The revolution, back in black

The black bloc must provide Egyptians with a positive vision if they want their struggle to succeed.

Mark LeVine

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Chiapas region. It has not fundamentally changed the broader political economy of Mexico, never mind defeated or even seriously challenged "global neoliberalism", against which the movement launched its war on January 1 over 19 years ago (although Subcommandante Marcos' words to disappointed tourists hoping to visit the local Mayan ruins the day the revolution was launched – "I'm sorry. This is a revolution" – was surely repeated to scores of disappointed tourists unable to visit the Antiquities Museum at Tahrir Square during the revolution).

While holding off the brutal march of neoliberalism into the Lacondan mountains of Chiapas is certainly a victory, the Egyptian revolution cannot succeed if it's limited to one geographic region or social group; its initial success and ultimate victory depend precisely on its spread throughout society and across the country. There is no partial victory, and small "liberated" spaces, such as Tahrir, cannot survive surrounded by an ocean of Brotherhood-cum-military neoliberal authoritarianism.

It's clear that black bloc tactics and the militant revolutionaries deploying them will not on their own carry Egypt further than the Zapatistas have pushed Chiapas (which, interestingly, has a Human Development Index ranking of .646, almost identical to Egypt's .644), never mind Mexico as a whole. But if they succeed in throwing the country's power-holders off-balance and reinvigorating the youth led-opposition, and can provide a creative and ultimately positive vision and strategies for continuing the revolution into its third year and convincing increasing numbers of ordinary Egyptians to keep up he struggle for real freedom, dignity and social justice, they will have played an important role in Egypt's tortured transition from an authoritarian to truly democratic system.

The last time kids in black caused this much trouble in Egypt, it was Satan's fault. Well, at least that's what the Muslim Brotherhood and the Mubarak government claimed during the infamous "Satanic metal affair" of 1997, when over 100 metalheads – musicians and fans – were arrested and threatened with prosecution and even death simply because they dressed in black and liked extreme music.

The persecution of Egypt's metalheads, or "metaliens" as many called themselves, drove the burgeoning scene underground for much of the next decade. It did not begin to resurface until the mid-2000s, at the same time as political movements like Kefaaya emerged, and the strikes in the industrial centre of Mahallah occurred. This period saw a renewed, if still sporadic, militancy that would coalesce into the revolutionary surge of late 2010 and early 2011.

It didn't surprise me, then, to see that some of the key organisers of the 18 days of protest were old friends from the country's metal scene. The seemingly sudden reemergence of black among Egypt's remaining revolutionaries, specifically the visual markers of the black bloc – which despite being described as a group by the media [AR], commentators and government, is more accurately understood as a tactic and strategy – thus brings back vivid memories, of both the sounds of Egyptian metal and the anarchistic heart beat of the original Tahrir protests. Metal and anarchy – as Egypt's political and religious authorities have argued with great ferver – have always gone together quite naturally.

Indeed, there was a clear if little remarked upon anarchist presence in Tahrir during the original 18 Day uprising; anarchist books can in fact be found in stalls along Talat Harb Street on the way to the Square where the group held a public march and prayer. And Tahrir itself remains in many ways the epitome of the ideas of horizontalism (*horizontalidad*) and self-organisation (autogestion) that are at the core of modern anarchist theory and practice.

Anarchism's Egyptian roots

In fact, anarchism actually has a long history in Egypt and the Levant more broadly. As the research of Edinburgh University Professor Anthony Gorman has demonstrated, it stretches back to the 1860s when Italian political refugees first made their way to the more hospitable surrounding of Alexandria and other Egyptian cities, where they inspired the foundation of the "Free Popular University" in 1901.

Egypt in this period was in the midst of an unprecedented and increasingly desperate state-driven modernisation campaign that increased its integration into the global economy during the first and in some ways still most intense phase of globalisation. The constant movement of northern Mediterranean communities to and through its eastern and southern shores going back centuries – as merchants, slaves, pirates, workers and activists – is a seminal lesson in how integrated the Mediterranean has traditionally been, and hopefully will again be.

Italians and Greeks, who by the *fin de siècle* had established vibrant communities tens of thousands strong in the major cities of the Mediterranean's southern and eastern rims, were increasingly enmeshed in the politics of the indigenous labour movements, and brought a strong dose of anarchism, including anarco-syndicalism, which specifically focused on labour struggles through self-organisation. Anarchist-agitated strikes were being staged and arrests being made for illegal organising by the 1890s, if not before.

Anarchism, along with any other political ideology that would compete with Nasserism, was sidelined during the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 60s. But at least some contemporary Egyptian anarchists trace their roots to local anarchist activity in the 1940s [AR].

And that's where anarchist and black bloc tactics come in, as they constitute one of the most imaginative and creative responses to the hardening process (it's also why those commentators who have dismissed them as "pretty silly" have little understanding of the history of such tactics or their proven utility in revolutionary Egypt). The question is how the majority of Egyptians who are not directly involved in this struggle (but directly affected by it) will understand this dynamic. How will they respond to the kind of tactical violence epitomised by black bloc tactics and anarchist principles if it continues and the government responds with more violence?

Will they see the creative and project aspect of the protests, and accept them as the only means not merely to finish the job of taking down the system but of building a truly new political and social economy for Egypt? Or will they focus mostly on the destructive and resistance element of it – as a one way path towards social, political and economic disintegration and chaos against which a religio-authoritarian system, however unpalatable in principle, seems the better choice?

However we might want to judge their tactics more broadly, their commitment and loyalty to other protesters are hard to question. When women were being brutally attacked in Tahrir Square last week, beyond the ability of groups like Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment to protect them, black block activists have literally appeared out of nowhere to take on the often armed groups of attackers and protect the women and other activists.

Limited success, broader future?

It's worth noting that the success of Zapatismo has in fact been fairly limited on the ground. The Zapatistas have managed to carve out a relatively – and constantly threatened – autonomous zone for indigenous Mexicans living in the

itants. Young and old, rich and poor, Muslim and Copt, metalhead and Sufi, everyone radiated "*silmiyya*" – peacefulness – even as they screamed at the top of their lungs for days on end.

It was clearly a liminal, paradoxical experience, and one which, as Georgetown professor and *Jadaliyya* co-editor Adel Iskandar reminded me in a recent conversation on the present situation, was itself a two-part phenomenon: "the one from January 25 to February 4 which was violent, confrontational and black bloc-esque... and the Tahrir of the Utopian imaginary that dominated between February 4 to 11... The two continue to exist and manifest with oscillating frequency."

The key question is, of course, how to control the oscillation, particularly when you can't really tell either when the tipping point has arrived and which way it is tipping. For two years now the Egyptian "state" has been in this liminal state; the structure at its core – that is, the deep state of power holders through whom the vast majority of the networks of power and wealth flow in Egypt – has remained seemingly stable, and is enlarging a bit as the Brotherhood and its own networks of power and patronage are, with some difficulty, absorbed into this elite. But the state remains gelatinous and porous outside of the core nucleus, and if the opposition can siphon enough power and legitimacy away, the system could, as General al-Sissi warns, move towards collapse.

Millions, if not tens of millions of Egyptians understand that if the state structure rehardens or concretises in the shape it's apparently taken, they will be either frozen into pretty much the same place they were under Mubarak, or pushed even closer to the margins or completely outside the state. Indeed, the "state of emergency" once again declared, now by a democratically elected President, and the organised attacks on women by forces clearly aligned with the existing power regime, reflects this desperate need to clear as many people away from the power networks as possible before the new system hardens.

The rise of the anti-corporate globalisation movement

Anarchism's appearance in Egypt in the 19th century provides the historical context for understanding its reappearance today, during the next great struggle age of global integration within a Western-led (but no longer dominated) global neoliberal system. Since Sadat's initiation of the *infitah*, or opening in the 1970s, Egypt has been as deeply – and unfavourably – incorporated into this system through its dependent relationship with the US, and with the IMF and World Bank as it was into the 19th century European dominated global economy.

Mubarak, father and even more so son, tried to use neoliberal policies to strengthen the power elite's economic position within Egypt and globally. Policies of privatisation and liberalisation offered unprecedented potential for the elite to strengthen its control over the economy. The problem was, and remains, that the greater concentration of wealth can only come at the cost of a far more precarious economic position for the vast majority of the population. This demanded not just increased repression but also the cooptation of new actors into the power elite, whether the emerging bourgeoisie of the 1990s (epitomised by Gamal Mubarak) or the Brotherhood elite in the last decade.

From Morocco to Syria the struggles for "freedom", "social justice", "democracy", "bread" and particularly "dignity" – which has been a key word for struggles against neoliberalism at least since the Zapatista movement made it a centrepiece of its discourse in the early 1990s – are quintessentially anti-neoliberal struggles. In this regard, they are the natural continuation of the struggles of the anti-corporate globalisation movements in Latin and North America and then Europe of the 1990s and early 2000s (as epitomised by Buenos Aires, London, Seattle, Prague and Genoa), which then morphed into

the anti-war movement that emerged around the US invasion of Iraq.

Theatres of violence

Many of the anarchist organising principles which Egyptian black bloc activists have adopted as their own – such as self-democracy and decentralised organisation, as well as militant and often violent confrontations with security forces and symbols of systemic power – were deployed by the first generation of black bloc activists in the anti-corporate globalisation movement. These activists emerged not just out of anarchist circles but also groups like Ya Basta!, Tutte Bianche and Attac (which actually had branches in some Arab countries).

They in turn were powerfully impacted by Latin American grass roots struggles epitomised by the Zapatistas in Mexico, whose movement, I argued already in 2005 in my book *Why They Don't Hate Us*, constituted the best model for then inchoate politicised youth movements to emulate. Indeed, the US government-sponsored think tank RAND warned [PDF] that the Zapatista uprising "demonstrated how new technology made it possible for 'swarms' of 'flies' to overrun governments", precisely the kind of tactics that defined the Tahrir phase of the Egyptian revolution.

It could be argued that the anti-WTO "Battle of Seattle" of late 1999, which first put the movement on the media and activist map, would have never received the attention it did had it not been for the violence against property deployed by protesters, which was and remains a rare phenomenon in the US outside of "riots" in poor minority communities.

However, it was also clear by the anti-IMF Prague protest of September 2000 that the use of violence, however theatrical and limited to property and aggressive security forces, was becoming counter productive. The police used the threat of such

destroys the old order while creating something new to take its place. The reason most revolutions either fizzle out or are hijacked or taken over by forces other than and often opposed to those who first led them lies precisely in the failure to move successfully from the destructive to the creative phase and discourse. This is as true of the axial religious revolutions, including the Abrahamic faiths, as well as for modern political revolutions in Mexico, Russia, China, or Iran.

It's anarchic impulse stems directly from the fact it is directly taking on the existing system. But if one state – that is, arrangement and network of power relations – is to be replaced by another one, a new system has to replace the one that disintegrates. Similarly, every true revolution is a powerful combination of what the sociologist Manuel Castells calls "resistance" and "project" identities; the former being narrow, closed and hostile to outsiders, the latter open, inviting and future-oriented.

You can't bring about the "downfall of the system" and the creation of one in its place without both. As important, you can't in the long term keep tens of millions of people supporting destruction if the positive vision of the future is not there for them to see. The problem is that while the two halves of the creative destruction equation naturally overlap for much of a revolutionary period, at some point the destruction has to subside and the creation has to become the dominant process, otherwise the revolution becomes either self-destructive and nihilistic, coopted, or redirected (often by the military, as epitomised by the phenomena of Bonapartism or Caesarism). In such a situation, one time supporters will turn against it in favour of the stability of a restored if changed *ancien regime* (if in new clothes).

What made Tahrir truly revolutionary during the 18 days, but sadly too few days since, was that in the Square you could see, *feel*, the possibility of a new Egypt, a different Egypt, an Egypt that could fulfill the dreams of the majority of its inhab-

of Tahrir's historic 18 days of anarchist-style self-organisation. On the other hand, some of the self-identified Egyptian black bloc activists list their "university" on their facebook page as "UNAM", the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which has a long history of affiliation with the Zapatistas, while a return to some of the analysis of black bloc tactics written during the pre-2001 period reveal similar debates and challenges facing the movement in the West then and in Egypt today.

Revolution as creative destruction

In the wake of the Brotherhood/FJP's electoral victories, the anemic performance of the official "opposition" represented by the "National Salvation Front" and a population desperate for some sort of economic recovery, revolutionary forces were on the defensive in the last few months. But the mass protests and then violence surrounding the Port Said verdict and the second anniversary of the start of the uprising on January 25 has generated a recalibration of the political scales. The black bloc has become a public (and even more so media and government) symbol of the militant opposition that is quite literally on the march against the still unstable emerging order.

It's hard to overstate the dangers a well- yet self-organised and decentralised protest movement could present to Egypt's power elite. The country's military chief, Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, is not exaggerating when he says ongoing protests threaten a "collapse of the state"; nor are prosecutors wrong in considering those deploying black bloc tactics as "terrorists". For what is the goal of revolution if not the collapse of the existing state, and how can protests aimed at that end not terrorise those presently in power?

All true revolutions involve a supreme act of creative destruction – an anarchic and ordering impulse that both

violence to deploy ever larger and overzealous forces who arrested (often violently) peaceful activists and helped disrupt, as well as infiltrating them with greater frequency. The nadir was reached with the killing of Italian activist Carlo Giuliano at the Group of 8 summit in Genoa in July, 2001, just two months before September 11 completely delegitimised any kind of violence by protesters in the US and Europe for the next half decade.

Simply put, routinised violence against property cost the anti-corporate globalisation movement significant support in the US and Europe precisely because the the vast majority of people in these countries were not suffering enough under the existing system to support the level of chaos and disruption such violence was intended to generate. Anarchists and hardcore anti-corporate globalisation activists might have wanted the "fall of the system", as Egyptians have chanted since the eruption of the revolution (and in fact, before), but most everyone else was only looking for a far less painful process of reform.

Militant oppositional politics became even more difficult during the Bush War on Terror years, both because there was less public tolerance for them and because governments used anti-terror laws to increase surveillance, infiltration and prosecution of militant activists. It has reappeared with the rise of the Occupy movements globally, especially in Greece, Spain and to some degree the United States. But even in the midst of the worst economic period since the Great Depression, black bloc tactics alienated at least as many potential supporters of the movement as they attracted, leading normally sober observers like Chris Hedges to label the tactic (in fact, like so many others, he erroneously labeled it a movement) the "cancer of the Occupy movement".

Globalisation on steroids in the Arab world

The Arab and broader Muslim world constitute a very different environment for struggles against neoliberalism and the various policies it involves than did the advanced capitalist West. Unprecedented petroleum rents allowed for rapid development of the smaller Gulf countries in the last two decades, but for the economic and political situation of the vast majority of the region's peoples has become more bleak during the last generation. This at the same time that their ability to connect with and become culturally – if not economically and politically – integrated with global movements and ideas increased at an unprecedented rate.

In a lecture-hall filled with 500 people at the Prague anti-IMF protests of September 2000, not a single audience member raised their hand when I asked if anyone was from the Muslim world. Within a few years, however, activists from the Middle East and North Africa were becoming an increasing presence in the global peace and justice movement, while at the same time taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by Western governments and NGOs to network with their peers (and especially each other) in the mushrooming number of "civil society"-related workshops and conferences of the post-US Iraq invasion period.

The internet, of course, made it that much easier to learn about tactics – such as that of the black bloc's – and allowed various groups both in and outside the region who shared similar goals and attitudes to become acquainted. At the same time, the growth of the now (in)famous Ultra movement, clearly inspired by similar movements of football fans in Europe, provided the perfect laboratory for experimenting and perfecting the kinds of aggressive and even violent confrontations with security forces and regime thugs that between January 28 and February 4, 2011 literally saved the revolution.

It is not surprising that as their ability to shape the political situation has lessened in the two years since the initial uprising, the Ultras and sympathetic fellow-travellers among Egypt's revolutionary movements would search out new strategies, tactics and symbols to reshift the momentum, and as important, the national narrative, towards more favourable terrain. Members of the Revolutionary Socialists, the most sympathetic group to anarchists in terms of strategies and political goals (and who've consequently been attacked with them by SCAF and the Brotherhood) have from the start of the Revolution repeatedly told me that the key to its success will be constantly learning from and teaching ever widening circles of people. The explosion of talk about the black bloc in Egypt – even more so among the government, its supporters and the Egyptian and Arabic-language media than in Western media – is evidence of just how successful their strategy has been.

From an examination of the proliferation of Egyptian black bloc websites, video pronouncements of activists, twitter feeds, and the use of black bloc description and logos, and discussions with friends in the broader Ultra movement and others who've followed recent changes in strategies, it's clear that while the adoption of black bloc tactics is centred around the Ultras, it's not limited to them, since not all activists who've donned the balaclava or black hoodie are members of one of the main Ultra clubs, such as Zemalek or Ahly.

It's also clear that while the activists who came up with the idea to publicly identify themselves with the tactic are familiar with its recent history, it would be a mistake to assume they share (or even spend time debating over) a coherent anarchist political agenda or philosophy, or are all equally grounded in the larger anarchist-influenced discourses that have shaped the broader global Occupy movement – which, let us remember, was directly inspired by and even born out