

# The Logic of Revolutions

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**With the ‘Arab Springs’, the question of revolution was raised afresh. Taking a comparative approach, H. Bozarslan and G. Delemestre analyse the link between revolution and the democratic process, returning to the role played by intellectuals in the revolutionary dynamic.**

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Reviewed: Hamit Bozarslan and Gaëlle Demelemestre, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution ? Amérique, France, Monde Arabe, 1763-2015* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2016), 400 p.

Since winter 2010-2011, much has been said and written about the uprisings of populations in different Arab countries. The countless studies on the topic have tried to understand the causes and local circumstances of the Arab revolts. Above all, though, these uprisings highlighted the need to rethink revolution itself. By bringing the ‘age of revolutions’ back to the forefront of History, the ‘Arab Spring’ called old analytical frameworks into question. The aim of Hamit Bozarslan and Gaëlle Demelemestre’s book *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution ?* is precisely to suggest new analytical tools capable of rethinking revolutions in a more comprehensive way in light of the Arab uprisings.

In this work, the authors pursue the comparative reflection about the Arab revolutions begun by H. Bozarslan et al. in 2011 in *Passions révolutionnaires*.<sup>1</sup> Written during the Tunisian ‘Spring’, the latter book compared the revolutionary crises that had marked the Middle East during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with other non-Western revolutions. As for *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution*, it compares the recent Arab revolutions with two classic upheavals in history – the American and French revolutions. In doing so, it explores the relationship between expectations of revolutionary change and the idea of democracy. This innovative approach gives due importance

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<sup>1</sup> Hamit Bozarslan, Gilles Bataillon, Christophe Jaffrelot, *Passions révolutionnaires. Amérique latine, Moyen-Orient, Inde* (Paris: Éd. de l'EHESS, 2011).

to the democratic demands expressed at the beginning of the Arab uprising, reminding the reader of the dilemmas that the American and French revolutionaries faced in their time.

## The concept of ‘revolution’: between a slogan and a scientific category

The first thing called into question by the Arab revolts was the very term ‘revolution’. Both rigid and polysemic, it could not account for the different paths “Arab Springs” were taking. After the protests, the return of repressive regimes, the outbreak of civil wars and the relinquishing of democratic demands by a large proportion of the population fell considerably short of the normative image of revolutions.<sup>2</sup> Use of the term ‘revolution’ to refer to the Arab uprisings gave rise to many controversies, illustrating the difficulty of using this concept, which serves both as a slogan, aimed at acting on reality in order to change it, and a theoretical term, aimed at describing that changing reality.

The first part of H. Bozarslan and G. Demelemestre’s book aims to answer these questions with a view to analysing revolutions above and beyond such controversies. They note that researchers face two challenges. First, they have to ‘objectivate’ the revolution; in other words, they have to try to step outside axiological discourse about it in order to compare it with other similar movements. Second, they have to understand that this objectivation may contradict the terms used by the actors involved in the movement to define their experience. Because ‘referring to an experience [...] as being a revolution is not a neutral act: it monopolises the right to classify and reclassify’. Indeed, ‘the very claim of revolution produces revolutionary effects on a society that researchers cannot ignore’ (p. 45-46).

Revolutions are also difficult to grasp because of the powerful grip of their own discourse about themselves – their own ‘philosophy of history’, which frames revolution as an inevitable historical necessity. Experienced as an eschatological struggle between Good and Evil, they force the researcher to take a stance for or against them. While this philosophy of history makes it impossible to broach revolutions historically and sociologically, it is also counter-productive to exclude it from analysis. The actors involved in a movement experience a revolution in their very flesh and blood, and this has transformative effects on society. Researchers are therefore ‘forced to divide themselves into two’ by adopting a stance that displays neither ‘fetishism’ nor ‘dismissal’ towards the revolution in question (p. 24-25). Many ways of reading of a revolution are suggested in the book: it is analysed as an expectation, a principle of change, a historical break, a universal event rooted in the specific, and the process institutionalising a new political order. If a revolution can be read in so many ways, it is because it can be approached through

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, ‘Soulèvements arabes : la “révolution” dans ses crises’, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 138, December 2015.

varying time frames. It is often a short-lived, condensed event, which leads to the removal of an old regime; at the same time, it is also a long and wearisome process through which a new institutional order is negotiated; finally, it is a historiographical construction located in a longer historical span (p. 29). Consequently, each section of the book is devoted to a different revolution, analysed in terms of a particular aspect.

## Two ‘passions’ – revolution and democracy

The common thread running through the book is exploring the relationship between revolutionary actions and democratic expectations. Without positing a causal relationship between these two ‘passions’ – a relationship that is contradicted by the number of revolutions that have resulted in authoritarian regimes, for example in Russia, China or Iran – the book explores the historical conditions in which these two elements have been juxtaposed. Sections 2 and 3, written by philosopher Gaëlle Demelemestre, are rich and informative, and chart the debates that accompanied the construction of a democratic order in America and in France. Comparing these two revolutionary movements, the author explains why they resulted in different ways of reconciling power and individual freedom. The political conditions in which these two revolutions took place play a crucial role in this regard. In the United States, an active social stratum was formed before the state was created, allowing the freedom of enterprise to be elevated above all else. Conversely, in France, the legacy of hierarchical society weighed too heavily for a large fringe of the population to be allowed to influence political decisions. Following De Tocqueville’s reading of the French Revolution, attentive to the continuities between the new order and the Ancien Régime, the author suggests that these initial circumstances led the French revolutionaries to return to the unitary form of sovereignty conceived under the monarchy. The strength of this analysis resides in its demonstration that revolutionaries reached political solutions through confrontation with concrete problems. Ideas do not float around in the air: here, they were grounded in the concrete political struggles of both these revolutions.

However, such struggles do not always call on the language of democracy. In the Arab world, discussed by H. Bozarslan in section 4, for a long time it was the exception rather than the rule for the idea of revolutionary change to be linked with democratic expectations. Throughout the history of the Middle East, which has been rich in protests, previous revolutions have often served to justify authoritarianism as a political plan because it was unthinkable that great aims of independence and development could be achieved within a pluralistic and conflictual society. Between 1952 and 1969, a number of military coups rocked Arab countries, particularly Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Libya. They were generally presented or experienced as real revolutions, even when they resulted in authoritarian and repressive regimes. The plural and conflictual nature of societies was perceived as a threat against the unity of the nation – a unity that was indispensable in order to fight ‘enemies’ from without and within. It

is only at the turn of the 2010s that democratic expectations became intertwined with the idea of radical change, thanks in part to new media and the emergence of civil societies (p. 306). However, the tension between two conflicting conceptions of society has not disappeared. On the one hand, there is the idea of an organic society, seen as one body moving forward in the same direction. On the other hand, society is perceived as a muddle of different, diverging interests making compromise and negotiation indispensable. The first conception is predominant in Egypt today, where the police, army and other repressive institutions were able to legitimise their power through the demand for security expressed by a large portion of society. This astute sociological reading of post-revolutionary processes in Arab countries affords an understanding of the factors that prevented the democratisation of the political order, such as the suppression of public protest and the institutional resilience of the old regime.

## The role of ideas and intellectuals

By questioning the relationship between revolution and democracy, this book contributes to a broader reflection about the role of ideas in revolutionary protest. In this, it echoes the famous 1980s debate between T. Skocpol and W. Sewell about the role of the Enlightenment in triggering the French Revolution, although it does not make a direct reference to it.<sup>3</sup> H. Bozarslan suggests, for his part, that ‘ideas do not make a revolution’ but that they are internalised by actors and then become ‘expectations’, a ‘shared conviction that the established order is not fair’ (p. 58-59).

Such an approach to the role of ideas in revolutions justifies the book’s attention to Arab intellectuals who, according to the author, were partly responsible for the failure of the democratisation of Arab societies. In his view, unlike North American and French intellectuals, Arab thinkers have not devised innovative notions of citizenship that could allow their societies to adopt new institutional models (p. 307). The social scientists – which have progressively turned away from questions of power, citizenship and political representation – and opinion journalists – who tend to restrict their focus on the issue of the ‘Arab-Muslim condition’ – have both failed to play a political role comparable to that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary theorists. According to H. Bozarslan, these theoretical shortcomings are responsible for the fundamental differences between the Arab revolutions and the American and French revolutions. While the latter aimed to transform the political community, by reconfiguring relationships between individuals, communities and authorities, the Arab revolutions were carried by the desire to join the ‘bourgeois political community’, following models that already exist elsewhere. The ideological constraints weighing on intellectuals, such as Arab political culture, permeated with the neo-Platonic idea of the ‘Philosopher-king’ or the ascendancy of theological reason and the

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary of that debate, see Isaac Ariail Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 117-119.

imaginary of the Nation, prohibited any acceptance of the principle of a divided and conflictual society.

The role played by intellectuals in the Arab revolutions has been little explored up until now and this analysis is therefore a particularly welcome contribution. However, by only considering intellectuals in terms of the ideas they produce, it fails to grasp the social logics that might explain the ambivalence of their stances taken in regard the uprisings. Connecting these stances to the concrete political and social struggles in which they were elaborated could have offered a better understanding of why Arab intellectuals were only able to elaborate a limited vision of political change and soon fell back into the Mubarakian logic of polarisation around the Islamic question. Moreover, there is certain discrepancy between how the role of ideas is analysed in the section addressing the American and French revolutions and how it is broached regarding the Arab uprisings. While the passages looking at the former show how theoretical conceptions were devised through concrete struggles, the section analysing the latter takes a somewhat disembodied approach to ideas. The links between the three cases of revolution could have been taken further had the book included the very intense debates that accompanied the revolutionary process in Egypt, for example about the meaning of democracy ('ballot box democracy' versus 'democracy of the streets') or about the meaning of 'citizenship' and 'civil state'.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless despite these minor reservations, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution ?* offers an innovative, nuanced reflection on processes of democratisation in revolutionary contexts. The book provides a global view of revolutionary movements and affords a better understanding of how they are grounded in political philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> On these debates, see the article by Alexis Blouet and Clément Steuer, 'The Notions of Citizenship and the Civil State in the Egyptian Transition Process', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2005, p. 1-21.