upper and lower classes, marked by extreme and apparent

divisions, faced questions about the future of the revolution and the social and economic

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[291] Mathijs Van de Sande, "The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square–An Alternative Perspective on the 2011 Revolutions," *Res Publica* 19.3 (March 2013): 234.
[292] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance," 8.
[293] Ibid.

conditions that may result from it, obliging them to debate openly fundamental questions

of social justice and equality for perhaps the first time. Tahrir Square created "new social

and political mechanisms," and "housed a complete alternative 'society-under-

construction,' which functioned as a social laboratory, a place where alternatives could be

formulated and experimented with."[294]

Everything operated in the Square on a voluntary basis: cleaning the compound,

donating blood, addressing media, preparing food and offering educational programs.

People exhibited tremendous generosity and willingness to support fellow protesters in

every possible way. The scene of reciprocal relations and solidarity between the people

became the revolution's standard, which no one could ignore. Things however did not

stop at that level. The eighteen days witnessed elevated forms of readiness to contribute

to the collective despite the high price paid, sometimes at extreme cost of injury, loss and

death. Self-sacrifice and the willingness of people to protect each other in the face of

state violence was perceived as a way people defended their mutual space, agency and

political power. By the same token, it was noted that no cases of sexual harassment –

otherwise an epidemic in Egypt[295] – were registered during those days. The Square was a

safe place for communities and groups who otherwise lived under constant threat of

being exploited.

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[294] Van de Sande, "The Prefigurative Politics," 234.
[295] Glen Johnson, "The Other Side of Tahrir Square," *The New York Time*, March 9, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/10/opinion/10iht-edjohnson10.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; Bel Trew, "Breaking the Silence: Mob Sexual Assaults on Tahrir Square," *Ahram News*, July 3, 2012, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/46800.aspx

In recounting what took place during the Egyptian revolution, Mohammad

Bamyeh argues that the crowd's competence in self-management, their coming to each

other's aid (sometimes at heavy personal cost), and the deep solidarity they exhibited

constitute what he calls a new form of nationalism. This nationalism is characterized by

one's exertion of effort and responsibility over one's own fate and that of others. It is a

nationalism that is pluralistic and pragmatic and is "suspicious of all sorts of established

leadership." He adds, "the new nationalism prefers uncharismatic public steering

committees and leaders, as it promotes the feeling that history is now written by the

layman rather than the nation or revolution's leader."[296]

The Square then, after being reclaimed from the state by the protesters, became

an open and secure place.[297] A space for experimenting with and practicing new ways of

communicating, of being, and of doing politics. New traditions of interaction between

people were emerging, touching upon many levels of daily human life. It bore witness to a

change in how people relate to each other, belong to a mutual space, and act upon their

rights and duties.[298] A new phase was taking root, starting with establishing efficient and

functioning entities that truly belonged to all the citizens, demonstrating unprecedented

forms of mutual aid, and reconfiguring relations typically characterized by inequality and

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[296] Mohammed Bamyeh, "The Arab Revolutions and the Making of a New Patriotism*," Orient: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East*, 52 (2011): 3.

[297] On how the state employed certain physical designs of the Square to discourage democracy and how the protesters secured it while keeping it open, see: Elshahed Mohamed, "Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space," *The Design Observer Group*, February 27, 2011 http://places.designobserver.com/feature/tahrir-Square-social-media-public-space/25108/

[298] Soueif, "Protesters Reclaim the Spirit of Egypt."

oppression such as gender, class and sect.[299] The Square saw forms of civic ethics and

solidarity previously unimagined.

Agency and Desires

The central constituent element of a revolution is the return of the people to the

political realm. This return entails the rise of the regular citizen to be the main political

actor, replacing at once political parties, leaders and professional politicians.[300] Occupying

public spaces, seizing them from the state's immediate authority, is a monumental and

meaningful act that literally and metaphorically places the people right at the center of

the political realm. This was the first act of protesters in Tahrir: claiming the Square and

by virtue of this claim asserting their agency. The public character of any space that is

reclaimed during a protest is, as Judith Butler maintains in *Bodies in Alliance*, disputed.

The crowds contest the character of the public space, it is "not given" but rather is

"fought over."[301] By reclaiming these spaces, the crowd declares their presence by

emphasizing their determination not to remain absorbed by their 'private interests.'[302] It

is not that they say 'our personal business lies somewhere else, and now we attend to the

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[299] See Hazem Kandil, "Why did the Egyptian Middle Class March to Tahrir Square?" *Mediterranean Politics* 17.2 (2012): 197-215.

[300] Bamyeh writes, "the idea of 'the people' [during the Arab revolutions] never seemed to require being embodied in a charismatic leader, vanguard party, or any grand structure that would stand in for peoplehood as a whole." In "Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention," 191.

[301] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 71.

[302] Mohammed Bamyeh, "Anarchist Philosophy, Civic Traditions and the Culture of Arab Revolutions," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5.1 (2012): 39. In discussing tyrannical regimes Arendt writes that "they have in common the banishment of the citizens from the public realm and the insistence that they mind their private business while only 'the ruler should attend to public affairs.'" Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 221.

business of the general will,' but rather that they fully blur the separation between public

and private.[303] The moment they occupy a public space and institute parallel institutions

to those of the state, they bring their own multiple and plural desires and interests to

bear upon the present-day situation. In fact, the images circulating of people cooking,

sleeping and studying in Tahrir reveal that this separation is an illusion, one that functions

to maintain politics as an exclusive realm for the few:

> After all, in Cairo, it was not just that people amassed in the square: they were
>
> there; they slept there; they dispensed medicine and food, they assembled and
>
> sang, and they spoke. Can we distinguish those vocalizations from the body from
>
> those other expressions of material need and urgency? They were, after all,
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> sleeping and eating in the public square, constructing toilets and various systems
>
> for sharing the space, and so not only refusing to be privatized – refusing to go or
>
> stay home – and not only claiming the public domain for themselves – acting in
>
> concert on conditions of equality – but also maintaining themselves as persisting
>
> bodies with needs, desires, and requirements.[304]

Something very important happens at the moments when the crowds gather and occupy

a public space; actually, what is being declared public is not the materiality of a square or

street but rather of politics itself. The crowds in Tahrir Square, by appropriating the space

and extricating it materially and ideationally from the state, and by creating their own

institutions, made two interrelated claims. First, being *the people*, here and now, relies

not on numbers but on the affirmative claim of being so, having universal demands, and

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[303] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*, 71.
[304] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance," 12.

actively participating. Second, this entity is not, given the description of the Square I have presented previously, an abstract one: it is composed of active, desiring, engaged, frightened individuals. Thus, bringing people back to politics relies on merging these two qualities: being part of a collective and having one's own interests and wishes voiced.

We can interpret the experience of the Square in terms of the *polis* as Arendt describes it: "the *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."[305] The Square was, for those eighteen days, a movement centred on a physical location, yet politics continue to happen when a square is dispersed. When phenomena that are considered private, such as emotions, desires and interests, are publicly displayed it reconfigures the very definition of what is public and what is not. A point that Butler stresses:

> As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly
> and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech
> reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public
> character of that material environment. And when crowds move outside the
> square, to the side street or the back alley, to the neighborhoods where streets
> are not yet paved, then something more happens. At such a moment, politics is no
> longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private
> one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that

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[305] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood, or indeed

in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public

square.[306]

Indeed, just eighteen days of Tahrir Square allowed protesters to declare their

responsibility over the public domain (the political) as the people's new concern and the

arena for their action. The revolution had given occasion for a new subjectivity[307] to arise:

a subject that has an agency that wills and acts on that will.[308] After being excluded and

absent from political life – all the debates and decisions surrounding it – the people

became political players par excellence. And it is above all through understanding this

agency that we can apprehend the conditions under which solidarity and civic ethics

emerged in the Square and in turn utilize these lessons for normative theory.

The recuperation of the people's political agency takes various forms; I will focus

here on two in particular. First, the people can reclaim their agency through accepting

and acting upon their political power as a constitutive and constructive force. It is a force

that resists, opposes and challenges at the same time as it builds alliances,

communicates, protects, and proposes alternatives. It is not a power that those engaged

in the act itself perceive as disciplinary and restrictive. To the contrary, the more powerful

the crowd felt, the better they were able to voice their multiple desires and propose

plans for future action. People establish their political agency by taking direct

responsibility over their fate and that of others. They became directly involved in

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[306] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance," 1.
[307] Bamyeh, "Anarchist Method," 190.
[308] In an interview one Egyptian citizen reported, "I am Egyptian again, not marginalized, not without value or dignity." El-Naggar, "*The Legacy of 18 Days.*"

imagining, debating, and executing action in various forms that allowed everyone present

to take an active role.[309] In this case, there is no separation between the power and those

who bear its consequence.[310] There is no disconnection between those who make

decisions and those touched by them. As political agents, the people are no longer the

instruments of political processes. To the contrary, their direct involvement negates their

becoming an instrument and prompts their agency.[311]

The second way this agency is recuperated, as in the case of Tahrir Square, is that

the crowd immediately enacts its collective will without mediation or delay. Their

demands and slogans for social justice, freedom and equality were actualized through the

very modes of their protests. Immediately after occupying the Square they founded open

and democratic institutions, established secure spaces to protect each other, and

produced methods for equal and meaningful involvement as a mode of enacting their

values. The power of the gathering, hence, was not only in the slogans they chanted but

in actualizing the slogans' very promise, mimicking their values – equality, freedom,

justice – and reshaping the dominant politics surrounding them.

The demonstrators "struggle[d] not only for the idea of social support and political

enfranchisement, but their struggle takes on a social form of its own. And so, in the most

ideal instances, an alliance enacts the social order it seeks to bring about."[312] The

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[309] The revolutions as a work of network: Ilhem Allagui and Johanne Kuebler, "The Arab Spring & The Role of ICTs, Editorial Introduction," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1435-1442.

[310] Or as the philosopher Todd May puts it: Power, "is to stay with those who must bear its effects." *The political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Penn State Press, 1994), 57.

[311] For more on the agency and new subjectivity that emerged out of the Arab revolutions see, Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi, "The Will to Revolt and The Spectre of The Real: Reflections on the Arab Moment," *City* 15.6 (2011): 625-630.

[312] Butler, "Bodies in Alliance," 5.

people's enactment of the social order they seek is made possible due to, again, the materiality of politics; their refusal to adhere to a version of it that is abstracted and mediated. Now that the public realm can include the private desires and wishes, the public can be imagined differently and collectively. Moreover, the fact that one can have a say in designing a shared space is in itself a tremendously empowering endeavour and a catalyst towards building one's agency. Indeed, political autonomy is fostered "by enabling people to live by rules that they make for themselves."[313]

During the eighteen days of the revolution, the people managed to create a geography that allowed for regaining political agency and collective power. This is not, however, to say that their power and agency were a given the moment they gathered in the streets. Rather, the more involvement they showed, and the more they adhered to and enacted their ideals of social justice, freedom and equality, the closer they came to bearing their collective power in all its consequences – witnessing the implications of their decisions – and the more they related to others as fellow citizens in spite of their different wills.

The New Politics

Naturally, it is possible to describe the above modes of responsibility toward others and ethical engagement in the public realm as "exceptional;" as deeds and gestures of nobility and heroism practiced by people during idealistic times such as in a

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[313] Cohen and Fung, "Radical Democracy," 25-26.

revolution against tyranny. Emphasizing this exceptionalism can be especially accurate if

revolutionary moments are perceived solely from a position that understands them as

transitional periods intended to install a new regime in the future and dissolve itself

thereafter. From that perspective, noble modes of citizen interaction and

parainstitutional activities do not necessarily conceal anything new that we should

consider philosophically or ethically beyond inquiring about the immediate political

outcomes. I hold that we should aspire to interpret these infrequent and unusual

moments, in their rapidity and intensity and their profound impact, beyond their

revolutionary or post-revolutionary outcomes. How can these moments be captured,

learned from, and conceptualized?

Given that I have dedicated the first two chapters to critiquing the liberal

perspective, which I have framed as politics as regime, and claimed that it does not deem

people's political participation necessary and prescribes political changes as events that

should occur from above, I wish to concentrate here on the radical-

democratic/democracy as procedure standpoint. Namely, whether the radical democratic

belief in the stipulation of citizens political participation is warranted as well in moments

of upheavals and revolutions, and to what extent it fulfills this promise? I will argue that

the new epistemic frames offered by revolutions are challenged by the radical democratic

position- that understands and accepts the vitality of mass mobilizations and popular

engagement in politics-, but which does so within a frame that argues the raison d'être

for social and political movements is "fostering or halting change."[314] Such a stance holds

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[314] David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 8.

that a movement is considered only on the grounds of its ability to challenge or defend

"existing institutional authority;"[315] that is, its ability to ameliorate the constitutional

frame of its existence and to have demonstrable outcomes which precisely pertain to

state power.

There is no contention that this position, is dramatically more attuned to the

involvement of the people in the political realm—in fact, it sees a great deal of value in

such involvement, both politically and morally. However, it nonetheless operates with an

eye on the regime and its apparatus. Consequently, the appraisals of popular movements

that come from proponents of this stance are bound up with the outcome these

movements have on politics at the top. Their stance on power is symptomatic of this

fixation: power is not perceived negatively, especially when used to claim universal

values, nor is it theorized as a fundamental characteristic of political life and its very

inception. It is rather an instrument, constructive at times, but nonetheless should be

limited and instrumentalized to gain specific objectives.

One of the defenders of the radical-democratic position is political theorist

Andreas Kalyvas. He identifies the occasion of popular movements or of the people

coming together in the streets as points of 'rupture.' He describes these foundational,

'extraordinary' moments in the life of the republic as "those infrequent and unusual

moments when the citizenry, overflowing the formal borders of institutionalized politics,

reflectively aims at the modification of the central political, symbolic, and constitutional

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[315] Ibid.

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principles and at the redefinition of the content and ends of a community."[316] Kalyvas

deploys the concept of the extraordinary to theorize a normative democratic theory

responsive to its founding act, its rupture. The 'modification' of the political and

constitutional, and the redefinition of the community, stem directly from his wish in

writing about these moments: to bestow legitimacy and stability on democratic politics in

normal times.[317] The extraordinary moments, in their infrequency and rarity, are crucial

for the dilemma of legitimacy, which democracy in our times is so desperately lacking.

Kalyvas claims that extraordinary moments ceased to be accounted for in political theory

for two reasons. First, that some of these ruptures have turned quickly to undemocratic

and totalitarian movements; second, that "revolutions were idealized and mystified as an

absolute leap from the realm of necessity to that of total freedom, failing to account for

normal, everyday politics."[318] I agree with Kalyvas's assertion regarding the dearth of

revolutionary moments being theorized as experiences that normative political theory

can learn from, an absence that motivated this very dissertation. However, thinking about

moments of rupture primarily within the frame of amending the legal and constitutional

apparatus, as per Kalyvas's project, still fixates on state power as the object of desire for

both normative political theory and popular movements. It also fails to weigh

'modifications' that might be unrecognizable on state level but do register as radical

undoings of the political realm itself. If the political, in general, is perceived on its very

fundamental level by Kalyvas and other radical-democratic theorists as a domain for both

individual and collective active participation, engagement, and deliberation, then a

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[316] Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.
[317] Ibid., 12.
[318] Ibid., 3.

different approach altogether would guide the inquiry into these exceptional moments and their lessons. Indeed, a philosophy that is committed to justice, freedom and equality ought to ask about the teachings of the extraordinary moments *in their very exceptionalism*. That is, instead of looking at what they contribute to politics as usual, we should consider their mode of exceptionalism as their truth, their identity and their new knowledge. Whatever they pronounce during these moments is not then considered "against" normal politics but regarded as a valuable lesson about a shared experience and existence as proposed by the revolting masses. These exceptional moments are opportunities to learn what cannot be learned at normal times, as Bamyeh explains:

> An exceptional and passing moment, however, does not exist simply to be enjoyed while it lasts. It is also an opportunity for learning what cannot be learned at more normal and sober times. The basic quality of such a moment consists precisely of allowing what is not possible at normal times: for one to see more into the soul of others, and to see how what seems possible in everyday life is always less than what is humanly possible. The point is not how such a revolutionary moment will be captured in institutions, but rather how we may discover through them something more about humanity, something that becomes added ammunition in our repertoire of techniques of action, spirit, deliberation, and solidarity.[319]

Something crucial to discover in those extraordinary moments, manifested time and again in Tahrir Square, is the freedom of the people to will their being, acting, and living

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[319] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 164.

together and to take responsibility for that willingness. Politics in moments of revolutions

become a space to transform this willingness into a practical project because of its

immediacy and the vitality of the power utilized. This experience operates against the

dominant political view, which does not apprehend living together as a legitimate inquiry

to explore nor, equally, as an act of will or love. Caring for each other, and for the

conditions that make our shared existence possible and negotiable, emanates from love

rather than fear, as Arendt contends.[320] This love, in order to be unblemished, cannot be

reached from a position lacking in power or desires. It emanates from a choice, and a

freedom to will love and shared living into existence.

To maintain this living together it is necessary to keep an open public sphere and

politics as a domain for acting and deliberating collectively. Politics in that sense is

understood as an achievement of those who create it and not a mere administrative

necessity. This view of politics, as a sphere of willed action where agents take initiative to

choose the course of their mutual living, already invites the people back to it. This is not

done without a struggle, namely over the very character of politics and how to sustain it.

But, through struggling to attain this kind of politics that intrinsically invites the people

back, the people find themselves empowered and active again. No demonstrator in Tahrir

Square fancied politics as a domain of ruling, of bureaucratic administration, as a

hierarchy of power and order. Without the very possibility of imagining a different

meaning and nature of politics, the crowd would not have gathered in those numbers.

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[320] Arendt, *The Promise*, 139.

They themselves were the issue at hand; how they participated, and which forms of

participation they chose testifies to – and in turn produces – this fact.

Then, if the point is beyond institutionalizing these moments, how can they be

conceptualized? Considering that these moments are praised and perceived positively by

people from various ends of the political spectrum (a testament to their democratic,

inclusive and just quality), and given that we know that these moments cannot last with

such high intensity and numbers, I suggest that their newness, and the forms of solidarity,

civic ethics and deliberation arising in the process, are the lessons to be gleaned. Still, we

ought to ask: is political agency an accessible mode that an individual or a group can

adopt at any given time and under any conditions? Can we speak of political conditions

that allow for this agency and, as such, pave the path for the solidarity and responsibility

to spur out of it? Put differently, what is special about revolution – in general, and in this

specific revolution – that establishes this agency? Under which political conditions are

they possible? Doubtless, one could always rightly point to the fact that in resisting

injustice and inequality, there is a form of solidarity that is born between people facing

violence and aggression.[321] But even this possibility is not to be taken for granted. I want

to argue in the coming section that the proliferation of these forms of relationships and

political agency is predicated on the modes of political organization themselves. Different

ways of organizing can allow the people access to reclaiming their agency—it can also

deny them, or otherwise instrumentalize their action. How political participation is

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[321] For a thoughtful discussion on the relation between solidarity and resistance see chapter 6 in José
Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social
Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

fashioned influences the restoration of political responsibility and hence the solidarity that arises between the people, testifying to the continued struggle of the people against forms of politics that exclude them and banish their power.

Forms of Participation

For those who witnessed the demonstrations in Cairo evolve into a revolution, one very obvious aspect was that regardless of how massive the movement became it remained leaderless. The first mass demonstrations were organized through social media, open to all to suggest, organize, follow, debate, argue and disagree. Its organizing was not, from the beginning, centralized in any sense. Demonstrations resulted from suggestions coming from the ground up; routes were decided upon on the spot; dispersed actions took place all around different cities. And later on, when the Square became the centre of the movement, decisions were made there in committees and sub-committees at open-air meetings. All participants were welcome, and work was divided among the members present.[322] With a clear lack of formalized leadership and central organization, the crowd acted horizontally, driven by a sense of personal responsibility and collective consciousness:

The revolutions of the Arab spring obviously appear as massive political phenomena. Yet strangely they did not emerge out of organized political groups, nor did they provide an opportunity for any leadership, organization, party, or

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[322] Butler gives a similar account of Tahrir Square in, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*, 89.

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even revolutionary symbol to stand in or lead the revolution as a whole. Rather,

these revolutions relied on a spontaneous sense as a primary source for the

theory of revolution, and on *agility as a primary style* for the practice of

revolution.[323]

Direct and transparent forms of participation in equal and deliberative bodies, with a

clear absence of hierarchical order, allowed everyone to actively participate in deciding

the future of the movement. From seasoned political activists who were at the frontline

of continuous confrontation with Mubarak's regime,[324] to others for whom the Arab

spring was the first time they acted upon their social and political grievances and beliefs,

the forms of political participation – vivid, dynamic, and non-hierarchical – facilitated

regained confidence and a sense of belonging. Clearly, when faced with a situation

without saviours, every participant had to be directly responsible for their own actions as

well as those that were taken collectively resulting from a process of deliberation. The

absence of formal leadership obliged them to come up with creative ideas and

institutions, and to confront the myth that the people are not interested in politics; that

they were neither willing nor capable of engaging in them.[325]

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[323] Bamyeh, "Anarchist Philosophy, Civic Traditions," 33. (Emphasis mine.)

[324] "Kefaya- Egyptian Movement for Change" and "April 6 Youth Movement," are the most prominent among them. For more information see: Killian Clarke, "Saying 'Enough': Authoritarianism and Egypt's Kefaya Movement," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 16.4 (2011): 397-416. Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution," *Middle East Report* 41.258 (2011): 2-13. For further reading on how these movements of change "creatively adopted a non-hierarchical model of collective action that was organically suited to the vast informal and subterranean networks already dominant within Egyptian life" see, Diane Singerman, "Youth, Gender, and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9.3 (2013): 1-27.

[325] It should be noted again, that this is not a point to negate democratic institutions, it is rather to stress a point, which Bamyeh makes eloquently, that "humanity does not live by, or for the sake of, procedure alone." That the degree of an openness of a society should be measured according to the effective and practical engagement of individuals in it. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order*, 52.

The political agency of the people was not, thus, predicated upon resisting oppression solely, but on the *methods* chosen to resist: "if power creates its own resistance, then the liberation from specific forms of power must take account of the kind of resistance that is being engaged in, on pain of repeating that which one is trying to escape."[326] Indeed, while one can claim that people take to the streets to depose a dictatorship or to formulate a specific list of demands from the ruling regime, it takes more than demands to construct political agency and experience the strength of acting upon one's beliefs. The fact that the people were not commanded by a leader or following an organization amplified their sense of strength, but it also mirrored their stated vision and goals back to them. That they designated, deliberated upon, and planned their actions collectively was in a way a clear affirmation that what they desire does not lie 'out there,' but in here. In how and why they organized, how active they were, and how influential they felt. As Judith Butler described interactions in the Square:

> "[H]orizontal relations" among the protestors formed easily and methodically, alliances struggling to embody equality, which included an equal division of labour between the sexes- these became part of the very resistance to the Mubarak regime and its entrenched hierarchies, including the extraordinary differentials of wealth between the military and corporate sponsors of the regime and the working people. So the social form of the resistance began to incorporate principles of equality that governed not only how and when people spoke and acted for the media and against the regime, but how people cared for their

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[326] May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, 73.

various quarters within the square, the beds on the pavement, the makeshift

medical stations and bathrooms, the places where people ate, and the places

where people were exposed to violence from the outside. […] These actions were

all political in the simple sense that they were breaking down a conventional

distinction between public and private in order to establish new relations of

equality; in this sense, they were incorporating into the very social form of

resistance the principles they were struggling to realize in broader political

forms.[327]

Solidarity and responsibility rose out of the forms of political organization enacted in the

Square. It is this leaderless and non-hierarchal manner of coming together and acting that

enabled the involved individuals to reclaim their agency and form a new subjectivity. They

were able to participate on equal footing, think and act, debate and plan. Equalizing the

process between participants, eliminating gaps created by leadership discourse, and

relinquishing the need for a clear and coherent plan all contribute to the sense that this is

a new way of doing politics. It is a route that in fact refuses to see in the political a means

to an end, realizing that the first to be instrumentalized due to the means-ends logic will

be the people themselves.[328] From the perspective of the people's participation in the

politics that govern their daily life, the split of means and ends can be undoubtedly

dangerous and detrimental, a point I will address next.

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[327] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory*, 89-90.
[328] Mathijs, "The Prefigurative Politics."

Power and Participation

Horizontal relations, non-hierarchical forms of organizing that allow massive numbers of people to participate in decision-making, turn participation into power.[329] The alliance experiences their power the moment they realize they have it. But it can be realized only in acting together in ways that do not instrumentalize the collective's actions and in ways that underscore their ability to take further actions in the future. Arendt reminds us that "power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization."[330] It materializes only when people are acting together. Power emerges among the people who take part in shaping their present and future, and who construct a political community to achieve this goal. The moment action is halted, the power is lost and political community dies. This bears emphasizing: power vanishes the moment the people disperse. Only through political power, that is through performing and actualizing it, can one start to learn to speak and to inquire about the truth.

The power of the crowd vanishes when they cease to participate actively in the making of the laws and relationships that connect them together. "Power is about politics, not just in the formal sense but more broadly, about the politics of everyday life"[331]—this can be witnessed beyond times of revolution, any time the people's power and participation are broken apart by so-called professional politics or governing.[332] The

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[329] For how horizontal participatory structures are experiments in 'real democracy' see, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, "The Fight for 'Real Democracy' at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street," *Foreign affairs* 11 (2011).

[330] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

[331] Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 149.

[332] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History,* 107.

"dispersal of the crowd" is not meant in a strictly physical sense. They disperse when they

are asked to go home literally or figuratively, when they are told to be occupied solely

with their personal interests. The power of the crowd also disperses when they are asked

(and concede) to exchange their power in the name of possible future gains or, more

broadly, when they accept any possible means to achieve political ends. The power of the

crowd, in direct contrast, lies in displaying and exercising the values of their movement,

merging means and ends. Those values according to which the revolution enacts its

power cannot be postponed to a later moment or treated as a future promise, delayed

until the revolution wins or demands are met. As Arendt reminds us, the greatness of an

action is the only criteria we can judge it by, but this lies only "in the performance itself

and neither in its motivation nor its achievement."[333] In the case of the recent

revolutions, the performance can be captured by the enactment of the values the

protesters believed in, the deliberative democratic process, and the equal procedures.

This alone was the guarantee that participation translated into power, in an attempt to

create a new form of politics.

Revolutions, an Instrument for What?

Arendt's assertion that "the proper end of politics is in a way its opposite, namely,

nonparticipation in political affairs,"[334] is still a valid synthesis of the state of present-day

politics. She repeatedly warned that the avoidance of politics became the end of it. The

Western tradition of political philosophy since Plato, Arendt maintains, degraded politics

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[333] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205-206.
[334] Arendt, *The Promise*, 83 (Emphasis is mine.)

and constructed a chasm between thinking, the ultimate activity of a philosopher, and

acting, the activity that corresponds to our collective existence, politics. Philosophy

sought eternal matters and the truth in them, while politics was concerned with earthly

and human affairs, those that is hard to systemize and categorize (and which haunt the

peace of mind that the pondering philosopher so covets). When, however, the tradition

turned to deal with politics in a systematic way, it was treated as a "necessary evil, due

partly to the necessities of life that force men to live as laborers or rule over slaves who

provide for them, and partly to the evils that come from living together itself."[335] Arendt

goes deep into classical antiquity to show that "no other activity appears as

antiphilosophical, as hostile to philosophy, as political activity in general and action in

particular."[336] Things have not changed much since Arendt's depiction and warning. The

ideal of nonparticipation still dominates the common understanding of politics.

Moreover, projects of radical democracy that perceive in popular and mass movements

'modifications,' or 'supplements' to 'normal politics,' do not challenge this ideal

fundamentally, as I have argued.

Thus far I have maintained that the failure to view in the experience of revolutions

something beyond a political outcome – a newness about our political space and ethical

constitution – is premised on disregard for the significance of political power in advancing

people's participation in politics; for the opening and equalizing of the public sphere to

the practice of solidarity and civic ethics; for the impact of allowing a space for people's

interests and wishes to appear. Yet another reason to add to those just mentioned is the

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[335] Ibid., 84.
[336] Ibid., 83.

issue of instrumentalization. Both the action and the actor undergo an instrumentalization process; their value lies in what they bring about or succeed in acquiring. It is their success in making that effect last – not the act itself or what happens to the acting agent – that matters. The instrumentalization of the political action is further solidified by one's standpoint, observer or actor. Writing, critiquing and understanding from the position of the observer, and not that of the participant, results in a failure to give an account for a revelation in the square, among the crowds. In fact, the only position that 'observation' allows is one that results in instrumentalization. That is, the people's gathering is a state that aims at an end, driving the focus to how, why, and what the crowd wants and manages to achieve. I will return to this point, but first we should look at how the protesters viewed their actions and the ensuing results, and how framing those experiences is essential to sketching an ontology out of them.

This chapter has described the organization and relations that took place in Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution, highlighting the protesters' interest in self-management, self-expression, the creation of a leaderless and non-hierarchal body of active citizenry, and the maintenance of equalized and open space. At no point did the crowd form a political party or a body of representatives aimed at replacing the political leaders of the old regime. Their demand for the fall of the regime was not combined with a detailed plan of what should happen next. The only thing they were sure of is remaining in the streets. They continued to act according to the social and political ideals they called for – equality, democracy and justice – by embodying and practicing them in the Square itself. They refused any overstepping of this form of

organization—no negotiating with the regime, delegating representatives, or naming a list of accomplishable demands (what some might call a 'more strategic' way of reaching their goals).

One of Egypt's prominent activists, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, summarized this theme as follows: "settling-down is betrayal, it substitutes the power of people, with less: the weapon or the organization or the state. Settling-down is betrayal; it substitutes the dream with less: a roadmap or arrangements of authority or some bits of demands and reforms."[337] His words speak to the worries shared by many activists: that the gripping pursuit of stability in uncertain times, especially a stability that reproduces the existing dominant political discourse, anchored by regime change, trades in people's power and agency for a sketch of how better to obtain their demands sometime in the future. For Abdel-Fattah, it is not that the movement is incapable of seizing the state's power, but rather it does not wish to do so. It does not want to trade its current real, immediate and practical power of active participation and solidarity for future promised gains.

There are two essential lessons to draw from Abd El-Fattah's words. One lesson has to do with the causality logic underlying the meaning and understanding of politics, a point I return to shortly. The other is in regard to the gap between how observers of political action interpret it, compared with those who partake in the action.[338] To clearly recognize the problem of forging politics as means to an end, and of instrumentalizing

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[337] Alaa Abdel-Fattah, "Letter from the Prison." https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/380744 my translation from Arabic.
[338] Arendt reiterates this point, that political philosophy is interested in or takes the position of the spectator and not the agent or the actor. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin Books, 2006), 52.

political actions, such analysis is best served by the perspective of those who are involved

in it, making it happen (who cannot, in that regard, be both its actors and its observers).

Let's consider the following passage by David Snow about the significance of framing

historical incidents and popular movements in particular, and the theoretical and political

repercussions of such an operation:

> The framing perspective is rooted in the symbolic interactionist and
>
> constructionist principle that meanings don't automatically or naturally attach
>
> themselves to the objects, events, or experiences we encounter, but often arise,
>
> instead, through interactively based interpretive processes. Consistent with this
>
> orienting principle, the framing perspective, as it has evolved in the social
>
> movement arena since the mid-1980s, focuses attention on the signifying work or
>
> meaning construction engaged in by social-movement activists and participants
>
> and other parties (e.g., antagonists, elites, media, countermovements) relevant to
>
> the interests of social movements and the challenges they mount. In contrast to
>
> the traditional view of social movements as carriers of extant, preconfigured ideas
>
> and beliefs, the framing perspective views movements as signifying agents
>
> engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for protagonists,
>
> antagonists, and bystanders.[339]

The results are frames that different narratives to describe what is happening and what

they hope to be achieved in their action:

[339] David Snow, "Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields," *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 384.

[F]rames also function, perhaps even more importantly, as articulation

mechanisms in the sense of tying together the various punctuated elements of the

scene so that one set of meanings rather than another is conveyed, or, in the

language of narrativity, one story rather than another is told. Additionally, frames

may also perform a transformative function in the sense of altering the meaning

of the object(s) of attention and their relationship to the actor(s), as in the

transformation or reconfiguration of aspects of one's biography, as commonly

occurs in the contexts of some movements, or in the transformation of routine

grievances or misfortunes into injustices or mobilizing grievances in the context of

collective action. Given the focusing, articulation, and transformative functions of

frames, it is arguable that they are fundamental to interpretation, so much so that

few, if any, utterance, gesture, action, or experience could be meaningfully

understood apart for the way it is framed.[340]

The idea, hence, is to surround the political elucidations of Tahrir Square with a frame

that the actors themselves partake in forging, ensuring the appreciation of their power

and the meaning this power bears. Such appreciation is crucial in order for theory to learn

from praxis. The process of learning, of acquiring new epistemological tools that the

revolutions offer, must consider and incorporate those new articulations and meanings.

The newly produced knowledge goes against efforts to instrumentalize political action;

the latter operation arrives at the scene of a political event with a clear set of goals and

ends, and a pre-existing perspective on what counts as failure or success. But no matter

how radical these are, they are never as radical as an uncertain political moment.

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[340] Ibid.

Therefore, what some radical left-leaning theorists struggle with is the maintenance of both the radicality found during the transformational moments of the people's return to the public sphere and the attainment of demonstrable goals for normal politics.

Right after the first wave of uprisings in the Arab world, Alain Badiou published *The Rebirth of History*, his account of the events and a celebration of the people's movement in the Arab world and elsewhere. Throughout the book, Badiou stresses the fact that the coming together of the people, and their joint action and message, is what constitutes the critical power of the movement and its "initial victory."[341] The rupture that took place between governance at the top and politics at the bottom had to occur, he contends, as a necessary schism for history to be made anew:

> Just as our states and those who vaunt them (parties, trade unions and servile intellectuals) prefer governance to politics, so they prefer demands to revolt and 'orderly transition' to any rupture. What the Egyptian and Tunisian peoples are reminding us is that the only action commensurate with a shared sense of the scandalous occupation of state power is a mass uprising. And that in this instance the only slogan which can unite the disparate components of the crowd is: 'You there, clear off!' The exceptional importance of the revolt in this instance, its critical power, consists in the fact that the slogan repeated by millions of people gives us an idea of what will be - unquestionably, irreversibly- its initial victory: the flight of the man thus referred to. And whatever happens thereafter, this triumph of popular action, which is inherently illegal, will have been eternally victorious.

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[341] Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 107-108.

Now, that a revolt against state power can be absolutely victorious is a teaching of

universal significance.[342]

Only through large-scale popular movements, where the public squares and spaces are

stormed by the masses, is the people's relation to the political shaken, questioned, and

opened up for contestation. Badiou considers the revolts to present "a myriad of new

possibilities," among which "none of them is the repetition of what is already known,"[343]

and argues that it would be "obscurantist" to view those movements as mere demands

for Western-like democracy or social improvements. More so, he emphasizes that this

movement is not imitating or reduplicating any existing formula, it is instead creating its

own niche. He confirms that the people's attempt to reinvent politics away from

governance takes place through rejecting the traditional way of 'thinking politics.' This

entails the crowd evolving as the fundamental political player, without formal leadership

and central organization. The power, thus, circulates between the people who directly

participate in making this movement possible. He writes:

> The popular uprising we are talking about is manifestly without a party, a
>
> hegemonic organization, or a recognized leader. There will be time enough to
>
> determine whether this characteristic is a strength or weakness. In any event, it
>
> means that the uprising possesses in a very pure form – no doubt the purest since
>
> the Paris Commune – all the features of what must be called a movement

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[342] Ibid.

[343] Ibid., 109; Revolutions and political actions do carry a certain miracle for Arendt as well, see: *The Human Condition*, 178.

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communism. 'Communism' means here: the creation in common of the collective

destiny.[344]

Despite his initial position on the newness of the protest forms that Tahrir Square

offered, a different insight regarding the rupture between politics and governance

emerged for Badiou later on. His circumspect position on the lack of leadership is

apparent in the above account, as he wonders whether the lack of leadership will be

considered a "strength or weakness." A year-and-a-half into the Arab spring, he had

become resolute that the lack of leadership had weighed negatively on the revolution. He

wrote then that "[f]or an invention of history, a creation, to come about – that is,

something endowed with a genuine infiniteness – there has to be a new form of

declaration, establishing an alliance between intellectuals and a large section of the

masses."[345] This alliance is very important in Badiou's eyes, because what he calls the

"capitalist modernity" invests all its power to make sure that the intellectuals or the

"educated fraction of the population (the urban petty bourgeoisie, the middle classes

etc.) remains profoundly disconnected from the fundamental mass of the population."[346]

The alliance, however, between the intellectuals and the 'masses,' is another way Badiou

argues the need for 'guidance' and 'leadership.' As Fouad Halbouni discerns, Badiou

"seems to be prescribing Leninist solutions with little amendment," and the "shadows of

the necessity of a vanguard loom in his arguments."[347] Indeed, despite Badiou's original

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[344] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 111.

[345] Verso Books Blog, "A Present Defaults – Unless the Crowd Declares Itself: Alain Badiou on Ukraine, Egypt and finitude," 23 April, 2014, http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1569-a-present-defaults-unless-the-crowd-declares-itself-alain-badiou-on-ukraine-egypt-and-finitude.

[346] Ibid.

[347] Fouad Halbouni adds that Badiou's stance follows closely "the footsteps of a lot of old Leftist Arab intellectuals who grew weary and suspecting of the Arab revolutions, such as Saadi Youseff (the Iraqi émigré

opinion – according to which the lack of leadership amplifies people's power and presents

a new opening to rethinking politics altogether – in two years' time he had reconsidered

his stance, offering the lack of leadership as an explanation for what he believes to be the

revolution's failure. In a lecture given by him in 2013, a summary of which was translated

by David Broder, Badiou argued that the revolution and revolutionary activists missed the

opportunity to turn those uprisings into radical alternative politics. He is restated thusly:

> 'We must address the question of the relationship between historic event and
>
> political creation. The event creates a new political opportunity only if its creative
>
> form is not simply a negative tactical slogan', the philosopher explained. We all
>
> remember the hundreds of thousands of people shouting 'Mubarak, resign!' in
>
> Egypt, or 'Ben Ali, resign!' in Tunisia. While the popular movement found its point
>
> of unity in its negation of the state, the creation of a new politics demands that all
>
> the different components of the movement regroup around an affirmation of
>
> their own principles, Badiou insisted. It is for lack of this that 'so far, the uprisings
>
> in the Arab world have failed to open up the possibility of a new radical politics
>
> and for now have left victory in the hands of the old schemas,' the philosopher
>
> concluded.[348]

The tension in Badiou's account is between what he sees as the potential of these

revolutions to change the ordinary on the one hand, and on the other hand, his search for

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poet) and Sonallah Ibrahim (the famous Egyptian novelist). For them, such popular uprisings clearly lacked moral and political guidance," see "Are the Arab Revolutions Dead Yet?" May 6, 2014, http://madamasr.com/content/are-arab-revolutions-dead-yet /.

[348] Hélène Barthélemy, "Alain Badiou on the Arab Spring," *Verso books Blog*, 2 December, 2013, http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1471-alain-badiou-on-the-arab-spring

visible and demonstrable outcomes that he thinks could be attained if the revolution had

established a hierarchic and central setup that would have more efficiently transformed

the regime. However, this account misses the fact that these two predicaments are

contradictory. That is, designating leadership deprives the alliance of their very

achievement: political agency, responsibility and solidarity. It precludes them from

participating directly in making their fate, just as is typical of normal politics.

Slavoj Žižek reiterates Badiou's position, albeit more incisively. In an article

discussing various kinds of protest around the world, he states that protesters should aim

to grab the power of the state, and not settle for the power of the street. They should

form a body that can implement decisions quickly and effectively:

> The situation in Greece looks more promising, probably owing to the recent
>
> tradition of progressive self-organisation … But even in Greece, the protest
>
> movement displays the limits of self-organisation: protesters sustain a space of
>
> egalitarian freedom with *no central authority to regulate it*, a public space where
>
> all are allotted the same amount of time to speak and so on. When the protesters
>
> started to debate what to do next, how to move beyond mere protest, the
>
> majority consensus was that what was needed was not a new party or a direct
>
> attempt to take state power, but a movement whose aim is to exert pressure on
>
> political parties. This is clearly not enough to impose a reorganisation of social life.

To do that, one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness.[349]

The line of argument is all too familiar: that the radical moment can be too chaotic and too violent. Žižek, admitting to knowing and understanding the importance of hope in political change, warns us not to be swept away by it. *In Demanding the Impossible*, he asserts:

The problem is that hope and horror are always intermingled. What is happening in these days in Egypt and other Arab countries is, of course, hopeful. Almost everyone in postmodern times thinks nothing can happen. But it has been so nicely falsified. It did happen: a very traditional uprising without any religious references, but just calling for human dignity and secular demands. It's a wonderful event. And it's a real event. What I mean by a "real event" is that it's not just a smooth transition. We are living in this moment of uncertainty and you don't know who is in power, and this, of course, shows that there is hope. Hope simply means an open moment when you don't know who is in power, and then the regime falls apart. But the problem is that, in these situations, there is hope and, at the same time, there are confusing times where you end up with an even worse regime than before.[350]

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[349] Slavoj Žižek, "Shoplifters of the World Unite," *London Review of Books*, 19 August, 2011, http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite
[350] Žižek, Slavoj. *Demanding the Impossible* (Polity, 2013), 119.

The hope he is describing is not uncomplicated. Žižek writes, "my point is that there's still

a lot of hope," he summarizes, "but hope is always mixed with danger."[351] The

uncertainty of the revolutionary moment, depicted as saturated with danger, is not to be

underestimated. Uncertainty implies myriad possibilities, both unaccounted for and

unwanted options among them, no doubt. But intertwining danger and hope makes it

impossible to tease one out without immediately falling into the other. And when fear

enters the equation, the first thing to be canceled out is the political power of the people;

politics as the immediate practice of constituting a political community becomes a

privilege. Recall that political philosophy insists we ought to establish a shared

community out of fear, not out of choice or love. [352] This lack of choice will always lead to

modifying this or that regime without profoundly questioning the whole edifice of

political organization that is sustained by hierarchy and ruling. It is nearly impossible to

imagine a different meaning for politics, and a different form of practicing them, when

danger and fear replace one's powers and desires. In intertwining hope and danger then,

radical moments have to be weighed against what they can achieve – while limiting

danger and maximizing hope – which leads to instrumentalizing political actions and

actors, and perceives in politics a means to an end. It is no surprise that what interests

Žižek in the movement is mostly what it achieves when it is over:

> [W]hat I really care about is not those big enthusiastic moments like now in Egypt.
>
> I'm much more of a realist here. What interests me is *the day after*. That is to say:
>
> out of this enthusiastic moment that makes us feel free, how will this be

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[351] Ibid., 120.

[352] Arendt, *The Promise*, 139.

translated into a new institutional order? What will this order be? Will it be simply

a Western liberal democracy? Or will it be some kind of Islamic fundamentalist

regime? Or will it be something new? I mean this is a real hope for me: that

something will emerge out of these popular revolts that is neither just a corrupt

Western democracy – which just means liberal elites who ignore the crowds – nor

an Islamist hardline fundamentalist regime. I think this possibility means real

hope.[353]

On the factual level, the assertion of both Žižek and Badiou that the revolution failed due

to a lack in formalized leadership invites rebuttal. Take for example the following answer

from Bamyeh, who addresses this type of criticism leveled at the Arab spring: "the

uprisings succeeded best where there was no clear leadership and no strong

organizations. Wherever you had the latter, you had reform processes at best or

incomplete revolutions (Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco, for example)."[354]

Nevertheless, there is something more substantial that should worry us beyond the

argument over success and failure. As Mathijs van de Sande argues:

[A] problem arises if one judges practices such as the Arab revolts solely on the

basis of their outcomes, ascribing a certain degree of success or otherwise to

them from such an exterior position. It implies, first, that we can gain a clear,

exact and univocal image of the objectives and aspirations of such movements

and of what they themselves regard as a success. Second, it suggests that our own

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[353] Žižek, *Demanding the Impossible*, 121.

[354] Joshua Stephens, "Talking Anarchism and The Arab Uprisings with Mohammed Bamyeh," Toward Freedom, 26 February, 2013, https://towardfreedom.org/archives/middle-east/talking-anarchism-and-the-arab-uprisings-with-mohammed-bamyeh/

conception of 'success' can apply unproblematically, that our own use and

understanding of 'success' is applicable to the movement or practice in question.

Both, however, are far from evident.[355]

Žižek and Badiou start from praising and considering the myriad ways in which these

movements do contribute immensely to our collective existence and emancipation.

However, they do not retain this enthusiasm or turn it into a new basis to theorize

political participation, and politics in general. Describing similar attitudes toward

revolutions, Ariella Azoulay argues that moving from giving an account of the modes of

action that the people adopt in the streets, to asking about the "achieved results," adopts

the regime's method in treating time and space. The revolution becomes a period of

transition between two regimes. There is what was before and what should come

after,[356] And again both of these pertain to changes on state level. This brings us back to

the discussion on framing. What radical stances on these revolutions seem to miss once

and again is what is perceived as important by those who participated in the revolutions:

their agency and the power they achieved in and during direct involvement in politics.

That is to say, the change experienced by subjects and the solidarity formed between

those subjects:

> [T]he political machinations of the revolutionary and immediate post-
>
> revolutionary stages. For such machinations do not really allow us to see what is
>
> happening in culture at large; the immediate politics of the revolution tends to be
>
> expressed either as partisan dynamics in their narrow form or as constitutional

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[355] Mathijs, "The Prefigurative Politics," 226.

[356] Ariella Azoulay, "Revolution."

attitudes in their more general form. Neither points in any clear way to the

potential cultural achievements of the revolution.[357]

What Bamyeh calls 'cultural achievements' we can understand as those accomplishments

that the people themselves produce, and which in turn affect them and their immediate

surroundings. That is, the effect of an agent who now considers her desires to be

legitimate, worthy of influencing the public sphere and being part of a collective. These

can be acknowledged as political achievements, again if we understand politics to be the

space that arise between individuals as they live together and think about the manner in

which they want to ameliorate this togetherness. They can be also acknowledged as

ethical achievements, as the new emerging subjects in the revolution view themselves as

capable and powerful and relate to others in ways never experienced before (this will be

the theme of my next chapter.) Whatever we chose to name these changes that occurred

within subjects, and across intersubjective relations, those are undermined the moment

'the day after' becomes the point of departure for a 'final verdict.'

From the positions staked out by both Badiou and Zizek, we witness two

operations at work, one that I have called 'instrumentalization' and the other is the

adoption of the observer position. The outcome of the first is manifest in how the

participants are dislocated from their involvement and from their gains. The second

speaks to the fact that the 'evaluators' are not the actors directly involved in the

movements being studied.[358] This position acts as a form of epistemic imposition,

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[357] Bamyeh, "Anarchist Philosophy, Civic Traditions," 33.
[358] Ibid, 226.

excluding the actors from producing the knowledge and frame most suitable to understanding their actions as they happened.

On the point of instrumentalization, Van de Sande notes the problematic tendency of implying a causal relationship to understanding political incidents. Of the idea that something needs to happen for an act to be perceived significantly in the first place, he writes, "if we consider political acts to *follow from* and, subsequently, directly *lead to* other acts or developments, such a representation may convince us that a political practice or moment can be meaningful, significant or worthwhile only so long as it leads to something else."[359] This 'something else' is usually imagined as something 'bigger,' whether that be an event or a movement or power. He also wonders whether we should measure political practices based primarily on outcomes, and if we have any objective criteria for pursuing such a project. Instead of apprehending the movement's practices and methods from its own perspective, the causal logic approach employs external, objective criteria that are not useful for understanding what the movement in question actually *did* nor its ongoing effects. Instead, the causality logic has an idea, a pre-existing motive or desire, for political movement and revolutions to result in this or that objective, and it is no surprise that these usually have to do with state power and regime change.

As such, the rupture between politics and governance that the Arab revolutions created in favour of collectively pursuing the first of these, as Badiou himself has written, is now assessed from its end point—from the results obtained. This downplays the significance of movements that, as previously established in the case of the Arab spring,

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[359] Mathijs, "The Prefigurative Politics," 225.

reclaim a civil place, reaffirm the meaning of the political domain as a sphere for the people's engagement, advance the regaining of the agency by the many, and finally, suggest a different form of living together. The standpoint Badiou problematically repeats, via the distinction of means and ends, is exactly that which he goes to great pains to avoid: the monopoly of politics by the few. When Badiou maintains that the Arab revolutions lack affirmative principles, it is hard to imagine that he has not heard of the most popular and widely quoted slogan of the Egyptian revolution: "bread, freedom and social justice."[360] Or the principles that the people enacted in Tahrir Square to regulate their collective gathering according to democratic, open and equal principles of participation. Rather, he differentiates between slogans that people in the squares mobilized according to, believed in and enacted, and those, on the other hand, that he thinks are valid to facilitate the takeover and control of the state and its apparatuses. Alternatively, I following Van de Sande and others, propose to see the ideals of political practice as "actualized in the 'here and now', rather than hoped to be realized in a distant future."[361] The practices of Tahrir Square: the egalitarian non-hierarchical, leaderless movements and their methods revived the meaning of participation and political agency. They have proposed new forms of belonging and laid foundations to new radical politics.

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[360] This very slogan aided the success story of ousting three different governments, in three consecutive years: Mubarak's dictatorship, the military rule, and the Muslim Brotherhood government (2011-2013).
[361] Mathijs, "The Prefigurative Politics," 225.

Concluding Remarks

Implying the logic of causality— Linking what these events hypothetically wanted and what they achieved —cannot by any degree help us grasp the importance and impact of the revolutionary moment. It starts by retroactively defining what the masses wanted when they took to the streets, their multiple messages and sometimes incoherent voices, and molds them into one assertive reason (democracy, in this case). And then this logic defines the moment accordingly every step of the way: based on this initial fervour, the crowds should have acted in this or that way, to gain this or that result. The causality calculations present politics as a domain of efficiency devoid of special interests, steering towards rational outcomes. Contingencies, multiplicity, conflict and desires have no place in this equation. The result is not that certain experiences and terminology are continuously excluded, but that people are not part of politics. Not only that, but what does not fall into the borders of this logic is not counted as worthy of enriching our human, political and ethical experience. I contend that delving into the details of Tahrir Square highlights this experience as a valid and important one for knowledge about our political imagination, human existence and the potential of living together. Formulating its ontology is a tool to defy theoretical negligence toward beginnings, unorganized experiences, unconventional ways of doing politics—and the very fact of people doing politics. Causality logic does not appreciate the entanglement of means and ends, and prioritizes efficiency calculations, in a way undoes the very political sphere the revolts yearn to create. If reshaping and reproducing the political anew, with new intersubjective

foundations, is not apprehended as one of those so-called 'demands,' the potential of those uprisings is wasted.

I have discussed the position of Badiou's and Žižek's[362] who I claimed disregard the plea of the people who took to the streets to reaffirm their agency as capable political players and to change the priorities that regulate their lives. Both seem to have a model they are rebuffing; Žižek spells that out clearly, saying that the model adopted by the left of "immediate transparent democracy"[363] should be dropped for the sake of a strong state. While Badiou remains more reluctant to give up his enthusiasm over emancipatory politics made by the crowds, nonetheless does not affirm the radical manners in which the crowd redefine politics. Putting aside the ideological content and commitment of his statement, the attempt to group all and different human experiences in the political milieu under a certain model continues to be the most problematic issue at hand as it does not account for the political and ethical novelty of the praxis mass movements offer. This imposition is not new, as Arendt underscores, it is in fact a systematic ignorance of "the most salient political features of human beings—that they are plural, that each of them is capable of new perspectives and new actions, and that they will not fit a tidy, predictable model unless these political capacities are crushed."[364]

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[362] We can use the rubric of 'strategic thought' to group their positions. May uses the term to differentiate strategic thought from its 'tactical' counterpart. Marxism, for instance, belongs to the former. May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, 26, 44, 49, 65.

[363] Žižek, Demanding the Impossible, 102.

[364] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, xii.

The ontology of Tahrir Square is one that reintroduces the concept of people into the heart of politics, intertwining them so naturally that any perspective of political power, interest and common good must remain faithful to this immediate, practical and primordial relation. Tahrir Square is a vivid example of the effort made to make an art out of our living together. It is a place where political engagement meets collective and personal responsibility, where it is senseless to talk about ethics as a separated enterprise from politics. As Bamyeh beautifully summarizes the history of the concept of the people before and after the Arab spring, the concept now is 'offensive,' not defensive, and it carries the weight of a subjectivity asserting itself, and making its voice heard:

> [T]he concept of 'the people' emerged in the modern Arab world as a tool of resistance against an external threat. As such, 'the people' remained a defensive concept until the Arab spring. By this I mean that the term 'the people' was largely used to express demands to recover rights stolen from society as a whole, more than to express the right of society to exercise its sovereignty over the state. *With the Arab spring*, the concept of 'the people' moved from *defense to offense*. This is evident in the fact that all the Arab revolutions have derived their legitimacy from the notion that they were executions of the will of the people, and a reaffirmation of the principle of peoplehood as the ultimate source of any legitimacy.[365]

This transformation that the concept had undergone is a result of the direct engagement of people in the political realm. I argued here that on the contrary these moments of rupture constitute and perform on a huge scale what politics should be: an open space

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[365] Bamyeh, "Anarchist Philosophy, Civic Traditions," 39.

for deliberation and engagement, a practice of solidarity and responsibility. Practicing

political power and adding value to one's life and the lives of others is all that lies at the

heart of these moments. In the Square, the forms of political action and organizing and

the fact that knowledge was not separated from practice (but to the contrary, they are

mired in one another), questioned the whole apparatus of politics as a domain of

management, efficiency and rule. If Tahrir Square was an example of anything, its showed

that when the goals of movements are part of its forms, the agency and subjectivity of

the participants is not compromised. Our shared living together is still in the making and

under trial. Its contingency lies within its practice; as uncertain as this might be, it seems

the only truth we can hold on to.

Chapter Four

Modes of Ethical Subjectivity: Between Guilt Feeling and Companionship

> "Best of all will be those who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we live we shall have to live together with ourselves."[366]

> "Let's face it. We are undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."[367]

Introduction

The last chapter reached the conclusion that instrumentalizing the political action of the revolting crowds, by asking about demonstrable outcomes that pertain to state power and governance, undermines the importance of the agency and solidarity that the crowds establish. This instrumentalization is an act of disregarding the original and genuinely complex forms of political organization that transpire, and which question the boundaries of the existing discourse of politics. I have argued that the people's modes of coming together in Tahrir Square, notably erecting horizontal bodies and leaderless institutions, represented and advanced the social and political beliefs the movement

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[366] Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, eds. Jerome Kohn (Schocken, 2009), 45.
[367] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2006), 23.

defended. Normatively speaking, the contribution of these moments is the institution of a

realistic outlook on politics: its entanglements and challenges, its unpredictability, and

still yet its unaccounted for possibilities when power and desire are part of its

formulation.

This chapter aims to expand this normative argument by looking at the moral

dimension of revolting and of making politics collectively, and what it says about our

formation as ethical subjects within social and political constellations. I start with Kant's

beautiful depiction of revolution,[368] which in essence rebuffs any attempt at

understanding revolution as a political tool or instrument toward attaining an end. For

him, to look at the success or failure of a revolution is to fail to see the whole point of the

act: it is a lesson on the moral disposition of human beings. The sole thing we should

conclude from revolutions, according to him, is the collective desire for better life and

progress. This is radically apparent in his choice of 'wishful participants,' as he calls

them—those who have not initiated the act of revolution, and thus lack self-interest, but

who nonetheless venture to be part of the collective desire.

What draws the wishful participants to this adventure? What do we find in this

moment that is not experienced otherwise? Freedom, I will argue. An essential

foundation for our ethical formation, freedom is the motivator not only as a tangible,

physical condition but also as the freedom to imagine (and imagine differently) our social

relations and commitments. In the possibility of reimagining our attachment to self and

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[368] Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996): 297-309.

other, and in the reflexive solidarity and sympathy forged by manifesting freedom, there lies a novel potential for constituting ourselves ethically.

Clearly, neither the political nor the interpersonal can be reimagined except on a collective plane—it is there they find an active undertaking of the state of freedom. It is hence important to look at the modes of ethical formation available to us and consider those that are better suited to accommodate our plurality, our vulnerability, and the conditions of living together. After conducting that examination, I will bring this chapter to a close with an argument against ethical formations that center on the individual, positing as an alternative the model of companionship as a uniquely attuned possibility for our social and political life and ambitions.

The Collective Desires

In a short political essay, written in 1798, Kant addresses the event of a revolution as that which indicates the progress in the human race, and which reflects the human predisposition toward what is right. He writes:

> There must be some experience in the human race which, as an event, points to the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better, and (since this should be the act of a being endowed with freedom), toward the human race as being the author of this advance. …Therefore, an occurrence must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race, undermined with regard to time,

and which would allow progress toward the better to be concluded as an

inevitable consequence.[369]

As he answers later in the text, this event is the revolution, which, he says:

> [M]ay succeed or miscarry; it may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point
>
> that a right-thinking human being, were he boldly to hope to execute it
>
> successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such
>
> cost – this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (who
>
> are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful *participation* that borders
>
> closely on enthusiasm the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this
>
> sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the
>
> human race.[370]

As such, neither the trajectory of the revolution, nor its outcome and deeds, are the

indicators of progress in the human race. Rather, the desire for a better life, in and of

itself, is what signifies the revolution as a constructive event. It is a *collective desire* for a

better life. Kant's choice of the revolution, and not any other event or experience, does

exactly that; it draws out the desire for advancement from the individual dimension and

plants it in a mutual, collective realm. The striking characteristic of this event is its

collective nature. This collective event is carried out by both active participants and

"wishful participants." They are both part of the story of the revolution, but if this story

reveals something of a truth about us as moral beings, for Kant, this part is best told

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[369] Ibid., 301.
[370] Ibid., 302.

through the spectators, the wishful participants. Turning to the spectators has the

objective of explaining why our moral propensity is related to our desire and need to live

a better life. The 'spectators' are the ones who do not actively play a role in the event,

they are not the revolutionaries, nonetheless they are emotionally implicated in it.

Despite how the term 'spectators' might be comprehended, it does not mean impartial or

dispassionate subjects. The spectators Kant depicts are a group that manifests a

heightened sense of sympathy that parallels, if not supersedes, active involvement in the

event:

> It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself *publicly* in
>
> this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested
>
> sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk
>
> that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered.
>
> Owing to its *universality*, this mode of thinking demonstrates a character of the
>
> human race at large and all at once; owing to its disinterestedness, a moral
>
> character of humanity, at least in its predisposition, a character which not only
>
> permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself
>
> progress insofar as its capacity is sufficient for the present.[371]

'Disinterested' amounts to a lack of self-interest and not detachment. In fact, what really

fascinates Kant in the spectator's role is the amount of attachment they disclose despite

their lack of self-interest. It is this attachment that indicates our moral capacity as a

human race. This attachment cannot be conceived of as a passivity; it is in fact a deep

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[371] Ibid., 301-302.

commitment toward that which I did not initiate, yet which can so deeply move me that I am willing to pay a price for it. Bypassing the whole direct political project of the revolution, equally sidelining its 'results' and those who initiate it, Kant illuminates a major facet of the revolutionary project: the mode of attachment individuals demonstrate, and their willingness to participate and be in solidarity with others. Neither the project, nor those who initiate it are the signifiers of this great human event. That role belongs precisely to those who did not expect it, who did nothing to create it, and who despite this cannot but sympathize with the human call for advancement, which is a call upon our moral propensity to act. Kant explains:

> But even if the end viewed in connection with this occurrence should not now be attained, even if the revolution or reform of a national constitution should finally miscarry, or, after some time had elapsed, everything should relapse into its former rut (as politicians now predict), that philosophical prophecy still would lose nothing of its force. For that occurrence is too important, too much interwoven with the interest of humanity, and its influence too widely propagated in all areas of the world to not be recalled on any favorable occasion by the nations which would then be roused to a repetition of new efforts of this kind.[372]

Kant's marginalization of the political outcome of the revolution opens the revolutionary endeavour to moral deliberation. His account's disinterest in the political undertaking of the experience reveals, in turn, the disinterested crowd (who nonetheless fully participating), as being enthusiastic, involved and sympathetic toward a collective act—in

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[372] Ibid., 304.

short, a moral subject. Maybe they did not initiate it, but now they are certainly part of it. The moral character relates to an *active emotional engagement* with the idea and meaning of an event, a passionate involvement with the idea of progress and freedom. Even as a spectator, you tie your fate to the fates of others, and this is the philosophical prophecy of the revolution. This is a 'genuine enthusiasm' in Kant's words. It is our capacity as human beings to point to the advancement and to want it – our "passionate participation in the good"[373] – disconnected from whether or not it is attainable, and whether or not it is the best possible scenario. The revolution is *already* progress insofar as we are inclined to want amelioration, even without any guarantee and despite unexpected prices. The revolution, for Kant, discloses us as moral subjects, capable of manifesting and enacting sympathy toward others. This in itself is progress, and the ultimate revelation of revolution. But what really lies behind this constitution of moral subjectivity, which the revolution sustains? At the heart of the contingency of the revolution lies a call for the protection of that which is not yet known, for an engagement with a connection that is not guaranteed or predictable, for sympathy with a fragile hope that is present in the enthusiasm of those in the streets. The wishful participants are engaged now in the hope that the revolution represents, and in its potential to render open and perceptive our attachments to each other— that is, the possibility of joining, cheering and acting. This much we must retain from the above account by Kant: that what illuminates the revolution as an event of progress and as a moral practice is the opportunity to reflect and practice one's relations to others, and to reshape them.

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[373] Ibid., 302.

Something else is at play in Kant's short essay on revolution: it is contrary to his

general view on morality. As we know, deontology emphasizes the rationality of human

beings and their capability of impartial reasoning; morality within that doctrine is not

indicated by displaying sympathy or enthusiasm, as these belong to the faculty of

emotions. As Kant indicates, "that pre-eminent good which we call 'moral' consists

therefore in nothing but *the idea of the law* in itself, which certainly *is present only in a*

rational being."[374] Universal impartial principles, the pearls of Kantian moral philosophy,

are derived from abstaining from emotions and passions and their exhibition publicly. It is

natural, then, that theorists who seek ethical value in engaging our emotions and desires

in public matters would critique the deontological account. Iris Marion Young argues, "for

Kantian morality, to test the rightness of a judgment the impartial reasoner need not look

outside thought, but only seek the consistency and universalizability of a maxim. If reason

knows the moral rules that apply universally to action and choice, then there will be no

reason for one's feelings, interests, or inclinations to enter in the making of moral

judgments."[375] Recall Young's argument, as discussed in chapter two, that the separation

between public and private spheres results from the separation between reason and

emotion: "the dichotomy between reason and desire appears in modern political theory

in the distinction between the universal, public realm of sovereignty and the state, on the

one hand, and the particular private realm of needs and desires, on the other." Young

argues that this dichotomy resulted in the exclusion of women from the public realm.

Young argument was the basis for my claim that in fact the vast majority of people are

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[374] Immanuel Kant, "*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*," trans. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Arnulf
Zweig (Oxford university press, 2002), 13.
[375] Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral
and Political Theory," *Praxis International* 5.4 (1985): 385.

excluded from politics on the assumption that the public space is not the place for displaying desires and emotions.

I agree with Young in her assertion that "deontological reason's opposition of moral duty to feeling fails to recognize the role of sentiments of sympathy, compassion, and concern in providing reasons for and motivating moral action,"[376] and, moreover, I do not intend to defend the overall Kantian deontological stance on morals. However, I believe we should pay attention to how his essay on revolution deviates from the general line of his moral theory. Doing so, I believe, raises some questions and necessary clarifications: what might a revolution carry that is distinctive, exempted so to speak from the traditional deontological assessment of moral dilemmas? What did Kant witness in the revolutionary moment, unusually, that made his account susceptible to emotions such as enthusiasm, sympathy and sacrifice? What did he see in a revolting people that allowed him to rethink, maybe, his closely held impartial and rational moral reasoning principles, not only to see value in emotions, but to elevate them as a sign of humanity's moral predisposition? I believe that Kant's answer would be freedom. The freedom that revolutions create, and the freedom that is a precondition to collective action; without freedom to question, manipulate and reinstate one's relation with others as with oneself, no participant in the revolution could display or sense solidarity or sympathy. Freedom, as the very contingent condition of the revolution, by necessity makes an appeal to and engages with one's emotions. When the social attachments of people in a body politic are exposed and reformulated, one has to appeal to the emotions that make up this web of connections in order to assert the possibility of morality. Solidarity, which requires

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[376] Ibid., 386.

freedom to imagine, to practice and to be realized, cannot solely be practiced in the

private realm nor appealed to on a rational basis. It has to be maintained publicly and to

involve our connectedness, desires, and emotions.

The section to follow will discuss this point and expand on it. I will argue, along the

lines of Michel Foucault's claim, that both acting from a free will and demanding freedom

are preconditions for any ethical formation of the subject. But it's not the actuality of

freedom that is of interest here (despite, of course, the importance of materializing it in

our living conditions), but the *possibility to imagine it as happening*; this is what sets

individuals and collectives on this ethical path. The first indication of this particular type

of freedom is one's ability to imagine one's attachment to others and to oneself

differently; feeling free to reconfigure the constellation of the self and its relations to

others (or at least to reconsider it).

Freedom to Imagine Solidarity

On a very elementary level, revolution is a practice in broadening our freedom. In

revolution we seek to expand our social and political freedoms and our ability to assert

our subjectivity,

> Being free means something only in relationship to others. As an idea, freedom
>
> signifies nothing to someone who has never lived in society. We are interested in
>
> freedom only because we live with others and in social systems, but not,
>
> ordinarily, because we wish to live outside of society or abolish all social systems.

Rather, we tend to argue the perimeters of freedom in connection to the requisites of deliberation, agreement, and collective action.[377]

The revolution is hence an active and deliberative reach to imagine and claim our freedom with the existing social and political structures. It strives to expand the dominant forms of relationship common to a particular community[378] so that one can choose various ways in which one to relate to others (and to oneself)—that is to practice one's freedom. Asking "*how* do I relate to myself and to others" is fundamentally an ethical question. When the reconfiguration of these relations is rendered conceivable, as witnessed during times of uprisings, it permits the consideration of ethical issues pertaining to our living together that would not otherwise come to the fore with such clarity, intensity and complexity. This idea can be elucidated with assistance from Kant's discussion on the role of the spectators: we can say that what enthralls them, and what relates them to the revolution, is the prospect of freedom. The revolution facilitates this form of sympathy (invariably an ethical capacity), because in that moment nothing of the existing political or social ties are assured, imposed or predictable. Freedom then is a precondition of any ethical formation. Not a precondition in the sense that it is readily available for subjects to 'use,' but that its imagination, its performance and its practice enable a path toward ethical subject formation. Again, one cannot apprehend freedom as a given—it can belong "only to those who demand it."[379]

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[377] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, Inc., 2009), 143.

[378] The freedom to imagine different social forms I take from Bamyeh, who talks about "freedom to remake one's community." Ibid., 83.

[379] Ibid., 33.

The will to be free relies on the will to imagine being free. When revolutionaries adhere to a movement, when they feel passionate about it, it is first the movement of the imagination. Its relentless motion, which keeps on pointing to gaps between what is desired and what is experienced (and in turn begs for a change), gives rise to hope. Progress, after all, is an impulse that is "implanted in us by virtue of the difference between imagination and reality."[380] Indeed, the first foothold of freedom is its imagining, and the revolution is an open space for this imaginary. Revolution holds potential, what's more, for a collective imaginary, for both spectators and participants. Their desire for progress and a better life – even when the precise change and the road that leads to it are unknown[381] – continues to broaden the meaning and possibility of freedom. The progress imagined is born out of our sense of being part of a collective that actively pursues freedom. Without being endowed with freedom, as Kant claims, human beings would not initiate revolutions, and without wanting more freedom, and its universalization, they would not engage enthusiastically with it.

As I have argued earlier, the unique form of freedom the revolutions enable is the possibility of reimagining our social connections anew, the political and social constellations that organize our lives up until that moment of the revolution are exposed and understood as ties that can be influenced, changed, and reorganized. The moment offers such a possibility. Then, to participate wishfully in the revolution is to be attuned to a different emerging potential that can be sparked in our attachments: solidarity. We are enthusiastic over the possibility of solidarity, its potential and meaning, and how

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[380] Ibid., 5.
[381] Ibid.

attachments can be redefined in an equal and free space (one such as Tahrir Square).

Freedom encourages and authorizes enthusiasm over a cause we did not initiate because

it gives us the power to reformulate our net of relations to others and to ourselves. After

all, what would being in solidarity with others mean if I don't see myself and others as

occupying altogether different positions in our relationship? The claim to be 'in solidarity,'

is always accompanied by a 'with,' explicitly or implicitly. I allow my sense of solidarity to

reposition me differently in my relationships to others, to occupy a variant perspective,

and every time this happens I find that I have an altogether different view, different

connection and communication, with that self and with others around me. Solidarity

operates, thusly, in a space of freedom.

Freedom communicates the possibility of ethics, "for what is ethics, if not the

practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom."[382] Thus, the revelation of our

moral potential is conditioned upon an active pursuit of freedom. Without the prospect

of freedom our ethical faculty is not called upon. After all, a revolution is a project that

desires freedom and uses it as its means; Tahrir Square was such an example, enacting its

project of freedom through solidarity and egalitarian institutions. The enactment of the

desire for freedom enables the many, both participants and spectators, to be passionate

about this opportunity and its promise it holds for practicing and manifesting one's

ethical being. The revelation of our moral disposition is hence predicated upon and

conditioned by our freedom.[383] As Foucault puts it, "freedom is the ontological condition

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[382] Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, eds. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 (Penguin Books, 1997), 284.

[383] I have been cautious so far to avoid adding a signifier to the term freedom, i.e. 'the desire to attain political freedom.' I hope to make it clear by the end of this chapter that, regardless of what we think people in a revolution are revolting for (given the universality and egalitarian nature of their revolt, they will

of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection."[384]

The argument for the revelation of our moral disposition may come across as a passive encounter with one's inner capabilities. 'Revelation' first calls to mind a scenario in which moral potential is latent in human beings, as a nature, awaiting discovery under the right circumstances. However, the contingency of the event evinces *our own contingency* as moral creatures. We are not talking about a passive discovery; even further to the point, we have to recognize that the potential for the creation of the moral subject takes more than just the right circumstances.[385] I am suggesting that we reinvent and remake our ability to act ethically in these moments *by actively making the moments*; that, by their virtue, we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects. Imagination alone, without manifestation, is not sufficient to point in the direction of advancement because it does not reveal our moral potential through free action. Freedom, when not practiced, does not face the consequences of such a revelation, it does not engage in a search for a truth. Practice alone ties freedom to an ethical act we are potentially capable of, without which the ethical subject loses the potential to verify its connections to itself and others and its responsibility to these attachments. Indeed, the revolution is a moral prophecy inasmuch as it ties ethics to freedom via an action. The desire for progress is revealed in

demand whatever freedom they believe they lack, be it political, social, sexual, etc.), it is the form in which they enact this freedom, all things considered, that propels and invites their ethical capacity. So, I will continue to use freedom in the most general sense.

[384] Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 284.

[385] The foundation of claim is Michel Foucault's critique of humanism and the concept of man as an essence, Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 314. See also: Marli Huijer, "The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25.2 (1999): 61-85.

an active endeavour. The *practice* of freedom is what makes freedom; the *practice* of the

ethical act is what make us capable of developing our moral propensity and a sense of

who we wish to be. Revolution (and its promise of progress, which may or may not be

actualized) is not a passive disclosure of a moral disposition, but rather an active

excavation and creation of a moral being. So, while it appears as if the revolution reveals

something 'dormant' about us, what it does instead is lay out the potential for the making

of an ethical subject. Ethics, in that sense, is not based on a true knowledge of the true

self but rather is a creative, artistic forum of making oneself, as Michel Foucault claims.[386]

For him, art should not be related to artists or experts: everyone's life can "become a

work of art."[387]

While multiple aspects of our lives can take an artistic form, our constitution as

ethical subjects is a focal point. In exploring ethical subject formation, Foucault identifies

four 'aspects' in the relationship one has to oneself. The first concerns "the aspect or the

part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct." This is a question

over the source of our ethical decisions, what he calls 'ethical substance'—is it our

feelings, rational behaviours, or intentions? The second aspect is concerned with "the

mode of subjectivation [*mode d'assujettissement*], that is, the way in which people are

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[386] I am aware of the critique that is usually launched against Foucault's account of ethics, especially his individualistic stance and what is construed as an "elitist" position. See for example: Jerold J. Abrams, "Aesthetics of Self-Fashioning and Cosmopolitanism: Foucault and Rorty on the Art of Living," *Philosophy Today* 46.2 (2002): 185-192. Nonetheless, I rely on a more charitable reading of Foucault, such as the one offered by Michael Gardiner, which attests that Foucault's late writings "point towards a genuine recognition of otherness and affirmation of the value of human dialogue and solidarity." Michael Gardiner, "Foucault, Ethics and Dialogue," *History of the Human Sciences* 9.3 (1996): 27-46. My adoption of the concept of art and art making, and our living together as a form of art, is foregrounded on this reading of Foucault's ethics, which takes into account our intersubjective relations. I will expand on this conception of ethics, via the mode of companionship, at the end of this chapter.
[387] Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 261-262.

invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations."[388] The third aspect asks, "what are the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects?" That is, in all that relates to our behaviours, selves and desires, how can we formulate ourselves ethically? Foucault calls ethics "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*," and it "determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions."[389] And finally, the fourth aspect asks, "which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way? For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or master of ourselves, and so on?"[390]

In discussing the formation of an ethical subject through engaging in an act of freedom (i.e. through a form of political engagement such as a revolution) the second and the third aspects are the most relevant points of inquiry. The two essential questions emerging from Foucault's account, as regards my study, are the following: How are we constituted as moral subjects? And how do we come to recognize this formation and our moral obligations in general? The 'recognition' in the second question implies both a comprehension of the kind of relations we currently share with others, while acknowledging that the ethical subject is free to form new and different ones. Both of these questions relate to our ethical constitution as individuals and how we apprehend attaining this individuality and morality within social and political contexts. In the next section I will argue that the ethical constitution a revolution enables relies on our being socially constituted, and that a view of ethical formation that conceives of the self or the

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[388] Ibid., 264.
[389] Ibid., 263.
[390] Ibid., 265.

individual as a separate entity (as the notion of guilt feeling implies), arrives at a notion of ethics that is not, I argue, suitable for normative political and ethical theory. I will start from critiquing the view I disagree with, developing thereafter the one I would like to advance.

Ethics as One

In an intriguing book entitled *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance,* Simon Critchley introduces his theory of the ethical formation of the subject, drawing upon various philosophers and thinkers such as Levinas, Badiou, Foucault and Marx. He begins from an observation regarding our political existence – the suffering, the wars, the mass politics – which brings about a sense of disappointment. This disappointment provokes questions about justice, and about the need for an ethical system to respond to such injustices. His aim in this book is to develop a notion of ethics that is suitable to our current political life, arguing that "what is lacking at the present time of massive political disappointment is a motivating, empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present."[391] This empowering conception must relate to the ethical subject, without which "moral reflection is reduced to the empty manipulation of the standard justificatory frameworks: deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics."[392]

Ethical experience, Critchley argues, arises in the process whereby a self approves of a demand made upon it. This demand is one-sided, radical and essentially unfulfillable.

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[391] Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, 2012), 8.
[392] Ibid., 9.

Morality in this sense is an *affirmation* of this demand. A strong Levinasian account of the formation of the ethical subject brings Critchley to conclude that "the unfulfillability of the ethical demand … is internal to subjectivity."[393] That is, it splits the subject, and exceeds it, with a call it cannot fulfill but for which it is infinitely responsible. Critchley himself confesses to the difficulty Levinas's account presents, that it "runs the risk of chronically overloading – indeed masochistically persecuting,"[394] the subject. It seeks to achieve an impossible task. Critchley proposes to bypass the problem of persecution with the help of the psychoanalytical proposition of sublimation, specifically the practice of humour. Nonetheless, the strong sense of a subject hunted by a demand that it cannot meet remains central to Critchley's account, especially his emphasis on the notion of guilt.

The approval of the demand forms and articulates the self as an ethical entity.[395] This articulation is mostly felt through the affect of guilt. Guilt, because every time I decide to engage in an ethical act I face a conflict within myself, between the present self and the ethical subject I wish to be. I will always experience such a conflict; first, because this demand is laid upon me by the other, it is not generated internally. Second, because as Critchley reiterates once and again, following Levinas, it is an unfulfillable demand by essence. The other always asks me for more than I am willing or capable of giving. This conflict divides me, splits my subjectivity and is experienced emotionally as a feeling of guilt.[396] Critchley explains:

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[393] Ibid., 10.
[394] Ibid., 11.
[395] Ibid., 20.
[396] Ibid., 22.

The point at issue here is that the phenomenon of guilty conscience reveals –

negatively – the fundamentally moral articulation of the self. Namely, that ethical

subjectivity is not just an aspect or dimension of subjective life, it is rather the

fundamental feature of what we think of as a self, the repository of our deepest

commitments and values. Ethical experience presupposes an ethical subject

disposed towards the approved demand of its good.[397]

But is the self's good an objective good? Is the split or the guilt that one experiences what

the other, the person making the demand, wants or needs? Is it what the situation

requires? Is feeling guilty an activity or a mere reflection or consideration of one? I

suppose above all I am asking, what does a theory that aims at motivating the subject to

act ethically gain from provoking the terminology of guilt feeling? And what on the other

hand might it be losing?

I reference Critchley's account because I agree that there is a need for an ethical

theory, as a "normative force,"[398] to face the injustices in our world today, and that

philosophy, though it cannot fully change the already existing forms of ethical

development of individuals and societies, can offer a different perspective on the

formation of moral subjects.[399] I confess as well to difficulty in arguing against Critchley's

strong Levinasian stance; after all how could one resist the temptation of a theory that

hinges upon the call of "the face of the other"[400]? Little wonder that Levinas continues to

be an influential thinker among those interested in ethical dilemmas and articulation. But

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[397] Ibid., 23.
[398] Ibid., 10.
[399] Ibid.
[400] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority* (Springer, 1979), 50-51.

the difficulty Critchley finds in Levinas's philosophy continues to occupy his own proposition: the "ethics of discomfort" and the experience of conscience as one of division within the self. This theory remains hard to grapple with, let alone to use it as a motivating force. To remember, Critchley defends the following claim:

> So, my normative claim, if you will, is that at the basis of any ethics should be a conception of ethical experience based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility. Not only that, I will also recommend that this exorbitant demand of which I approve is that in relation to which the ethical subject should form itself. The subject shapes itself in relation to a demand that it can never meet, which divides and sunders the subject.[401]

Undoubtedly, one cannot argue for a theory of 'comfort' (in contrast to ethics of discomfort as argued for by Critchley) in an immensely torn and anxious world like ours. Any illusions of an ethical theory that advocates happiness, comfort, or a subject that rests assured in its own skin, would be voided before it offers anything. I am presuming and arguing that ethical subjects care about the world they live in, which is why a divided conscience is not a responsible conscience. That is, if moral subjects are 'mere' reflections of the current state of the world, fractured and torn, then what new path do they have? We have to ask whether our self-articulation as moral beings feeds on other values such as commitment, passion, attachment, and love, and if so, what role they play, and how they configure into an ethical theory. Still, this would leave unanswered why guilt feeling is not only insufficient for a normative practical theory of ethics, but also inadequate.

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[401] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 40.

As a starting point, I assume that subjects involved in an action like revolution are propelled by something other than a self that feels guilty and persecuted. Looking back at the 'enthusiastic' actors in Kant's account, I wonder whether their passion can be undertaken, in the first place, and explained, thereafter, through guilt feeling. At any rate, the condition of collective political action, an enterprise which speaks to an engagement of the many, promises a different outlook on ethical articulation. It presents us with a call that involves a collective, engaging them directly in a practical action and fundamentally involving the quality of their connections with each other. It is, in fact, a different phenomenon, one that forces us to examine our thoughts on the ethical make-up of the subject from the perspective of the many and not only the one, and in relation to the present and not only the past. This entails giving an account of a theory of ethical articulation and its relation to social and political contexts that harbours (not necessarily permitting or hindering) such articulation.

To forge the question of ethical formation of the subject on the collective plane, as the revolution proposes, the centrality of the self in Critchley's account needs to be problematized further. Notably, I am concerned that underscoring the central role of the self, to the degree that it appears as a self-generating mechanism of values, effaces the context it operates in; others continue to be an exteriority, not apprehended as part of the very constitution of the self, even when their demands are radical and vexing. Alternatively, I wish to point us in a different direction. This whole process has more to it than just self-failure and internal split; one's moral formation, within our social and plural world, has to resemble an open-ended dialogue between the self and others. It has to resemble the world I postulate, as well, that a theory of ethical articulation of the subject

has to remain faithful to the practical possibility of one's moral engagement. It has to

respond and stay attuned to the current state of affairs in the world, which is why ethical

demands must communicate and engage more than persecute and divide. In place of a

subject that is defined by an unfulfillable, radical demand that splits its subjectivity, I

propose a subject that through conscience and moral actions follows a process of creating

companionship, of articulating itself in terms of the company it keeps with itself and

others. This companionship depends, as I will argue, upon the existence and the active

origination of open, egalitarian spaces of hope and freedom. I will begin by spelling out

my disagreement with Critchley, point by point, an effort that will slowly unpack my

proposed alternative.

The notion of a divided self that is facing an internal split as a result of an ethical

demand it could not meet presupposes an operative image of an independent and self-

reliant subject.[402] This supposed autonomous subject engages with the situation at hand

in a rather interesting fashion, experiencing the demand as an internal split, yet detached

from the demand and from the situation that created it. The self, the demand, and the

demanding other are three separate entities. But once this exteriority is internalized –

that is, the self acknowledges the demand – the issue at hand becomes solely internal. It

is captured as a dilemma between me and myself, or rather between the ethical self (or,

per Critchley's terminology, the subject I have chosen to be) and myself right now. The

conflict occurs at the level of the self, and there it resides. That is why the experience of

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[402] On critique of the subject as an autonomous being, see: Jeffrey Popke, "Poststructuralist Ethics: Subjectivity, Responsibility and the Space of Community," *Progress in Human Geography* 27.3 (2003): 298-316; Virginia Held, "Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990): 321–344.

ethical formation, according to Critchley, is an experience of self-failure.[403] The ethical

issue is therefore a detached dilemma for the ethical subject to respond to or reject.

Issuing the demand happens somewhere else – *there* – but I ought to take it up – *here* –

and so the real distance between there and here, is of no significance because there is a

dichotomy in place. This internal-external separation produces an interval which can be

perceived as emotional, geographical and conceptual distance. Even when a demand

reaches across this distance, the ethical subject and the subject who issues the demand

have not communicated or genuinely connected.

Any action will carry consequences for *my* formation as an ethical subject. The

moment I grasp the dilemma it becomes *mine*, an internal conflict like any other conflict,

ethical or not. My ethical action, if I choose to take up one in accordance with this

demand, might very well change the life of another or several others. This, however, does

not refute the fact that those others remain exterior to my subjectivity, and the ethical

conflict remains an issue about my autonomy. Indeed, guilt feeling is acknowledged as an

autonomous affect. The split or division experienced by the subject as a result of the gap

between myself and the self I want to be cannot but be formed in a somewhat

autonomous subject. This gap sustains and is sustained by my guilt feeling, but it also

sustains my autonomy. It makes that self a 'me'—one that relates yet remains detached,

one that is persecuted yet its failure to meet this demand confines it to an almost

foregone fate of a pre-produced split within itself. One wonders, if a split must be there,

why is it not a split between the one who issued the demand and the one who never

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[403] It bears reiterating that Critchley thinks this failure is a source that encourages the ethical action to take place. He declares, "far from failure being a reason for dejection or disaffection, I think it should be viewed as the condition for courage in ethical action." Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 55.

responded to that demand? Why is the split not intersubjective, such that the moment I

fail others, I actually, maybe quite literally, create a distance to others? In other words,

the self-failure as presented by Critchley is not accountable, as an idea, to the other who I

failed. It projects its own standards onto an other, and its own standards are minimal: a

split subject. They are minimal if we take intersubjective relations seriously; if the ethics

we wish to produce reside in-between subjects and not in them; if, most decisively, we

are interested in practical ethics that can offer subjects the possibility to change and to

desire that change. The unfulfillable demand leaves a horrendous effect on the subject,

unquestionably. But this very effect brings us back to the point of departure: does this

guilt feeling affect[404] impel one to act, or to shun away from action? A split subject, I

argue, is not sufficient to act morally. It fails to establish a sense of attachment to an

other and to contextualize this relation, two points I will discuss next.

The strong sense of autonomous subjectivity goes against what Critchley wants to

achieve in his proposed ethical experience, and that is a subjectivity founded upon

heteronomy. He argues that alterity lies at the foundation of our being and facilitates the

transmission and recognition of someone else's demand. This alterity is a precondition for

the ethical relation to the other. Citing Levinas on this matter, he writes, "it is because of

a disposition towards alterity at the heart of the subject that relatedness to the other is

possible."[405] If moral philosophy aspires to develop a theory for the subject, it has to look

past autonomy. The moment the subject is faced with a demand it cannot comprehend,

yet to which it responds nonetheless, it calls into question, according to Critchley, the

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[404] It is worth noting that Lacan as well was very critical of morality that is founded on guilt feeling: John
Rajchman, John, "Lacan and the Ethics of Modernity," *Representations* 15 (Summer 1986): 42-56.
[405] Ibid., 62.

'autonomy orthodoxy' that has dominated post-Kantian philosophy. The incomprehensibility found in moral actions, recognizable in Kant's description of the role of spectators in a revolution, is a moment of alterity. Hence, Critchley maintains that ethics has to "acknowledge a moment of rebellious heteronomy that troubles the sovereignty of autonomy."[406] Intersubjectivity, the net of relations connecting subjects to one another, is what furnishes the ground for alterity in the first place: our ethical relations rely on being the social beings we are, Our connections to each other *precede* our individuality. In addition, Critchley emphasizes that he is not talking about symmetrical or reciprocal intersubjective relations, a Hegelian subject of intersubjective dialectic, but drawing again on Levinas: the 'hetero-affectivity' of the subject is what leaves him a hostage of the other. Critchley argues, "the Levinasian ethical subject is a traumatic neurotic … the ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, but which leaves its imprint within the subject. At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness."[407]

But what guilt feeling achieves, I maintain, is something quite different from this heteronomous subjectivity. While the emotions I am experiencing ask of me to open up to the experience of an other, and it might encourage the formation of the ethical subject I want to be, it nonetheless always throws me back to a self, entrenched and bounded within itself. This means that to at least some degree the nature of the unfulfillability of

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[406] Ibid., 37.
[407] Ibid., 61.

the demand originates in the impossibility of reaching *my own* expectations on the ethical

level. It might very well be the case that the other's demands are forever unfulfillable,

nevertheless, the economy of the guilt is reinstated by an interpretation that I had failed

myself, and this relation to the failure is constituted internally.[408] The demand is there, no

doubt, but it operates as a point of reference to the gap between my current self and the

one I wish to be. A reminder of my future failure. So more than failing someone else's

demands, I fail to meet my own expectation for myself.

Having higher demands of oneself to act ethically in the moment can be premised

on an affirmation of autonomy more than it is premised on alterity—even if a claim to

alterity is at its roots and what animates it socially and ethically. Hannah Arendt's critique

of Kantian moral philosophy excavates and illuminates a similar problem in the

constitution of the moral subject via guilt feelings. She argues that what is at stake is

"human dignity and even human pride;"[409] that the standard is self-respect and not love.

Indeed, self-respect, even when relied upon heavily by others, remains a process of

autonomy avowal. The radicality of the other's demand, according to the self-failure

standard, is subjected to me. It cannot free itself from me, its recipient. It is never radical

enough to refuse this dichotomy between receiving and asking, and between calling and

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[408] Freud explains that one submits to an "outside influence" when one feels guilty. The subject internalizes what is evil or good early on, and despite the fact that in many cases one has not committed an evil act, the subject is still compelled to feel guilty out of fear of loss of love. This is because the authority, which in the first place had created and delineated what is good and what is evil, would find out and punish the subject. This process is carried out internally, through the establishment of the super-ego, which now replaces the function of the external authority. And this relation between the ego and super-ego continues: "the super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same anxieties and is on the look-out for opportunities to expose it to punishment by the external world." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLinTock (Penguin Books, 2004), 45. Freud's stance bolsters my claim that guilt feeling, while a 'relational' affect, centers around the individual internally and not across relations with others, even if it originated in the first place from an external 'authority
[409] Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," *Social Research* 61.4 (1994), 756.

hearing. It is never radical enough to place us both in one context, an ethical context that is shared, even momentarily, so that we might together negotiate the terms of an ethical action. If one is to use the terminology of 'failure' in this situation, then it has to describe a failure to take responsibility and establish connections with others in the context that the ethical demand, by the mere fact of being issued, is enabling. Or, a failure to understand that one alone does not produce the standards or enforce them. The standards are yet unknown; they will be discovered and negotiated and continuously revoked in the course of interaction (and through the very relation itself). The self is not equipped, as it is standing alone, separated, tormented, and individuated, to issue the standards and declare them ethical, and carry the burden of its own guilt or that of others. Guilt does not ask the other for permission to feel so, or to act according to that affect, or whether or not that affect is effective in the given situation. In describing the subject being summoned to act as experiencing an internal split, an affect of revenge is almost always presupposed as a requirement by the subject summoning the demand. Even before asking to be forgiven, I assume that I am not, and before engaging in responding, I assume that I have failed. All of that while I am walled away from the other, anguished and plagued by my own psyche. Giving out of self-respect does not respond to the other's need; it responds to the self's need to remain entrenched in its disillusionment.

Thus, paradoxically, the operation of guilt feeling presupposes an already constituted ethical being that, given the right circumstances, and the appropriate line of argumentation, would act morally. Under threat of its autonomous self being further divided, a fear of estrangement encourages one to respond to the plea of the other. The

formation of the ethical subject, per the model of guilt feeling, does not perceive of ethics as a vibrant, dynamic interaction that inhabits a context and is reflexive toward it, capable of transforming itself and others. Rather, we can detect in this model an underlying view that perceives ethics as a form of predisposition, an encounter with a dormant possibility, a potential that we can excavate, and nourish internally; it is perhaps fear of self-failure that motivates us to continue to do so. The dilemma we are faced with is whether a motivating moral theory should follow this path? How much potential for ethical self-articulation exists within the frontiers of guilt feeling? To think back to the engaged crowd of enthusiast participants in Kant's description of the revolution, I wonder in which terms we could describe and validate a context of ethical formation that takes into account those instances and what they offer ethically. I contend that we must think of contexts not only as containers of the ethical experience, but as themselves involved, incorporated in giving rise to and sustaining ethical beings. Revolution is one of those contexts, as I will explicate later, but for now suffice it to say: the revolution sustained a relation between multiple subjects, even when no primary relation existed. The attachment to the context and to others, the enthusiasm about the shared moment and future, and the hope this created placed one outside the division of oneself, and into a context of multiple connections with others.

Indeed, if we are to think about the most problematic aspect of the guilt feeling in the theory of moral articulation, it is the erasure of the context in which it operates. Guilt feeling underscores the internal process of the making of the split within one's subjectivity, and the demand is portrayed as an isolated, distant quest. The subject being summoned is not implicated in the context of the demand it is responding to. A shared

destiny of any sort is not inferred (nor anticipated). By 'context' I mean the action and involvement in moral dilemmas. For the subject to act morally, the subject has to be sought in terms of a contextualized subject, and every opportunity of moral action has to rely on this premise and develop it further by stressing the centrality of the context and the relations between subjects that can arise only when such situations are erected.

The subject has to be envisioned as part and parcel of the moment at hand; its engagement incorporates it in the situation and forges ties with those it affects. By example, the subject does not stand out 'here' responding to a demand issued from 'somewhere else,' and yet somehow the demand finds its way and is met with an approval, despite this disconnect and detachment. A theory of the articulation of the ethical subject that cares about the political realities of our present, I maintain, should aspire for a stronger sense of connection, engagement and interaction. There has to be a connection between the two subjects, a situation that brings them together, a certain context that illuminates and is illuminated by their humanity. This, I argue, should happen for two reasons: first, because a responsibility to the other, a sense of alterity, relies on understanding our subjectivity as heteronomous and this mode of being with others cannot be recognized and nourished except in a mutual context that conceptualizes intersubjectivity. This understanding then allows us to imagine that even when the subject that demands and the one that responds are formally separate, a context of action brings them together and bestows meaning on their connection. The connection affects and changes all those involved, without erasing the difference between a demanding subject and a responding one, nor any injustice that happened to one but not the other.

The second effect which the creation and/or imagination of a context allows for, is the perception of the process of moral action as one of communication and not persecution. Must a passionate and deliberate inclination toward what is good provoke guiltiness? There is a subjective will at work here that recognizes the need to act; however, this happens with no relation to an internal split or call. The tension between one's choice to act morally, and one being obliged or persecuted to do so, is a tension that accompanies the subject all along. It is a tension that Critchley, while wanting to withhold, had forsaken it quickly toward what he thought the persecution can guarantee better. In that regard, Critchley claims that hearing the demand is not a choice that the subject makes, it is "independent of and prior to subjective choice;" we are summoned to hear this demand before wanting or willing to do so. Nonetheless, he maintains that the process of demand and response is an active one: "the demand is not somehow objectively given in the state of affairs. Rather, the demand is only felt *as* a demand for the self who approves of it." The demand and its approval arise at the same time, neither precedes the other—meaning that one has no choice but to hear the demand in the first place. If it is not a passive act to receive the demand, let alone to respond to it, then a theory that upholds the tension between one's lack of choice and someone else's need, and premises approval on the existence of a strong subjective will ought to examine the conditions under which one's demand is heard. That is to say, a context ought to factor into the equation; one that allows us to uphold this tension and to recognize the conditions of the audibility of the ethical demand and the role of communication in transmitting and accepting responsibility. We ought to question under which conditions we can hear the plight of others; when and how we respond; why certain demands go

unrecognized. Upholding the significance of the context where the ethical dilemma arises

obliges both the demander and the responder to be an active part in communicating their

affected humanity, a point I will expand upon shortly.

It is clear that we do not live in a world where people's demands are typically met

by multiple responses, and in many cases they are met with no response at all. Injustice

and oppression are rampant around the globe, which, if anything, attests to a lack of

ethical response on the part of many. Under these circumstances, for the subject to

actually take action in response to an ethical demand inspires further questions: under

which conditions can the ethical subject hear a demand? Which demands are better

communicated to us? Which propel us to act on them? These questions are

fundamentally about the social or political contexts that render a demand 'audible,'[410]

and perhaps, response-worthy. So, the constitution of the ethical subject, while it forever

should retain subjectivity at its center, cannot forgo the very conditions that foster such a

constitution and the moral dilemmas it encounters. Butler homes in on a similar question

about the ethical formation of the subject in relation to the social and political contexts,

asking:

How it might be possible to pose the question of moral philosophy, a question

that has to do with conduct and, hence, with doing, within a contemporary social

frame. To pose this question in this way is already to admit to a prior thesis,

namely, that moral questions not only emerge in the context of social relations,

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[410] I borrow this term from Butler; she uses 'audibility' in reference to what can or cannot be heard within certain limits of the public sphere. See chapter 5 in Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

but that the form these questions take changes according to context, and even that context, in some sense, inheres in the form of the question.[411]

Like Critchley, I believe we are in need of a "motivating, empowering conception of ethics." And like Kant, I believe that the revolution reveals something about our moral disposition that is not accessible easily in other times. It's a revelation not in the sense of discovering a dormant – and better – 'hidden core' to humans, but in the possibility to create an ethical subject within a context of collective action and prospective hope. But for this creation to be truly motivating and empowering, I argued earlier that self-failure and guilt feeling cannot support a theory of the articulation of the subject. There has to be more. This 'more' is partly revealed, in bits and pieces, in revolutions, but also in more mundane modes of living. Revolutionary moments are not a necessary condition for this articulation. Rather they show these same possibilities and capacities at full speed, intense and authentic.

In the coming section I present a different view of a moral articulation of the self. I suggest that our constitution as ethical subjects follows a route of *companionship*, to oneself and to others. In arguing for this moral articulation of the subject, which as discussed is conditioned on active participation in public life or political community, I collect a cluster of theories and ideas from other writers and philosophers, including Hannah Arendt from whom I borrow the term, to argue for the companionship model.

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[411] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

The Self as In-Company, the Other as Companion

In her book *The Promise of Politics*, Hannah Arendt argues that the history of

Western philosophy is a history of a prejudice against political thinking and the public

sphere. Philosophers since Plato have engaged in a search for certainty and absolute

truths, preferring these to the doubts and messiness of political life. In a chapter she

dedicates to Socrates's teaching, Arendt claims that his trial is the moment when

philosophy and politics separated. Socrates uses the art of persuasion (*Peithein*) – once

considered the highest truly political art – to try to convince the jury of his innocence,

however he fails to do so. Socrates pays with his life to demonstrate how the method of

discussion and persuasion is crucial for public life. Meanwhile, Plato, who narrates the

event, sets the stage to overturn this life teaching of Socrates's. The failure to convince

the judges puts the art of persuasion and the validity of opinion (*Doxa*) that Socrates so

avows altogether under threat. Instead Plato identifies the search for truth and absolute

standards as a philosophical priority over the shaken and unaccounted for political

sphere.[412]

Persuasion is rooted in conversation, in exchanging opinions with others. When

one engages in a candid conversation, one is not only introduced to another's opinion,

but to one's very own. Our opinion is an enigma to us prior to our presenting it; dialogue

forms one's opinion while exposing it.[413] But if one *fails to be truthful* about one's own

opinion prior to engaging in a conversation, what this indicates, distinctly, is the

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[412] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005), 7-9.
[413] Ibid., 15.

incapacity to capture one's truth regarding oneself. Knowing oneself always lies beyond

reach. We are not transparent to ourselves or to others, partly because we are constantly

changing and forming, and no one can pinpoint 'a core' beyond or beneath this

opaqueness.[414] And this is partly because any capturing of truth about ourselves must

also give an account of all those others with whom the self engages.[415] One does not and

cannot know oneself, or for that matter an other, because one cannot catch this 'I' in a

moment of utter solitude or stillness. The 'I' one wishes to apprehend is always in

relationship. And a relationship with an other is similar to a dialogue in a conversation, in

that it is never fully exhausted or accomplished. On this theme, Butler muses:

> What is recognized about a self in the course of this exchange is that the self is the
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> sort of being for whom staying inside itself proves impossible. One is compelled
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> and comported *outside oneself*; one finds that the only way to know oneself is
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> through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself, by
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> virtue of a convention or a norm that one did not make, in which one cannot
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> discern oneself as an author or an agent of one's own making.[416]

We cannot capture a conclusive, self-sufficient entity known as the 'self' outside or prior

to this conversation. In fact, the attempt to capture it for the purpose of recounting (to

oneself, to others) forsakes its potential, abandoning a full spectrum of possibilities in

exchange for a fleeting, momentary knowledge. That said, what do we imply when we

say, 'a relationship'? Simply put, that 'one' is invariably accompanied by an 'other.'

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[414] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 19.

[415] The idea, as Butler pronounces it: "our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others." *Precarious Life*, 7.

[416] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 28.

Arendt explains that this is the case even in a state of solitude; that when I try to think, I already find that I am two-in-one. That "each of us, 'being one,' can at the same time talk with himself as though he were two."[417] In solitude, I am given to the company of myself, so in being with myself I find companionship. This companionship is actualized through communication. I have to communicate with a self I did not choose (or for that matter, will into being), and so on many occasions we disagree. In fact, being two-in-one in thought, I am bound to disagree with myself. This plurality allows for contradiction; through it we are introduced to communication, and we hence desire a form of dialogue. One's conscience lies in forging this dialogue. Arendt believes a self that cannot experience solitude of thinking, of conversing with itself, is a self that can easily be persuaded to commit wrong doings. One has to actualize a dialogue with oneself to stay intact, morally speaking.[418] The wish, therefore, is not to contradict myself, or persecute it, but to reach an agreement with it. But again, that very agreement is conditioned upon my wish to be given to the company of someone whose companionship I like, someone who I want to accompany. That someone, is the ethical subject, I wish for myself and others, to become.

Wanting this or that kind of companionship is not the original state of affairs; it is a stage of freedom reached once we accept, as Arendt urges us to, the condition of plurality.[419] 'Wanting' presupposes difference and not identity; my relation to myself and to others is perpetually foregrounded on disagreement. This is the very reason the model of ethical subjectivity I am suggesting is founded on 'accompanying,' as it presumes a

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[417] Arendt, *The Promise, 20.*
[418] Ibid., 25.
[419] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.

level of communication needed among disparate entities. The condition of plurality, the fact that we do not choose many of our social contexts and ties, does not eliminate the dimension of choice or the will inherent in the freedom we exercise when we communicate and establish our companionships. In conversation with an Arendtian formulation of the condition of plurality, Butler stresses the freedom lurking in not-choosing those with whom we share the world, writing: "without that plurality against which we cannot choose, we have no freedom and, therefore, no choice. This means that there is an unchosen condition of freedom, and that in being free, we affirm something about what is unchosen for us."[420] Then, if one is to ask under which conditions one reaches an agreement with oneself, the answer would be: under the conditions of companionship. That is, establishing a company with yourself that you would want to keep. You would not commit a murder, because, "you would deliver yourself to the company of a murderer as long as you live." Nobody would possibly want such a companion, Arendt assures us. Although one does not always make the right choices, the conditions of companionship establish a path of conscience and negotiated standards. None of these standards are presumed or given, ethically or not. I can choose, fail to choose, practice how to choose the self I want to be in company with, as long as the path of companionship is unfixed, reflexive and undetermined.

If my self is a riddle for me, and I am always more than is revealed, then this 'I' has to take into account my unactualized potential, and accordingly, the unactualized potential of others. My lack of knowledge of my self, the possible contradictions I have

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[420] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 112. Mohammed Bamyeh has a similar thought on freedom which indicates that freedom is meaningless outside of social constraints. See, *Anarchy as Order*, 83.

and the desire for dialogue are all possible routes for ethical theory to explore. If we cannot know ourselves – because we are not transparent to ourselves or others, because we are not handed a self that is already fully formed, and because the moment we start to tell who we are a different self altogether unfolds – then the journey promises more than one can possibly imagine. Nonetheless, this journey begins, or at least it can begin, from accepting or rejecting certain company; as Arendt explains, "living together with others, begins with living together with oneself. Socrates' teaching meant only he who knows how to live with himself is fit to live with others. The self is the only person from whom I cannot depart, whom I cannot leave, with whom I am welded together.[421]

Then again, how is this possible contradiction between the two-in-one, this internal conflict, resolved, even momentarily? Arendt alludes to a form of splitting off, a state of being torn apart, but for her what calls one out of this state is one's relation with others. The moment I present myself to others, I am one again. "[I]t is companionship with others that, calling me out of the dialogue of thought, makes me one again – one single, unique human being speaking with but one voice and recognizable as such by all others,"[422] Arendt expounds. Avoiding the internal contradiction altogether carries heavy ethical consequences, because it indicates a lack of self-conscience. However, for Arendt, I contend, the idea is not to become immersed in or endorse the splitting up, but to overcome it. I argued earlier that one overcomes one's internal disagreements through establishing a desired companionship—creating a self that resembles closely someone I would want to be in company with. Every overcoming, then, involves an aspect of

[421] Arendt, *The Promise*, 21.
[422] Ibid.

"appearance."[423] My appearance encapsulates a certain way of imagining and forming my relationship with my self and my relationship to others; it encapsulates a mode of companionship. In facing an ethical dilemma, my appearance to others becomes a question about the companionship others would want to have in me. To that extent, my appearance, under the threat of an ethical split, continues to reflect the condition of the companionship I desire; however, in an ethical dilemma, what is at stake is the world we share, not the 'I' alone. We are in search of companionships that are precious for our shared living. I am looking now at my own self's potential to reflect the world it inhabits and is thus capable of influencing. That is, I ask, in whose company would others like to be? What company do they want to have in me? And what kind of world can welcome and foster such connections? I desire both a world and a self that are in communication, in good company, and in constant practice of being persuaded and created. To further explain this idea, recall Arendt's example of the murderer, who, she writes,

> [I]s not only condemned to the permanent company of his own murderous self, but he will see all other people in the image of his own action. He will live in a world of potential murderers. It is not his isolated act that is of political relevance, or even the desire to commit it, but this *doxa* of his, the way in which the world opens up to him, and is part and parcel of the political reality he lives in. In this sense, and to the extent that we still live with ourselves, we all change the human world constantly, for better and for worse, even if we do not act at all.[424]

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[423] A central term in Arendt's philosophy. She puts emphasis on how we appear to others, in contrast to who we truly are. As appearance carries the need for a political community to exist for one to be, or to show herself. See especially chapter 7 in *The Human Condition*, 50-58.

[424] Arendt, *The Promise*, 23.

The practice of being a good companion for myself and for others, therefore, invariably has a social and political dimension. To keep practicing this form of communication, one needs to wonder about the conditions that allow such practice to be effectuated and maintained. If we adopt Arendt's conception of persuasion, then we can ask: which circumstances enable persuasion rather than the search for absolute truths? Persuasion is rooted in the political realm; it is conditioned on the open spaces that enable its exercise. Persuasion is an ethical faculty after all. It is the ability to hear, to respond, to change one's mind, to choose freely one's commitments (and change these when necessary), to attest to one's opinion, and all of these abilities cannot be imagined outside of a political community. When the organization of the political community is as horizontal and non-hierarchical as possible, subjects are endowed with the possibility to negotiate and modify their companions. And for this active conversation to be fulfilled, the environment itself must also be active. Persuasion is an act of avowing that we are different, as much as it is the ability and possibility of living together despite difference. It is an affirmation that when one commits to reflect upon one's companions, because these are made and un-made in a vivid and alive form of community, one is also under continuous transformation.

To briefly reiterate the claims made in this chapter thus far, I have presented two modes of conceptualizing the ethical constitution of the subject. In one, the model I put forth, we find a subject that is opaque and somehow foreign to itself, such that its appearance to others necessarily reflects this obscurity. This subject is engaged, on the primary level, in creating multiple forms of companionships, because what calls it outside itself is a collective action with others founded on freedom and equality, such as in times

of revolutions, for example in Tahrir Square. Under these conditions this subject is actively reflecting on its appearance: how it desires to appear to itself and how it forges its relation to the world in a form that is optimal to all its inhabitants, beginning with the immediate others with whom the subject forms political community and social bonds. This relationality, which questions the notion of the independent subject, enables a radical view of freedom as that which cannot be attained individually. Butler makes the argument, one which I will explore further in the coming section, that "the exercise of freedom is something that does not come from you or from me, but from what is between us, from the bond we make at the moment in which we exercise freedom together, a bond without which there is no freedom at all."[425] In the other model, Critchley introduces an ethical subject that experiences self-failure, and acts to respond to a radical demand from the other. It is hunted, persecuted by the radicality of that demand and how it stands forever short of fulfilling it. I discussed earlier my opposition to the latter mode, but here I wish to make the case for understanding the subject's ethical constitution in accordance to the model of companionship, and why it is pivotal to moral and political theory.

The focal point of the companionship model is a self that is essentially relational. One is never separated from the world one finds oneself in. Arendt contends that even in the most radical forms of solitude, we find the condition of human plurality already indicated in the two-in-one.[426]. Though the difference might appear a matter of minor nuance, we ought to differentiate between Arendt's condition of plurality and the

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[425] Butler, *Notes Toward,* 52.
[426] Arendt, *The Promise*, 20.

relationality I find in Judith Butler's account. In addition to the condition of plurality that

we live in – that is, inhabiting the world with variable others – we are fundamentally

dependent on each other, a dependency we cannot will away. Butler argues for this

strong sense of relationality, which is a suitable comparison to use in order to reveal and

expand the notion of plurality suggested by Arendt. For Butler, our dependency on each

other reflects a fundamental fact of our social ontology: that we relate to each other

regardless of our desires. She emphasizes the point that our physicality, our bodies, are

situated in shared spaces and in proximity to others, exposing us to many forms of

relations that exist beyond an individual's approval or disapproval. From the moment of

birth we are given to others, anonymous and known alike, without willingness and with

no guarantees. Pushing this image even further, Butler argues that our bodies are inclined

to be outside themselves and exposed to the care and cruelty of their surroundings. Our

bodily ontology demonstrates our vulnerability, the condition of our precarious mutual

living. This precarity, for Butler, not only questions our claims of autonomy as human

beings, but also the myth of political autonomy and the price of creating it. Humanity

finds itself in perpetual wars and violence in an attempt to vanquish the condition of

vulnerability it finds itself in. As Butler postulates in *Frames of War*, "if I undertake an

inquiry into this question of destructiveness, and if I turn toward the question of

precariousness and vulnerability, then it is precisely because I think a certain dislocation

of perspective is necessary for the rethinking of global politics."[427] As she writes:

> [E]ach of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of
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> our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at

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[427] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso Books, 2010), 47.

once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being

socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments,

exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[428]

Like Critchley, Butler develops her ethical theory depending on the strong sense of

alterity in the philosophy of Levinas.[429] Critchley outlines Levinas's teaching as follows: "It

is because of a disposition towards alterity at the heart of the subject that relatedness to

the other is possible."[430] Butler agrees with this claim, however, for her the relatedness

does not originate within the subject but it reflects our social and physical ontologies.

Observing that the primary condition of living together is one of vulnerability and

dependency, Butler characterizes the "the fundamental sociality of embodied life [as] the

ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given

over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own."[431] This entails ethics

and politics of accountability.

Both Arendt and Butler attest to the possibility of willing the given, that is, what is

not chosen in the first place. This would constitute the first step in thinking about such

ethics and politics of accountability. Arendt was concerned that referring to plurality as a

given fact of our existence is not enough to protect the condition of plurality. According

to her, plurality was theorized in political thought as a weakness that forces us out of

options in forming our political communities. She writes, "the tradition of political

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[428] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.
[429] Butler's three most relevant works here are *Precarious Life*, *Frames of War* and *Notes Towards a Performative,* on the latter, see page 22.
[430] Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 62.
[431] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

thought's concern with human plurality is as if it indicated no more than the sum total of reasonable beings, who, because of some decisive defect, are forced to live together and form a political body."[432] This in consequence leads to a lack of enthusiasm and responsibility toward our mutual living; the sense that, because we did not will this plurality in the first place, then we cannot will the formation of a body politic that reflects it or engage in creating the right social and political conditions to cherish such plurality (as opposed to barely enabling it to exist). Butler corroborates this argument, claiming that we can choose an unchosen phenomenon in our social life and this would still carry a strong affirmative implications; claiming that our freedom necessitates choosing from what cannot be willed away in our mutual existence; that freedom has no meaning, and no bearing outside of our social life. Indeed, the fact that our givenness might never have originated in a willed and self-conscience act (and despite the fact that certain economies of power can conceal it) does not *tout court* exclude the possibility of theorizing it in a normative fashion. The passive givenness to each other can be turned into an active pursuit of solidarity and relationality. In describing a strong relationality, it is also necessarily conscious and reflective, formed around deliberate acts of willed companionships, and it, therefore, can constitute ethical subjectivity and communities that respond to such subjectivity.

A relational self asks in whose company one would like to be. It is searching for and establishing a sense of commonness with others. Companionships are not forged between those who have nothing in common. Nonetheless, the commonness between companions is subject to expansion and deepening, the way companionships are

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[432] Arendt, *The Promise*, 60.

imagined and formed once and again. This is possible because the standards that

establish our interpersonal relationships are located in the world we inhibit and create

together. A subject that is driven to establish companionships with others, who takes into

account their appearance to others and the company they want to cultivate has the world

as their mean standard. The standards are public, they are not personal or internal.

Irrespective of whether they are inherited or taught, internal standards, such as those

reflected in the idea of guilt feeling, are not sufficient; they cannot propose the full range

of possibilities one is capable of finding out-there, out of one's solitude or under the

authority of one's super-ego. The question of 'in whose company would I like to be' can

also be interpreted as 'how do I want to appear, to myself and to others?' and is of great

importance to ethical and political theory. One's true self, or true image of oneself, does

not constitute the raw material ethical theory works with; one's current being is not what

is at stake, but rather one's potential, one's becoming. And this potential cannot be

developed internally or abstractly—it has to be contextualized and in active relationality.

To further elucidate the qualities needed to constitute ethical subjectivity through

companionships, I use the image of the Homeric man as described by Mohammed

Bamyeh. Bamyeh writes that the ancient Homeric man illustrates the type of personality

that is "most suitable for the free and committed exploration of humanity."[433] This

personality features three important characteristics: (1) it sees itself through the eyes of

others, (2) it is not preoccupied with acquiring 'subjective unity,' (3) it is directed toward

results. But what does it to mean to say that one's value lies in how others perceive of it?

It implies that, guided by the question about my appearance to others, my ethical

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[433] 156

formation corresponds to a certain need in the world, a desired personality. However, the question about my appearance to others (and the type of personality that others desire), should never be separated from the related question, 'in whose company would I like to be'. This is because as much as the ethical subject is formed by its context, attuned to a real need, it also chooses that world unceasingly. Hence, the others I want to be accountable to in that world are not abstract others, but tangible ones. They are others who I have, in my way of being and living, moulded and influenced them, as the relation that connects us together. Within this sea of contingency and relationality, we need to call upon choice. Choice itself is implicated in our contingent living and in endless unaccounted for and unforeseen destinies, yet it also corresponds to a desire to generate companionships that fit our contingency and relationality in the first place. My creation of the self I wish to be in company with is inseparable from becoming the self that others value and want to be in company with. It is in this sense that, from an ethical perspective, one's true self is restrictive and does not correspond to one's commitments and freedom. The lesson the Homeric man brings is that subjective unity is impossible without others: "it was the others who weaved together the missing knots in his view of himself," Bamyeh writes, so that "his psyche was inseparable from his commitments, and he has no vision of himself that could be contemplated apart from such commitments." It is the 'oneness' we experience, as Arendt recounts, when we are called out of our solitude by others.

Of course, one's appearance and one's companionships emphasize that ethics are taught and learned. Thinking about ethical conception in those terms affirms the invariably social and political constellations of those operations. What humanizes us is the

way we appear to others, a possibility to assert who we are and who we wish to be. This relies on others who can similarly perceive, respond and, equally, assert their own self. As part of my opposition to the mode of ethical formation that is built around notions of guilt feeling, I have claimed that this mode erases a fundamental aspect in the ethical formation of the subject, and that is the context of action. Moral principles cannot be deduced abstractly, but they need to be directed towards a desired wish, a shared aspiration. The moral agent Kant describes, the enthusiast spectator, found its calling in the revolution, for example. The revolution is the context that rendered the ethical demands of the many audible and transmittable. Not every ethical act needs a revolution, of course, but the constitution of moral subjects nonetheless requires a context, and more precisely, a political context. Or as Bamyeh puts it, the "tangibility of commitments and sense of world-making require the visibility of one's contribution to the common good."[434] For that reason, Arendt stressed the importance of politics over the contemplative mode of philosophy. The difference between the two modes is the space of appearance; in politics we show ourselves to others, and engage with them, and together we act in the world.

What politicizes the revolution is the simple act of emphasizing a shared moment and destiny. Revolution creates the context, imagines it, and demands that it be recognized, even among estranged individuals who allegedly are not connected. But it goes one step further: by insisting and acting upon the expansion of freedom, it turns the context into one of hope. Revolution creates and manifests a collective hope that, unlike the hope we encounter in our daily lives as individuals, is engrained in a passionate cause

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[434] Bamyeh, *Anarchy As Order*, 159.

made possible by the wishes of the many. Hope is the central driver of such a grand event. It is hope, in the moment, that this specific occasion presents an opportunity, crafted and effectuated by a 'we,' beckoning each and every one to take part. Hope issues an invitation to imagine, to invest in existing dreams, and to reveal one's interests, one's connections to others, and one's willingness to forge oneself as a changing subject. Hope is not a guarantee, but it presents the subject with a meaningful event and with the possibility to understand oneself not as a finished product but as a source of new potentials. The revolution presents an opportunity for the subject to be reconstituted and for the subject's re-examination as an ethical entity. Indeed, moments of political hope open up the possibility to rethink one's world and one's constitution in relation to oneself and others. How do I want to live, in what world do I want to live, and how do I cultivate my relations with others? Hope, then, is one condition for ethical responsiveness; that is, one must feel that one's actions carry seeds of change for the present or the future. But hope is not possible if it does not expose a sense of connectedness to others. And this cannot happen outside of a context of shared life.

Concluding Remarks

I have presented two modes of the ethical constitution of the subject. One is conceived through the experience of guilt feeling, as suggested by Simon Critchley, and the other I have proposed is conceived through building companionship with oneself and others. I put forward the claim that the ethical articulation of the subject is possible under the condition of freedom, following both Kant and Foucault, and I tied this discussion to the event of revolution, specifically to Tahrir Square. The experience of Tahrir elucidates that when freedom is not only the goal of the movement but its very nature, condition, and way of being, then the possibility arises for an ethical articulation based on the model of companionship.

"The concept of the autonomous human subject is refuted by reality,"[435] Adorno writes, accompanied by, it must be noted, notions of ethics (such as guilt feeling) that correspond to and presuppose autonomy, and which protect one's independence as a self-reliant ethical entity. Against this view, I asked how we can theorize the ethical constitution of the subject while keeping in sight the importance of freedom and the commitments it gives rise to. I claimed that we should work with the notion of choice to introduce the formation of companionships as an alternative to guilt feeling. To do so, I used the revelation of one's moral disposition during revolution in Kant's teaching, and one's appearance in Arendt's account, to argue that the public sphere is a necessary condition for one's ethical constitution. It's not the hope for the better – any better – that

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[435] Theodor W. Adorno, *History and freedom: lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Polity, 2006), 7.

lies in the future, but rather the actualizing of this hope now in the present that really fascinates Kant with revolutions (and what, too, should continue to draw us to this human capacity). It is through acting together that hope and freedom gain their meaning and that one gains the potential to become the companion one desires. The political practice of freedom and the creation of an engaged community are crucial conditions for the formation of the ethical subject.

Moments of collective action elicit the recognition of our vulnerability and deep dependency on each other, laying open the grounds to form new companionships. The ethical subject that is now committed to appearing to 'negotiated others' creates the companionships desired both internally and externally without ever differentiating between the two. Companionship is a mode of reflective relationality at its core; we relate to ourselves, despite its opaqueness, and form accordingly relations with others. This mode of reflective relationality is fluid and changing, it is a call for a dialogue and communication and not grounded primarily on persecution. It is ethics that is grounded on action and a sense of care to the world. The formation of ethical subjectivity through companionship hence implies that ethics is taught and learned, and that it should remain practical and tangible.

Conclusion

> "The most interesting mass uprisings are in fact precisely those that, rather than simply conducted as experiments in unbridled freedom, make it possible to envision freedom in connection to solidarity."[436]

Revolutions and uprisings carry significant wisdom aiding the development of our political and ethical conceptions. If we cease to reflexively apply the available epistemological paradigms to the workings of revolutions — usually restricted to the scope of state power and regime restructuring – we could begin to unravel their promise for normative political theory and the shaping of our mutual living together as an ethical encounter. The idea of public participation in politics is not new. Radical democracy[437] and participatory democracy[438] have endorsed and hailed its merits for years. This dissertation has argued, however, that the recent surge of revolutions around the globe, grouped under the banner of popular movements, offers something original and as yet unacknowledged. Beyond revolution's euphoria and intensity, it is a singular opportunity in that the organization and meaning of the political sphere intertwines with the prospect and methods of our ethical formation in a rare manner that can impel theory that is attuned to and capable of responding to the injustices in our world today. I have argued

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[436] Mohammed A. Bamyeh, *Anarchy as Order: The History and Future of Civic Humanity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, Inc., 2009), 163.

[437] See for example Joshua Cohen, "Reflections on Habermas on Democracy," *Ratio Juris* 12.4 (December 1999): 385-416.

[438] Pateman's book is a standrad source to refer to, Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

that in these moments of popular uprisings our living together becomes a thoughtful and

deliberate practice and our plurality and vulnerability are recognized, all the while

questions about the nature and meaning of our existence are actively posed, turning our

living together into a form of art making.

I have argued that to assess the promise of popular movements we need to look

at a specific incident and illuminate it. It can hardly be better said than as Bernard Flynn

put it: "what we seek in a philosophical work is illumination. We do not look for eternal

truths but wish to discover something we had not known before, or perhaps had known

in a confused manner whereby it remained latent."[439] This dissertation pursued the

lessons of the Arab Spring, drawing our attention to Tahrir Square in particular and asking

about its contribution to political philosophy and ethics. To illuminate is also to show how

our clear vision might be hindered by certain perspectives, which is why the first chapter

of this dissertation examined democratization studies. I claimed that this field yielded a

form of epistemic imposition that makes it difficult, perhaps prohibitively so, to

acknowledge popular involvement and the people's impact on political life. For years this

domain of study examined the vehicle of change known as 'transition to democracy' and

how it might come to fruition in the Arab world; it is there that we would expect to find a

thoughtful engagement with mobilizations from below and their role in influencing the

political realm. A closeup view revealed the contrary. Democratic studies in its various

branches conceptualized the political sphere in terms of state power, state mechanisms,

and organized institutions; accordingly, change, if it were to happen at all (some thought

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[439] Bernard Flynn, *The philosophy of Claude Lefort: interpreting the political* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), intro.

not) would come from above. The conceptions of political life did not adequately address the people's agency and power or for that matter their capacity to reconfigure politics, and thus the people played almost no role in this transition paradigm. In short, politics according to democratization studies, was, I argued, thought and envisioned without the people.

The understanding of politics as pertaining to state power, as ruling and efficiency, is evident in democratization studies and is grounded conceptually in Western political thought.[440] In chapter two I tracked this troubled relation between people and politics to its origins, and concluded that it comes down to at least two active assumptions. First, that power is conceptualized as a negative substance, destructive and sovereign, and thus it needs to be banished, centralized and controlled by the few. Second, that the separation between public and private spheres, wherein individual interests and desires are banned from the former, while the latter is imagined as a space only for rational deliberations, resulted in excluding the majority of the people from political life. Alternatively, I have put forth that if political power is instead acknowledged as a constructive force for nourishing subjects in a society and for bridging solidarity between its members, and if public space is envisioned as an arena where individuals' emotions and desires can be manifested, then politics can become a domain that bestows meaning on individuals' lives when they participate in making and remaking it. Indeed, politics should be understood, this dissertation maintains, as a practical, immediate space of

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[440] The latter claim, namely that the tradition of political philosophy thought politics as rulership and as means to an end is from Hannah Arendt. See for example chapter 5 in her, *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005).

interaction, a place where people are empowered to act in pursuit of what they desire. Hence the inclusion of people is the most important component in defining the political.

Due to pre-existing theoretical frameworks and generally practical outlooks, the possibility to see politics as a space where we maintain our living together as an active and ethical pursuit is not present on a wide scale in 'normal' times. But revolutions offer a glimpse into this option. They offer us the possibility to ask what happens when people are engaged directly and passionately in politics and in creating the entities that serve them. What model of action will the involved crowds enact? How does that model differ from what we have known previously? What happens when the people are active and powerful in public life? I took up these questions in chapter three and argued that they can be illuminated by the example of Tahrir Square. Tahrir presented a model of horizontal, non-hierarchical organization that lacked traditional and centralized leadership. It emphasized the importance of practicing and ameliorating our capacity to live together in the present. Viewed as such, Tahrir demonstrated that a contingent, euphoric burst of activity practiced collectively can be maintained as a form of art. The practice implies that there is room for change, unpredictability and continuity. The crowds in Tahrir Square directly enacted the values they believed in, rejecting any attempts, from left and right, to instrumentalize their political action and agency in exchange for promised future gains. They offered a model of solidarity, deliberation and civic ethics that ought to be taken seriously when we conceptualize the political realm and what it is capable of, as it made these 'ideals' connected and possible.

The ontological account of Tahrir illuminates the promise of the kind of politics that emerge from acting together. It also illuminates what political philosophy is missing

when it disregards those instances. The disregard of social and political life at the hands

of philosophy has been discussed profoundly by others, notably Hannah Arendt, who

"among the difficult things she came to understand was that the great thinkers to whom

she turned time and again for inspiration, from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and

Heidegger, had never seen that the promise of human freedom, whether proffered

sincerely or hypocritically as the end of politics, is realized by plural human beings when

and only when they act politically."[441]

Like Arendt's plurality, a vibrant and open political realm is necessary to an ethical

formation of the subject that is attuned to the conditions of our living together as a form

of art. The fourth and final chapter argued against an ethical constitution of the subject

that is founded on the operation of persecution and guilt feeling, and in favour of a model

built upon communication and persuasion (of which Tahrir is an exemplar). Political

engagement, as I have characterized it in this dissertation, relies on the active

involvement of individuals – which presumes continuous reflection about oneself and

others – and thus establishes its own form of ethics which I call ethics of companionship.

This model of ethics is conditioned on freedom: its imagination, creation and struggle.

The conditions under which people are involved in politics manifest freedom or inhibit it. I

argued that forms of organizing crowds, notably horizontally and non-hierarchically –

where freedom and equality manifest in the modes of intersubjective relations formed, as

in Tahrir Square – give rise to and sustain ethics of companionship. These forms of

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[441] Jerome Kohn, Introduction. *The Promise of Politics*, by Hannah Arendt (Schocken, 2005): vii-xxxiii.

organization and this model of ethics by nature never produce or aim at an end product; they are forever open-ended endeavours in experiencing living together.

As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, political philosophy that seeks to create normative theory enthusiastic about ameliorating the conditions of our living together should start from connecting ethics and politics. Precisely, it should recognize how ethics stems from the domain of the political and what kind of ethics are possible when individuals insert themselves into the web of politics, especially under conditions of free action and full engagement. I have envisioned this as a form of collective art making. I maintain that when our social relations lack the passion and love we usually bestow upon our private lives, politics lose their meaning. And when politics become meaningless and undesirable, ethics become inaccessible. Ethics rely on the prospect of freedom, and this later is mirrored in social life, so the conditions of our social life have to matter. Both ethics and politics have practical dimensions to them—it is their exercise and practice that cultivates and enriches them. The moment we lose sight of the political sphere, we lose the possibility of creating a meaningful life, we lose becoming a subject, an active and engaged citizen, a companion who practices ethical relations. We lose something valuable about our humanity.

Ultimately the biggest lesson to be cultivated from these revolutions is that politics and ethics can and ought to be theoretically and practically interconnected. And this, I believe, is a source of hope. Theodor Adorno wrote that "the only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as

they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."[442] To entertain a redemptive standpoint in our reality, in the face of oppression and injustice and at the crossroads of alienation and insecurity produced by force, is to entertain hope—a radical hope at that.[443] Nothing can be more empowering than hope. The prospect of hope arises in and among the collective as they act together; this is where its potential can materialize. To sustain a tradition of producing hope, we have to philosophize instances where it is emerging and where it can circulate, where it is a new fragile experience set against despair (the old and all-encompassing experience). Hence a philosophy of hope must theorize the connection between ethics and politics, the space where their interconnection can happen, and the conditions that enable this bringing together. This philosophy of hope then revives and affirms the space that connects us, actively imagining and reimagining it. The space shared among us is a context that enables the exploration of new pathways, and it is for political philosophy to theorize, critique and search for these spaces that allow hope to prosper both pragmatically and conceptually.

Revolution is a case for full and direct participation.[444] It questions the idea that politics is the preoccupation of the few and that there is a certain incompatibility between people and politics—an idea to which modern democracies fully adhere.

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[442] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, (Verso, 2005), 247.

[443] As Raymond Williams puts it, "to be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing." *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (Verso Books, 2016), 118.

[444] And it is only but one from various options in which we can imagine full and direct participation, as Bamyeh beautifully describes our attachment to ideals: "Every operationalization of a grand ideal reveals a particular orientation, not a universal translation of the ideal. Grand ideals, after all, are usually entered through only one of their many doors, which is then claimed to be the one and only practical way to enter them." *Anarchy as Order*, 120.

Revolution alludes to the prevailing interpretation of politics as a domain of ruling and exclusion, showing how it can instead be about deliberation and praxis. Perhaps revolutions bring to the fore a subjective will more than an objective truth. No matter—in any case they reveal that political action is not a privilege. Political action has an element of our constitution as moral subjects, and it enriches the lives of human beings. In revolutions we realize that it is only when freedom is at stake – when one fights for it, contemplates it, yearns for it, engages in its creation – that one can gain political power and practice forging ethical companionships with oneself and others. Hope in the possibility of freedom reintroduces the relation between the political and the ethical. What philosophy ought to do, therefore, is envisage the nature of politics in a way that facilitates the creation of a spaces in which agency, solidarity, companionship and political power can arise. The kind of politics that invites hope and is fueled by it is a politics that *de facto* involves people. It is then this kind of politics that is predicated upon participation and engagement, and that posits politics as a field of meaning, not only a field of achieving.

As I write, two new revolutions are unfolding in the Arab world, in Algeria and Sudan. Notwithstanding that each has its own contexts and particularities, they have repeated again the model of popular movement described here using the example of Tahrir Square: egalitarian, horizontal, non-hierarchical forms of organizing that refrain from appointing representatives and leadership. Hence, the question that theory should be occupied with is not why these movements turn to 'idealistic' or 'ineffective' tools for achieving 'real' change – again, thought of in terms of controlling state power – but

rather why time and again people opt for *this* form of engaging with politics and *this* form of committing to each other. It should ask why the people remain, despite years of democratic institutionalization, more radical and demanding than any institution could fathom. It should ask why the people remain suspicious about ideas regarding rulership, efficiency and calculable gains, despite the fact that those notions have lingered for years and have been hegemonic in every sense. We ought to ask why and reflect upon these questions from a different angle, changing the perspective of our political and philosophical inquiries. My hope is that this dissertation's approach and methodology opens up space for more philosophical examinations that contemplate this model of civic engagement and ethics, and that take as their starting point the power circulating below. If social and political philosophy care about the conditions of our living together, then the conditions of popular engagement must be further examined and scrutinized. This investigation must begin from the perspective of the people's relation to their living environments and conditions, and the contexts in which their desires and actions arise. The old paradigms must be continually thought over and interrupted.

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