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Anarchism and the Arab Uprising

An Interview with Mohammed Bamyeh

Joshua Stephens

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Spontaneity, largely horizontal organization, and a suspicion toward explicit political leadership have all been signature components of what's referred to as the Arab Spring. This has been the case since the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution—regardless of the regimes that have resulted from the power vacuums left in their wake. Yet very little of the particularities or the historical forces driving these uprisings captured the imagination of or spoke to left anti-authoritarians in the west, until the appearance of a western-style black bloc in Cairo on the two-year anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. That contradiction, and a sudden gaze cast—particularly on Egypt—pose rather unsettling questions about representation, and a slouch toward Orientalism.

The romantic accounts of Arab struggle constructed in the US (most recently, in an “open letter” to the Black Bloc, from Crimethinc), commit a signature sin of omission. Namely, the Arabs present in these accounts (published largely for an English-speaking audience) don't speak, and are not heard.

The features we're treated to are filtered through a process of selection in which Arabs did not participate. Consequently, what these accounts convey—well-meaning, or no—has more to do with what their authors see of themselves in their subject matter, and less to do with anything happening on the ground in Arab struggles.

Mohammed Bamyeh is a sociologist of social movements at the University of Pittsburgh, who has written critically about the intersection of anarchism and the dynamics of the Arab uprisings. I encountered him through an article published on the website Jadaliyya several years ago, and sought him out on the topic of anarchism in the Arab world. This conversation resulted.

Joshua Stephens: We've talked a little about treating anarchism as a methodology, or something reflected in practices, as opposed to something that stands in for party affiliation. What informs that, for you?

Mohammed Bamyeh: It is informed by my understanding of anarchism as something that already exists rather than as some future utopia; that is, as part of some (though obviously not all) familiar social traditions of self-management, mutual aid, solidarity, and local trust. This means that when we talk about anarchism as a “method,” we are talking about the aspects of anarchism that are already embedded in some reality in an organic way, even though there may be no explicit anarchist theory around.

JS: Where do you see that intersecting with the Arab uprisings of the last two years?

MB: 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). Note also how in Syria, for example, one speaks of “coordination” or “coordinating committees,” not leadership structures or executive councils. The entire Syrian uprising has been an-

archic, and more features of that reality are becoming obvious now, as people have developed self-governing local structures wherever the regime has left the ground. Anarchism as a mode of life and organization is in this case a necessity, not a theoretical luxury.

Of course, we will not see much of this reality if we focus our attention only on the “high politics” of transitional or a post-revolutionary phase. Such politics correspond to the making of a liberal order. I don’t think that this is avoidable at this point, especially given that the vast majority of the people support a liberal order of some sort (including the religious parties). But anarchism lives on not at that level, but in the ongoing and long-term cultural transformations.

JS: What appears to distinguish this era of uprisings—and this is true globally, really, but is particularly striking with regard to places that have emerged from colonialism in the last century—is the spontaneity and lack of centralized leadership within the rebellions themselves. We’re not really seeing nationalist figures at the front of these movements; we’re not really even seeing particular names repeated that much. This has confounded more mainstream observers and probably even surprised some folks who have arguably less rigid ideas about these parts of the world. I’m guessing, however, that for a sociologist, this corresponds with trends and data that have been emerging for some time.

MB: I gave several lectures precisely on this point. Briefly, absence of leadership is due to the work of historical memory: we did have savior leaders in the past, and leadership seemed essential both as a symbol of a unified struggle and due to organizational imperatives in the immediate postcolonial era. But we learned from that period, and now you have an almost intuitive rejection of charismatic leadership. Also, the presence of leaders does not allow a revolution to be as radical as it could be otherwise.

JS: This was obviously true in the case of Palestinian Authority’s dismantling of popular institutions from the First Intifada, in the wake of Oslo. Are there other instances where you think that’s particularly pronounced?

MB: In some way the Arab rebellions are mimicking the first Palestinian intifada which, along with the collective uprising in Sudan in 1985, are organizational precursors to what we see now. Right now, the density of revolutions is greater and the process of learning faster. What I have elsewhere called the “Arab Dark Age, 1973–2011” involved, among other things, an increased disjuncture between society and state. This led to an increase in the importance in people’s lives of mutual aid networks, especially for the new urban poor but even the middle classes. Some even speak of a “ruralization of cities” rather than “urbanization” in that period, but in any case it was a process whereby large stretches of society separated themselves from the state and invested instead in their own traditions of networking and informality that became increasingly essential for survival. So when we speak of the “spontaneity” of the revolution, we are really talking about how the already familiar and necessary spontaneity of everyday life, well suited for new and complex urban environments, transformed into revolutionary spontaneity. People knew already how to act spontaneously in response to unpredictable encounters.

JS: Horizontal forms of organization—even overtly anarchist traces—have a considerable history in the eastern Mediterranean, as works like Ilham Khuri-Makdisi’s have documented. Malatesta even entered Egypt to fight alongside those resisting the British. But until a black bloc emerged anarchists in the west seemed to have little interest in what such practices look like on the ground in this part of the world, almost as though they carried no authenticity until they took forms intelligible—or maybe even flattering—to the west.

MB: I don’t think we should focus too much on episodic apparitions like the black bloc. Unfortunately, many anarchists cannot distinguish between anarchism and nihilism. The black bloc is quickly celebrated because it appears like something seen in the west, but if anarchism is a global tradition, then we need to understand how it has been approached from a variety of local perspectives. Many of these perspectives do not use the word “anarchism,” but in spirit they express a basic longing for an unimposed, voluntary order and invoke an ideal of social justice. These perspectives we have had in abundance, for over a century.

JS: Can you talk a little about particular cultural forms or thinkers who’ve been particularly influential on that front?

MB: I have become increasingly interested in the history from below perspective, which was developed precisely during the Dark Age (1973–2011) as a cultural response to all previous authorities and knowledge, and as way to tell national narratives from the point of view of the little person rather than the leader or savior figures. The historical novel has served as a particularly effective genre for delivering this knowledge. Important figures here include Abdelrahman Munif, Ibrahim al-Koni, Elias Khoury, Gamal Ghitani, Khairy Shalabi and many others. One can also speak of a genesis of this movement in the works of Ghassan Kanafani and Naguib Mahfouz. However, no one has represented the entire spirit of this movement, this total rejection of all meta-heroics of the Dark Age, better than a poet: Mahmoud Darwish, especially after 1982, which marked definite and widespread disillusionment with the older revolutionary styles.