Squares, Occupy Movements and the Arab Revolutions

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2019

Contents

Abstract

The last decade has experienced a revival of global anarchist movements in Western and non-Western contexts. It is so in the case of Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and other Southern Mediterranean countries where anarchist groups and forms of doing politics have re-emerged during the last years with the Revolutions in 2011 in the Southern Mediterranean societies. Tahrir, and other squares in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, constituted spaces of convergence, of encounter and 'anarchist experiences' in themselves. These experiences ended up with the establishment of self-declared anarchist groups and of different autonomous spaces and collectives that, by reclaiming their right to the city and radicalising the public space, were organised in horizontal, decentralised and anti-hierarchical ways with the ultimate goal of keeping alive the demands of 2011 Revolutions. The present study incorporates theories of new social movements and 'autonomous spaces' (Newman, 2011) in order to analyse the contemporary political culture of anarchism in the Southern Mediterranean contexts. Throughout the study of 'autonomous spaces' I intend to decolonise and broaden the meaning of anarchism, on the one hand, and to incorporate the experiences of the Arab social revolutions to its history, on the other.

> The glorious 18 days that toppled Mubarak as they have been seen by many commentators were not so glorious and were not only 18 days. The 25th January Revolution in 2011 started everywhere, in many towns and also in many streets in Cairo. It started everywhere and went to the centre, Tahrir square. The square was the focus of the movement, not the centre. All beams of light came down to the square, after clashes with the security forces, after the people took the square and they declared the sit-in and issued the first statement that ended with the slogan "The people want to topple the Regime".[1]

For Yasir Abdallah, an Egyptian self-declared anarchist, translator and one of the founders of the anarchist movement al-Haraka al-Ishtirakiyah al-Taharruriyah (the Libertarian Socialist Movement, LSM), the Egyptian revolution with Tahrir Square as its symbol was not just confined to eighteen days. Tahrir was also not the centre of it, but a place of convergence, of encounter, and an 'anarchist experience' in itself. Even if more than six years have passed since the spark of the Occupy movements around the world, 2011 was above all a turning point in the emergence of new social movements, some related to anarchist theory and practice, in the South of the Mediterranean. Since 2011, Arab revolutions have played a key part in maintaining, reclaiming and decolonising anarchism as a political philosophy.

The study of the anarchist experiences in the Arabic-speaking world since 2011 echoes a long history of libertarian and emancipatory thought and practice that has passed unnoticed in most books on anarchism. These experiences have also shed light on the theory and practice of anarchism in unprecedented ways in the last decades; however, they have not yet been inserted in

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[1] Y. Abdallah, 'La desprimaverización de la primavera árabe' (2013) *Entretierras.* Available at: https://entretierras.net/2013/05/25/la-desprimaverizacion-de-la-primavera-arabe/ [Accessed June 5, 2013].

what Uri Gordon describes as '[…] the full-blown revival of anarchism, as a global social movement and coherent set of political discourses, on a scale and to levels of unity and diversity unseen since 1930s'.[2]

The movements that emerged in the South of the Mediterranean are deeply diverse in terms of social composition, culture, government reaction and repression, and geopolitics. The kind of political systems in which they operate differ in the same way that their repertoires of contentious politics and their anarchist practices do. Notwithstanding these differences, it is precisely horizontal organisation, urban transformation and the radical re-appropriation of public space which allow us to draw a pattern of commonality among these new anarchist experiences in the South of the Mediterranean. All of them share a common response to the *status quo* that performs politics outside of traditional left-wing party politics, NGOs and institutionalised organisations. Furthermore, these movements are not defined by traditional narratives of socialism, Islamism or nationalism (even if in many ways they have had a national framework of action). At the same time, they are mostly leaderless, horizontal, decentralised and anti-hierarchical in their organisational strategies.

This chapter brings to light some of the ways in which anarchism has been lived and experienced in the South of the Mediterranean from 2011, in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Bringing these three contexts together allows us to have a general overview of the re-emergence of anarchism in this region since the Arab revolutions. My main argument is that what started out as new social movements with the occupation of squares and street politics in what its participants recognised as revolutions still continues in other forms and autonomous spaces that give sense to the revolutionaries' motto: *al-thawra mustamirra* ('the revolution continues'). This comparative structure does not allow us to discuss the case studies in detail. However, it allows us to divert the attention of the reader in order to think and rethink the ways in which contemporary anarchism expresses itself in non-Western contexts, namely the Arabic-speaking world of the South of the Mediterranean. For the purpose of this analysis, anarchism is understood as a form of doing politics rather than a European-based ideology. For that reason, most of the cases analysed in this study are not self-declared anarchist groups and collectives, but they do function in a way that help us to expand, re-conceptualise and decolonise our understanding of anarchism. These are mostly horizontal, decentralised and anti-hierarchical strategies, discourses, groups and repertoires of fighting against the capitalist and neoliberal construction of public/private spaces, urban architecture and established social dynamics and relations. Neither is it our intention to romanticise resistance nor the anarchist experiences of the people from the South. These experiences have been followed up by harsh state repression and counter-revolution through detention, forced disappearances, imprisonment, torture and even death. Our intention is to draw a line of commonality where transnational solidarities can be drawn and where the South of the Mediterranean is included, recognising its local specificities in the global history of counter-hegemonic discourses and practices, and in particular, anarchism.

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[2] U. Gordon, 'Anarchism reloaded'. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12:1 (2007), 29.

From Occupy the Squares to Autonomy: On Revolution in the South of the Mediterranean

Yasir's vision of the revolution is that of a long-lasting social revolution. For the young Egyptian anarchist, the revolution did not just happen at one moment, as it has been widely assumed in the media or academic circles, but it has continued in less visible diverse spaces and in novel ways within Southern Mediterranean contexts. The classic model around which the concept of revolution is built conjures up the idea of centralised power—the political power of the State. As is understood in Marxist accounts, this power is seized by a revolutionary vanguard.[3] Revolutions do not succeed until there is a radical change in the pre-existing political systems and their internal structures. For that reason, when we are dealing with political and social events in Europe and North America, the academy displays a tendency to use terminology derived from European history.[4] The popular uprisings that took place in the South of the Mediterranean at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 and that are still ongoing (despite the great efforts of counter-revolutionary forces supporting authoritarian regimes in the Arabic-speaking world) were described by analysts, journalists and part of the Western academy as the 'Arab Spring'. The 'spring' metaphor is twofold. It implies, on the one hand, the universalisation of the hegemonic criteria of Western political science and, on the other, an orientalist worldview of those who articulate these criteria. According to Brownlee and Ghiabi the term minimises the intensity and bravery of those who have participated in these mobilisations.[5] Moreover, the 'spring' metaphor carries with it the semantic legacies of an entire colonial history of the Southern Mediterranean societies, Arab or otherwise, who, after decades of historical and social lethargy during the Ottoman Empire, woke up with the arrival of European colonisation. This literary, cultural, social and political 'awakening' that is known in Arabic as *nahda,* re-emerges in 2011 as a potent trope that conceptualises the spontaneous uprisings against authoritarian regimes in the Arabic-speaking countries. In Arabic, the conceptual differences between a revolution (*thwra*), a revolt (*tamarrud*) and an uprising (*intifada*) have helped, as Brecht De Smet points out, the counter-revolutionary forces to sustain their argument that the Arab revolutions, once (for the most part) they led to the downfall of a dictator, the street movement and the political masses could retire from the scene and leave the situation in the hands of professional politicians and technocrats.[6]

But in fact, the uprisings that took place in Southern Mediterranean societies at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 were not just insurrectional moments. They have been transformed into long-lasting social revolutions that still continue in different spaces and with new forms of contentious politics, some directly related with the politics of anarchism and some others in the form of anarchist practices. These practices, theories and repertoires redefine and reconfigure the relationship of the people with the political and give sense to the motto *al-thawra mustamirra* that has been and still is chanted in protest movements. This process, labelled by its participants as a revolution, builds a narrative framework that enables those who lived and experienced it to become agents and subjects of history. Revolutionaries (as they call themselves) become aware

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[3] S. Newman, 'Postanarchism and space: Revolutionary fantasies and autonomous zones'. *Planning Theory*, 10:4 (2011), 348.

[4] B.J. Brownlee, & M. Ghiabi, 'Passive, Silent and Revolutionary: The "Arab Spring" Revisited'. *Middle East Critique* (2016), 3.

[5] Brownlee, & Ghiabi, 'Passive, Silent and Revolutionary', 4.

[6] B. De Smet, *Gramsci on Tahrir. Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Egypt* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 179.

of the revolution as a profound historical experience, more than a means to an end, according to Mohammed Bamyeh.[7]

It is in this moment, that the term *sha'b* (people) emanated in the Arab revolutions as a potent political actor in itself and helped the social mobilisation of the uprisings. For that reason, the slogan 'al-sha'b yuriid isqat al-nithaam' ('the people want to overthrow the regime') was the motto *and* the epitome of the revolutions. This is how the people separated themselves from the government and the state and '*al-sha'b* became material for revolution'.[8] The Argentinian theorist Enrique Dussel in his *Twenty Theses on Politics* (2006) argues that 'the people' is transformed into a political actor in critical moments or in concrete political conjunctures:

> The *people* appears in critical political conjunctures when it achieves explicit consciousness as the *analogical hegemon* of all demands, from which it defines strategy and tactics, thereby becoming an *actor* and constructing history on the basis of a new foundation. As many social movements note: 'Power is constructed from below!'[9]

In fact, constructing the power of the people from below is how revolutions, with squares as their symbols, were at the same time sites of convergence, of encounter and 'anarchist experiences' in themselves.[10] As sites of convergence, protestors started in different parts of the country, in many cities, and after clashes, revolutionaries went to the squares to occupy them. This is how Tahrir Square as a symbol and epitome of the 25th January revolution emerged, as was the case of other squares in the MENA region. Indeed, occupying practices were not a new repertoire in the history of the contentious politics in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean. In 2011, public squares in the Arab world were, on the one hand, transformed by their citizens into becoming the centres of their political demands. On the other hand, the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, the Green Square in Tripoli, the Change Square in Sana'a and the Kasbah Square in Tunis had a direct influence on the dynamic and organisation of other squares in the West, in Spain, Greece, and the United States, subverting the squares' primary goal of sustaining their regimes' power. As Luisa Martín Rojo writes:

> Squares and urban places that were designed to project the regime's power and monumentality, and which also function as centres of economic activity, are now being occupied and used not only as new "agorae" for political debate, but also as alternative cities forming part of a large-scale protest.[11]

Even if the occupation of these squares appeared spontaneous, the convergence of their participants in these urban spaces has its roots in their strategic location and historical symbolism. In the case of Tahrir Square, one can find the monuments and buildings of Egypt's political, economic and colonial power, such as the Parliament, the Mogamma (the symbol of Egypt's corrupt

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[7] M. Bamyeh, 'Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson: The Arab Spring Between Three Enlightenments. In B. Maxwell & R. Craib, eds. *No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries. Global Anarchisms* (Oakland California: PM Press, 2015), 322.

[8] Ibid., 321.

[9] E. Dussel. *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 75.

[10] This has been directly recorded from the conducted interviews with Yasir Abdallah in Cairo in 2013 and 2014.

[11] L. Martín Rojo. *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements* L. Martín Rojo, ed. (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016), 2.

bureaucracy), the Mubarak's National Democratic Party headquarters, the Ministry of the Interior and the American University of Cairo. Beyond its strategic location, Tahrir Square has a long history of contentious politics. It was renamed *Midan al-Tahrir* (Liberation Square) after the military coup of 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power and symbolised the liberation of Egypt from the colonial power. From that moment, Tahrir Square has been a space of contestation for many social movements during the second half of the twentieth century, including the student movement of the 1970s, the hunger strikes of 1977 and the protests against the Iraq War in 2003. As Gunning and Zvi Baron point out, 'a history of Egypt could be written from the perspective of the Square'.[12]

In the Tunisian case, the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi sparked large protests against the Ben Ali regime. Protesters used the main avenue, Habib Bourguiba, to launch their demands and drawing on their repertoires of contentious anti-regime politics. Habib Bourguiba Street became progressively more important in the events of the Tunisian revolution. In fact, soon after, the 7th November Square, located at the end of this street, was renamed after the young street vendor, Mohammad Bouazizi Square. Another square, Kasbah Square, surrounded by Dar el Bey, the government palace, the centre of state and governmental power, was also the centre of the demonstrations when young activists rejected the recently formed interim government that included members of the former president's political circle and gathered in the square demanding 'the full dismantling of the old regime's security apparatus and a complete break from the old political system by electing a National Constituent Assemble to write a new constitution'.[13] To occupy the square, therefore, meant to reclaim the right to the city, in Henri Lefebvre's terms, and to re-appropriate, re-semantise and collectivise the symbols of power.[14]

In Syria the squares were not the centre of the demonstrations. However, the people went to the streets reclaiming their right to the city, in the same manner as their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts. In Syria calls for protests were made for the 4 and 5 February 2011 in what has been called the 'Days of Rage'; however, they were not followed up by street protests since the people wanted to see the reaction of the regime. The third 'Day of Rage' was called for the 15 March 2011, when thousands of Syrians gathered simultaneously across the country in the cities of Hama, Hasakah, Dair al-Zor and Deraa. After the (mass) detention of protesters, protests continued around the country in the following days and were followed by assaults and arrests.[15] It was clear for Syrians since the beginning of the uprisings that the meaning of the revolution and the strategies needed were going to differ from that of their Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts. Soon after the start of the protests, mainly after the arrest of fifteen schoolboys, all under the age of fifteen, who disappeared after being caught writing revolutionary slogans on walls in Deraa in March 2011, Syria has experienced a popular uprising that tried, at least at first, to institute the right to self-management and government through the establishment of Local Coordination Committees, alongside other forms of contentious politics, such as demonstrations, protests and civil resistance.

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[12] J. Gunning, & I. Zvi Baron. *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests, and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 246.

[13] A. Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia* (London, New York: African Arguments, 2013), 100.

[14] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Editions Anthropos, 1991).

[15] R. Yassin-Kassab & L. Al-Shami, *Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 37.

However, and most importantly, squares also symbolised the *tipping point* of decades of struggle by social movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. These three countries, together with Libya, Yemen and Bahrain (to name a few) have had a long history of contentious politics and social movements that fuelled the initial mass protest. In fact, the emergence of new social movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria were at the centre of the formation of mass protests in 2011 and beyond. These new social movements, which mainly started at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, have been defined as 'glocal' movements. They are global since they are the product of globalisation, and they are local since they target local issues. In the global sphere, the events in Seattle in 1999 and the Zapatista movement were essential in determining the emergence and development of new social movements around the world, even in the Arabic-speaking world. In Egypt, since 2000, different protest waves marked the appearance of new social movements that symbolised the fall of leftist party politics and a new wave of social politicisation. Although influenced by transnational events, the Second Palestinian Intifada and the Iraq War signalled the creation of decentralised and horizontal movements and groups that served as umbrella organisations to denounce the corruption of the government and demand the democratisation of the country such as the *Kefaya* and April 6 Youth Movement. In Tunisia, the events in the Gafsa Mining Basin of 2008 sparked social mobilisation, which shook this area near the Algerian border, and represented the most important protest movement in Tunisia since the bread riots of 1984. Soon after, these mobilisations spread through various sections of society, including unemployed graduates and the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) (the main trade union). Using a large number of repertoires of actions including hunger strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations and occupations, these initial mobilisations catalysed and anticipated the explosion that broke out in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, and later led to the overthrow of Ben Ali in January 2011.

In Syria, there were precedents foreshadowing the events of 2011. In 2000, a forum for the intellectual middle class was established in Damascus in which reformist ideas could be debated, and which was, at that time, more liberal than anything found in Egypt or Tunisia. It was not, according to Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami a 'radical movement, and its demands were modest, but still it represented a significant change in a polity where for decades all criticism had been brutally suppressed'.[16] In this 'Damascus spring', in 2001 a manifesto was signed but by 1000 people drawn from across Syrian civil society. This manifesto called for the review of the Baath's position as the leading political party and it demanded social justice, a more equal society and redistribution of wealth. However, soon after the appearance of the manifesto, some of the key figures of the movement were arrested. The regime hardened its position on freedom of expression and cracked down on civil society, even as protests and sit-ins continued. The opposition movement during Bashar al-Assad's first decade (2000–2010) 'though brave and in some ways groundbreaking, involved only a tiny section of the population. Plagued by infighting and boxed in by continual bouts of repression, the opposition failed to galvanize the street'.[17]

Neither al-Assad's authoritarian regime, nor his coetaneous dictatorial regimes in the South of the Mediterranean could stop the emergence of social revolutions. These revolutions were experienced by some participants as anarchist revolutions, as Yasir Abdallah and other self-identified anarchists in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria declared in the interviews I conducted in Cairo in 2013 and

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[16] Ibid., 17.
[17] Ibid., 29.

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2014 and in Tunis in 2015. The occupied public spaces were transformed into political arenas for debate and recognition. According to Luisa Martín Rojo, the participants generated different political practices that challenged the status quo through 'inclusiveness, horizontality, transparency and the absence of monopolies or appropriation of discursive practices by leaders or spokespersons'.[18] In fact, the occupation of the squares contributed to the meaning of the protest, and it transformed the experience of their inhabitants throughout the construction of counter-practices to the prevailing neoliberal construction of the city. Mohamad Bamyeh, who also participated in Tahrir Square, considers that the Arab revolutions displayed anarchist methods:

> In this sense that the current Arab revolutionary wave is closest to anarchist ideals, which highlight spontaneous order and posit the principle of un-imposed order as the highest form of a rational society and which like all revolutionary currents in nineteenth-century Europe, had clear roots in Enlightenment thought.[19]

According to Bamyeh, these revolutions had an anarchist method but a liberal intention. Bamyeh considers that other communal, self-governed and autonomous traditions outside Europe, such as those found in the Arab-speaking countries, should be placed within the anarchist tradition.[20] In fact, the anarchist tendencies, practices and theories witnessed in these Southern Mediterranean countries were adapted, reformulated and integrated in their local, linguistic and cultural contexts, thus decolonising the European roots of this political philosophy.

The indication of the intellectual impact of the Arab revolutions on anarchist models can be appreciated if we note the change in name of a study by Ahmed Zaki, an Egyptian translator deeply interested in anarchism although not a declared anarchist. Zaki changed the title of his book from *al-Anarkiyah: al-madrasa al-thawriyah allati lam ya'arifuha al-sharq* ('Anarchism: the revolutionary school that we did not live') published in 2007 to *al-Anarkiyya: al-madrasa al-thawriyah allati na'arifuha* ('Anarchism: the Revolutionary School that we know') republished in a second edition in 2011. This book was widely distributed in Tahrir Square and the streets of downtown Cairo. The author explains in the book why:

> What was happening in Egypt at that time was the modern edition of some of the ideas of the revolutionary school of the 21st century: masses without ideology, from a wide range of social groups, participating without hierarchical leaders from professional politics taking advantage of the waves of protests, an achieved freedom to launch the creativity of every individual [overcoming] the amazing power of conformity and consensus, the creativity for the management of the forms of social protest through democratic ways without excluding anyone, even in the shared management of the lives of thousands of protesters inside the Square for more than two weeks etc.[21]

Undoubtedly, the organisation of Tahrir and other squares was also an example of the practice of this 'revolutionary school'. At first, Tahrir was organised as if it was an imagined new society, in a collective and self-managed way. It practised direct democracy through assemblies, and it

[18] L. Martín Rojo, *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements*, 3.

[19] M. Bamyeh, 'Anarchist Method, Liberal Intention, Authoritarian Lesson', 331.

[20] Ibid., 322.

[21] A. Zakī, *al-Anārkiyya: al-madrasa al-thawriyya allati naʿrifuha* (al-Qahira: Dar al-Khamasin, 2012), 7.

never had the intention to occupy state institutions, but to organise people's power outside of the state. The projection of this imagined community was constituted through concrete infrastructures: a security apparatus, delimited borders, flags, a health-care system, a communication system, libraries, schools and its own participatory self-government and direct decision making. Through these strategies Tahrir became an autonomous space, the first of many autonomous spaces that were organised in Egypt as well as in Tunisia and Syria in the period 2011–2017. The Arab revolutions violently disrupted the existing personal and geographical spaces and perhaps started to build a new spatial order in a post-anarchist sense, as Saul Newman points out.[22] For Newman, spaces are always political and therefore their contestation and reconfiguration are essential forms of radical politics relevant for anarchism:

> Rather than seeking to take over state power, or to participate in state institutions at the level of parliamentary politics, many contemporary actors and movements endeavour to create autonomous spaces, social practices and relations, whether through the permanent or temporary occupation of physical spaces—squats, community centres and cooperatives, workplace occupations, mass demonstrations and convergences—or through the experimentation with practices such as decentralized decision-making, direct action or even alternative forms of economic exchange, which are not striated, conditioned or 'captured' by statist and capitalist modes of organization.[23]

In this vein, a multiplicity of autonomous and insurrectional spaces and practices appeared and continued to exist and expand in the South of the Mediterranean, following these revolutions' core idea: *al-thawra mustamirra* (the revolution continues). What started as new social movements or in the form of civil society organisations outside of the traditional paradigm of party politics in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria still continues in the form of autonomous spaces and practice, and these autonomous spaces change the practice of resistance and the revolutionary method. Their performances and their repertoires are an important part of the configuration and decolonisation of the politics of anarchism. Among those new political actors that create radical social practices and relations while reclaiming their right to the city by creating autonomous spaces, we find many groups and collectives that either existed before the revolutions but radicalised their discourse after it or were created due to the creation of, and their encounter with, affinity groups. These affinity groups emerged during the sit-ins, street protests and the occupation of the squares.

Building a Long-Lasting Social Revolution: Autonomous Experiences in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria

The square was also a place of encounter. 'Glocalised' social movements and civil society found each other during the sit-ins, camps and in the street protests and clashes with security forces in the streets of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Many subjectivities from heterogeneous ideological, economic and social backgrounds met and agreed on the 'imagined community' they were

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[22] S. Newman, 'Postanarchism and space: Revolutionary fantasies and autonomous zones'. *Planning Theory*, 10:4 (2011), 348.
[23] Ibid., 345.

trying to create. This encounter was an essential part of the organisation and the continuation of the Arab revolutions in other spaces with new ways of understanding the political and with new repertoires of contentious politics. After the breakdown of the sit-ins and street politics through harsh repression and counter-revolutions, the creation of activists' networks helped to configure affinity groups that later constituted autonomous spaces and practices that radically transformed and are still transforming public space.

The gathering of activists who self-identified as anarchists, or knew of the existence of an ideology called anarchism, in Tahrir and in Kasbah Square culminated with the foundation of the two more important self-declared anarchists groups in the South of the Mediterranean: the Libertarian Socialist Movement (LSM)[24] in Egypt, and 'Asian (Disobedience)[25] in Tunisia. Both were self-defined as anarcho-communist organisations. The emergence of these two anarchist movements,[26] both born in 2011, can be explained with reference to two forces. Firstly, due to a personal factor, mostly related to individual motivations and experiences, particularly the experience of the Square discovered and lived as an anarchist experience. Secondly, due to external factors related to the collectivity and the 'political opportunity' to create horizontal, decentralised and anti-hierarchical movements.

The main goal of the two organisations was to accelerate and radicalise the revolutionary process. The LSM is thus defined on their official webpage:

> The Libertarian Socialist Movement is an organisation of anarcho-communists who believe in class struggle as the only way to overthrow Capitalism and the power of the oppressive State. It adopts the aspirations and demands of the working classes, the industrial workers, the small farmers, the peasants, the proletarians, and all of those who only have the power of their work to sell without the control over the production process.[27]

'Asian', in its declaration of principles presents itself as 'libertarian and anti-authoritarian. It fights against Capitalism and the authoritarian apparatus. Its goal is the self-organisation of the people, general and direct self-management of life and wealth and [...] struggles against the State and its central power that has to be replaced by direct self-management of the resources for life'.[28]

For the LSM and 'Asian', the state promotes and helps the functioning of capital, with capital's domination incarnated and represented by the financial elites and the local Arab regimes. However, 'Asian' goes further in underlining other forms of oppression and recognises that ethnic, racial and gender inequalities are also a form of discrimination. With a Marxist understanding

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[24] For a deeper insight into the LSM and the re-emergence of anarchism in Egypt see: L. Galian, 'New Modes of Collective Actions: The Re-emergence of Anarchism in Egypt', in F. Gerges, ed. *Contentious Politics in the Middle East. Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 351–372.

[25] 'Asian changed its name after internal divisions to La Commun Libertaire—al-Mushtarak al-Taharruri.

[26] It is important to say that there has not been any known self-declared anarchist groups or movements in the Arab world since the end of the IWW. For more information see: I. Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010).

[27] 'al-Haraka al-ishtirakiyya al-taharruriyya' (2012). Available at: http://lsmegypt.blogspot.com.es/ [Accessed June 12, 2015].

[28] 'Asian,'I'lan al-mabadi' (Disobedience Movement—Principles Declaration) (2012) *Al-Mushtarak al-Thawri*. N. 1.

of social inequalities, both groups are very close to their local labour movements and have acted with them in organising strikes, occupations and sit-ins in the work place. Furthermore, both organisations emphasise the role of culture as a means for spreading and radicalising the revolution. The LSM used to organise a weekly seminar to read and translate anarchist books. Such translations of anarchist books into Arabic have been an important repertoire of resistance for anarchists in the Arabic-speaking world for disseminating their political philosophy.[29] In the case of 'Asian', important figures from the rap music scene in Tunisia, such as e Armada Bizerta or Omar Herzi, were members of the organisation. In fact, in terms of the social make-up of their members, both groups can be inserted in what Uri Gordon has called a *local milieu* where 'The closest affinities exist on the level of small groups and local milieus—the 'bands' and 'extended families' where there is the closest level of friendship and trust'.[30]

In Tunisia, there are other horizontal, decentralised and self-managed collectives with a libertarian and anti-capitalist character. Among them is the music collective Blech 7es (in Tunisian dialect 'Without noise'): 'This is the counter-concept we have used since this project has the intention to motivate young people to express and share their ideas with the public'.[31] As a musical project and collective, Blech 7es organises a weekly general assembly with all the members of the group to discuss and debate every aspect of the organisation. The general assembly is, as it is said on their web page: 'the engine of the collective' and self-organisation is 'the safest method to allow the human being to exercise their potential and dignity'.[32]

In Egypt, other horizontal, decentralised and self-managed collectives and groups appeared with the construction of concrete walls along downtown Cairo that had the intention of separating the 'war zone' from the 'normal life of the citizens' while mass protest was taking place. Activists painted them to reclaim their right to occupy the city. For Naguib, an Egyptian anarchist artist, the first days of the revolution motivated him to join The Revolutionary Union of Artists, a group of artists (painters, film makers, designers, musicians, photographers, singers etc.), whose main goal was to create a solidarity network and to work towards an artistic aspect of the revolution. They felt that to defend that art was another important weapon for the revolution. For Naguib, painting around the city was a way to narrate the 'real revolutionary stories' and to counteract the image that the state and private media were broadcasting of it. On the other hand, doing graffiti was a collective method of direct action and was closely associated with anarchism: 'It was not the art itself, but the way the art was done and the goals that it has'.[33] By reclaiming their right to the city through graffiti and painting, graffiti artists negotiated with the state, through a dialogic process of making murals, erasing them and painting them again, that created an archive of the revolution.

Moreover, since 2011, many initiatives were born to gender the Square and the revolution. This is how *Ikhtyar* ('Choice'), a feminist collective, was founded. A self-managed and self-funded group, *Ikhtyar* is defined as:

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[29] The first book on anarchism translated into Arabic was Daniel Guerin's *Anarchism From Theory to Practice* (1970) by the Professor of Law from Lebanon George Saad. Four thousand copies were distributed, most of them in the Arab region.

[30] U. Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 17.

[31] Blech 7es (2012). Available at: http://blech7es.org/ [Accessed April 12, 2015].

[32] Ibid.

[33] Interview with Naguib in 2016.

> [...] an open space where researchers and activists meet to exchange ideas and discuss gender as a cross-cutting topic to develop an indigenous knowledge around gender and sexuality trends and dynamics in Arabic. We seek to be the knowledge producer not just the subject of the study.[34]

Situated in the popular Abbasiyya neighbourhood, the collective organises seminars on gender, disseminates information about sexuality and has a communal and open access library in its headquarters. Their main goal is to create an open space for researchers and activists. The collective has the intention of decolonising its epistemological foundations by changing the locus of enunciation from white-Western theorists to those from the South. They want to be the knowledge producer and not just the orientalist subject of study. In fact, their intellectual and feminist references are heterogeneous, and for that reason in the group one can find second and third wave feminists together with black and Islamic feminists.

In Egypt we also find theatre, open mic, community media and citizen journalism projects that can be inserted within the category of autonomous spaces such as *Moseeren*, *al-Fann Midan*, among others, that work in a decentralised and self-managed way and that are trying to keep alive the ideas of the revolution.

On the other hand, the Syrian case largely differs from the Egyptian and the Tunisian one. However, even with the difficulties faced by political dissidents, fiercely surveilled by the regime's secret police, anarchist thinking and practice were not stopped during the revolution. Mazen Kam al-Maz, a Syrian anarchist, narrates his journey through anarchism and the Syrian revolution as follows:

> I started translating the works of Bakunin (who directly impacted me with his crazy devotion to freedom and revolution) and other known 'anarchists'. The theory of State Capitalism was very important to me and for some of my friends who were heading in the same direction. We used it to describe the Al-Assad regime and to promote a direct oppositional politics in the 2000s. However, it was the 'Arab Spring' that gave anarchism a true push. I left my job as a family doctor in the Gulf and I went to Egypt and after that to 'liberated Syria' in 2012. I saw how the movement was growing up in Egypt and in some parts of Syria as well.[35]

As Mazen Kam al-Maz states, the Arab Spring gave anarchism 'a true push'. In fact, the Egyptian and the Tunisian uprisings, that started as few weeks before the Syrian, gave Syrian society the political opportunity to take to the streets, even if it was under tight control and monitoring by the secret police and the state apparatus. The solidarity protests that followed them were the catalyst for a series of protests and a change in the demands and petitions of the protesters who gradually addressed national issues. During the heyday of the Syrian revolution, different types of self-managed projects emerged. One of the most important grassroots movements was the *tansiqiyyat* or Coordination Committees that sprang up in neighbourhoods, villages and towns across the country. They were the first forms of revolutionary organisation and the nucleus of the civil resistance. The *tansiqiyyat* were organised as networks where a few revolutionaries (5

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[34] Ikhtyar, 'Ikhtyar'. *Facebook* (2013). Available at: https://www.facebook.com/ikhtyarforgerstudies/ [Accessed May 20, 2015].

[35] Interview with Mazin Kam al-Maz, 2013.

to 7) were working in secrecy throughout the city organising resistance in their local communities with street actions, preparing slogans, banners, demonstrations and barricades to protect protestors and document the events.[36] With time, their actions and strategies changed according to the circumstances from direct repertoires of contentious politics to more mutual aid support organisation (field hospitals, collecting and distributing food and medical supplies etc.).

The work of the *tansiqiyyat* has been greatly influenced by the theory and work of the Syrian anarchist, intellectual and economist Omar 'Aziz (1946–2013) whose theoretical work on Local Councils in Syria has received a great deal of attention from the media and eventually also in academic circles.[37] Omar 'Aziz spent a great part of his life in exile in Saudi Arabia and the United States, and in the first days of the Syrian revolution, at the age of 62, he decided to return to Syria to enrol in the Free Syrian Army. He was not, according to the Palestinian activist Budur Hassan, a typical contemporary anarchist. In her tribute to 'Aziz, she declares that Omar 'Aziz did not wear a Vendetta mask, nor did he form black blocs. He was not obsessed with giving interviews to the press, nor did he make the headlines of mainstream media upon his arrest'.[38]

In his initial conversations with young revolutionaries, Omar 'Aziz concluded that the protests that were taking place were not going to finish with the end of the regime. For 'Aziz it was necessary to carry on grassroots, long-lasting work, involving civil society as whole that would undermine the hierarchical and authoritarian structures imposed by the state. In order for the revolution to succeed it was necessary, according to Omar, to permeate all aspects of people's lives through a radical change in social organisations as the basis of their relationships. That was going to be the only way to confront the very foundation of the system of domination and repression of the Syrian regime. In order to accomplish that task, Omar 'Aziz designed a document which enunciated the theoretical principles of a new society based upon the organisation of the local councils. These local councils would be the basis for the cooperation among the members of the community and the collectivisation of the resources available to them. Inspired, as many anarchists of his generation, by Rosa Luxemburg, and above all, by the examples and experiences of self-management of the *tansiqiyyat* in Syria, the local councils were for 'Aziz the space where people from different ethnicities and economic backgrounds could work together with the same goal: manage their lives in an autonomous way outside the institutions of the state and give a safe space that would allow mutual collaboration among the individuals in order to activate and advance the social revolution at a local, regional and national level.[39]

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[36] Yassin-Kassab, & Al-Shami, '*Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War*', 57.

[37] In English: Budur Hassan, a Palestinian activist and Leila al-Shami, a Syrian activist, have extensively documented the life and work of Omar 'Aziz in the Syrian Revolution. See: B. Hassan, 2015. 'Radical Lives: Omar 'Aziz' (2015) *Novara Media*. Available at: http://novaramedia.com/2015/02/23/radical-lives-omar-aziz/ [Accessed March 10, 2015], L. Al-Shami, 'The Life and Work of Anarchist Omar 'Aziz, and his impact on self-organisation in the Syrian Revolution' (2014) *Tahrir-ICN*. Available at: https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/syria-the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz-and-his-impact-on-self-organization-in-the-syrian-revolution/ [Accessed April 5, 2015]. In Arabic see: M.K. Al-Maz, 'Omar 'Aziz wa nihayat al-muzaqaf' (2014) *al-Hiwar al-Mutamadden*. Available at: http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=417680 [Accessed March 4, 2015].

[38] B. Hassan, 'Omar 'Aziz: Rest in Power' (2013). *Wordpress*. Available at: https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz/ [Accessed March 10, 2015].

[39] L. Al-Shami, 'The Life and Work of Anarchist Omar 'Aziz, and his impact on self-organisation in the Syrian Revolution'. *Tahrir-ICN*, 2014. Available at: https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/syria-the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz-and-his-impact-on-self-organization-in-the-syrian-revolution/ [Accessed April 5, 2015].

This theoretical approach to self-management comes from a very particular notion of history. For ʿAziz history was divided into two periods: *thaman al-sulta* (the period of authority) and *thaman al-thawra* (the period of the revolution).[40] From his perspective, revolution would constitute a rupture with the space and time that makes humans live in these two consecutive and contradictory periods. Exemplifying his case with the first eight months of the Syrian revolution, when it was still peaceful, for ʿAziz the *period of the authority* is the time where the regime still rules the people's lives and the *period of the revolution* is the time in which activists work every day to overthrow the regime. However, according to ʿAziz:

> The risk lies not in the overlap of the two periods, for that is the nature of revolutions, but rather in the absence of correlation between the spheres of daily life and the revolution itself. So, what is feared of the movement during the coming period is one of two things: humans becoming bored due to the continuity of the revolution and its disruption of their daily lives, or humans resorting to the use of heavy weaponry, causing the revolution to become the rifle's hostage.[41]

For ʿAziz, in order to achieve the continuity of the *period of the revolution* it was necessary to work in a collective and self-managed way, guaranteeing, for example, decentralised medical and legal aid. The 'imagined community' for ʿAziz was that of a society with flexible structures based on a merging of the revolution and the daily lives of the members of society through the Local Councils. The ultimate goal of the councils was that of working to:

1. Find safe housing for families coming new into the regime and provide them with needed supplies. The council located in that region must collaborate with its counterpart, the local council from the region that the families initially fled from.

2. Organise statements for the detainees and transfer the information to concerned authorities in the revolution. The council must arrange to contract legal authorities and must provide support to the families by issuing follow-ups on the conditions of loved ones in detention.

3. Manage the requests of effected families and work to ensure the expenses through financial aid for the public and 'regional revolution funds'.[42]

Omar ʿAziz was aware that his vision of the self-managed society of the revolution was going to be a slow, progressive process, which needed to begin by building up people's trust. For that reason it was necessary to create new social relationships among human beings.[43] Local councils would constitute spaces for discussion so that citizens could exchange and seek solutions to their

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[40] O. ʿAziz, 'A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria' by the Martyr and Anarchist Comrade, Omar ʿAziz' (2013). *Tahrir-ICN*. Available at: https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/09/22/syria-translated-a-discussion-paper-on-local-councils-in-syria-by-the-martyr-and-anarchist-comrade-omar-aziz/ [Accessed August 24, 2016].

[41] ʿAziz, 'A Discussion Paper on Local Councils in Syria'.

[42] Ibid.

[43] It is necessary to notice that here ʿAziz does not use the word *shaʿb* (people), but *bashar* (human being). Mohammad Sami al-Kayal a friend and comrade of ʿAziz points out that 'He did not believe in "The people", that jargon coined by authority to maintain its power. He saw human beings who live, thrive and spout their potential'. Hassan, 'Omar ʿAziz: Rest in power'.

daily problems. In addition, they would serve to build horizontal networks between the local councils of a geographical area that in turn could be expanded to include relations between different councils of different regions.

However, local councils could not work just by themselves, and a non-hierarchical national structure, a National Council, would be necessary to coordinate the work of the local councils. The National Council would be in charge of the revolutionary funding of the councils, facilitate the coordination between the different local and regional councils in a flexible way and thus would guarantee structural flexibility and the quest for a common ground of action.

The work of Omar 'Aziz had a great impact on the development of the *tansiqiyyat* in Syria and the self-managed projects that arose during the revolution. In November 2012 he was arrested and a few weeks after his detention, killed. However, his legacy is still experienced in the country, even if, as time went on, some of the revolutionary councils were replaced by Sharia-based and Islamist structures.

Even if it is not the purpose of this chapter to touch upon the Kurdish case due to its specificities and complexities, it is important to mention the debate around Rojava's libertarian experience after the withdrawal of Assad's forces in 2012. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) with initial Marxist-Leninist tendencies led by Abdullah Ocalan became influenced by the 'libertarian municipalism' or 'democratic confederalism' of Murray Bookchin. In his *Social Contract*,[44] Abdullah Ocalan envisioned an 'imagined community' based on communalism and transnational direct democracy. This social contract is supposed to be the antidote for sectarianism, militarism, authoritarianism, gender inequalities and discrimination and promotes coexistence, self-governance and a democratic autonomy within the state through local councils, workers cooperatives and so on. However, many dissident voices have raised criticisms. The Kurdish revolution seems to have been in some parts more top-down and party-led than a bottom-up social revolution. Although grassroots' participation at the local level exists on day-to-day life issues, the militarily backed party hierarchy displays authoritarian characteristics and censors members or sympathisers of other parties as well as independent journalists. Furthermore, military and security decisions are taken by Democratic Union Party (PYD) staff.[45]

Other self-managed projects and committees appeared during the first years of the revolution to advance a social revolution such as the Syrian Revolution Coordination Union (SRCU) that organised peaceful resistance and boycotted regime-backed businesses, or the Syrian Revolutionary Youth (SRY), a self-funded group of students that organised a more radical vision and actions in the streets and whose petitions included free education and health care and gender equality. Also, citizen journalism and community media was found in Syria, such as Radio Nassem. However, the militarisation of the conflict gave way to more hierarchical structures and inner contradictions within the self-management projects and the local councils appeared, such as cases of corruption, misdistribution of resources and the lack of female representation.[46]

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[44] 'Charter of the Social Contract. Self-rule in Rojava'. *Peace in Kurdistan. Campaign for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question* (2014). Available at: https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/ [Accessed September 25th, 2017].

[45] M. Leezenberg. 'The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava'. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16(4) (2016), 682.

[46] See H. Yahya, 'Idlib Local Councils Face Crisis of Trust Under Difficult Circumstances'. *SyriaUntold* (2017). Available at: http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2017/09/idlib-local-councils-face-crisis-of-trust-under-difficult-circumstances/ [Accessed September 3, 2017].

Conclusion: Decolonising and Expanding Anarchist Theory and Practice

Yasir's narration of the revolution in Egypt underlies the close relationship between the anarchist theory and the Arab revolutionary practices. The squares as the symbols of the new social and occupy movements designed different 'imagined communities' with decentralisation, direct decision making and anti-hierarchical organisation at their core. These movements, their strategies and their narrations have given their participants the legitimation to carry on with their revolutionary and libertarian repertoires of contentious politics that transcend the hegemonic narrative of the Arab Spring. Participants still continue their work through what Saul Newman has defined as 'autonomous spaces', through the radical occupation and re-appropriation of urban public space in order to reclaim their right to the city and to work outside the state's parameters. However, these movements were not always devoid of conflict, power struggles, divisions, setbacks and faults, with most of these related to intergenerational and gender problems on the one hand and the lack of technical support on the other. These problems sometimes led to the fractionalisation of groups and hampered the continuity of their projects. Moreover, these movements faced and are still facing continuous repression and close surveillance from state authorities. Participants adapt and readapt to these conditions in order to maintain their autonomy and guarantee their own personal safety. The emergence of these movements re-writes the history of libertarian ideologies and practices in the South of the Mediterranean. Adapted to local contexts, such as that of the Arab-speaking world, the new repertoires of contentious emancipatory narrations and struggles decolonise European libertarian and anarchist ideologies and expand this primarily white political philosophy to non-Western contexts.

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