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# Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings

Mapping Interactions  
between Regimes and Protesters

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# Conclusion

## Unruly Protest

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Near the shore of the Khaleej, outside a conference hall, I lingered after dinner with a group of Arab professionals. They had come from across the region, some for the week and some for good. They read multiple daily newspapers and could lecture confidently on political economy and modern Arab history.

Naturally, conversation turned to the so-called Arab Spring. “We Arabs will not put up with corruption and mismanagement forever,” one of my companions said. I am paraphrasing from memory. “Look at the poverty. Look at the inequality. Look at the waste of natural resources, of human resources. Eventually, we had to say: Enough!”

“But there is just as much waste and corruption in Algeria and Jordan as in Tunisia and Egypt,” another companion countered. Algeria and Jordan had relatively small-scale protests in 2011 that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and King Abdullah weathered easily, while Tunisia and Egypt experienced mass uprisings that ousted presidents Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. “Ben Ali and Mubarak fell because France and the United States wanted them out, but Bouteflika and Abdullah made deals with the West and were allowed to stay in power.”

In my experience in the Middle East, reference to Western machinations is normally a conversation-stopper. But this evening, another companion took exception. “Tahrir Square wasn’t a Western conspiracy,” she said, referring to the mass sit-in in Cairo. “All that America did for us was to invent Facebook and Twitter, which Egyptians used to make Tahrir Square on their own, to organize food and medics and reinforcements.”

Although these were not social scientists by training, their conversation was as social-scientific as any I’ve overheard at academic conferences. Without scholarly citations, these “lay” social scientists juxtaposed theories

of socioeconomic and political grievances, international pressures, and new media effects. They could elaborate, when pressed, with evidence from their core cases and extrapolate to contrasting cases within the region. They were intimidatingly well-informed about the daily course of events and political alliances and betrayals.

As debate ran into the night, I began to see a consensus, notwithstanding their theoretical differences: the uprisings of the Arab Spring were both inevitable and doomed. They had to happen, and they had to fail.

Many full-time social scientists have come to similar conclusions. The Arab Spring has generated a small industry of *post facto* just-so accounts. Even when couched in the language of probabilities, social-scientific causality and explanation tease us with hints of determinism. Like other revolutions, the Arab Spring rose and fell “because.” Indeed, many social scientists see the quest for “because” as their primary mission.

Social scientists are particularly drawn to explain surprisingly shiny objects, but we are not the only ones. A half-century ago, ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) proposed that making sense of difficult, unexpected behavior is one of the main tasks of social interaction. Similarly, Judith Butler (1999) argued that gender nonconformism attracts special scrutiny and judgment as a violation of the expectation of dominant gender norms. At the macrolevel, too, Hendrik Vollmer (2013) suggests that disruptions prompt movements to contain and normalize the unanticipated. Most social scientists are human, too, and we get professional brownie points for bringing the wildest-looking phenomena into the comforting corral of “because.”

I’ve been skeptical of this explanatory mission for some time. It seems to me that some moments are less easily tamed than others by social science’s causal models. Revolutions and other forms of nonroutine behavior, in particular, disrupt prior patterns of interaction, erasing the causal inferences that apply to routine action (with apologies for self-citation, readers who are interested in this argument can find fuller versions in Kurzman, 2004a, 2004b).

Let me be clear – I am not saying that all human behavior is inexplicable. A colleague once challenged me to set scope conditions: If revolutions cannot be tamed by causal models, what else did I imagine was unpredictable? Isn’t rush hour traffic fairly predictable, for example? I agree – I dread rush hour traffic as much as the next person, and that dread is based on a causal model that presumes a certain predictability. My point is that the predictability of some human behavior does not imply the predictability of all human behavior. I do not know where the scope conditions lie, but I suggest that those boundaries are fascinating to study: at what points do behaviors become “unruly”?

By “unruly,” I mean collective actions that do not obey the rules of social behavior, and that do not obey the rules of social science (with apologies to Bartley [2014], from whom I borrowed the terms “ruliness”/“unruliness” but not his definitions). It is unruly to stand in front of armored personnel carriers and demand that the commander in chief resign? It is unruly to hold up a sign demanding freedom, in a place where people who have held up signs demanding freedom often lose their freedom as a result? These actions are not necessarily raucous or disruptive – although they may be – but they are unruly in the sense that they violate the norms of routine behavior. To the extent that such actions also flout the expectations of social-scientific models, they are unruly in a second sense: they appear at moments the models did not predict, they spread in places the models treated as unlikely, and they disappear just as updated models are developed to predict them retroactively.

The Arab Spring was unruly in both senses. It erupted in defiance of authoritarian political systems that had suppressed and manipulated political mobilization for a generation or more, and it shocked social-scientific experts who considered these systems relatively stable. Arab publics were never perfectly quiescent, and the Arab Spring had its roots in the region’s long-standing traditions of protest (Chalcraft 2016; Thompson 2013) – but these protests were definitely against the rules. They appeared sporadically and were repressed harshly. The uprisings of the Arab Spring were unruly in the second sense as well – they did not fit the patterns that social-scientific theories led us to expect. They did not occur in countries with especially high usage of new media technologies, or in places where inequality was the most severe, or in societies with the greatest youth unemployment, to pick several potential theories (a variety of data sources are reviewed in Kurzman 2012).

Lay social science, like my conversation by the Khaleej, may allow itself to grab at evidence that fits its theories, and to push aside evidence that disconfirms them. Professional social science, by contrast, makes a commitment to examine data more systematically. The data may involve numbers or texts or fieldwork, but regardless of form the evidence brings us closer to our subjects. My experience with all of these forms of evidence is that the more data we analyze and the closer we get to our subjects, the more unruly they come to seem. Individual trajectories stand out more clearly against general patterns. “Deviant cases” (a pejorative-sounding phrase in comparative-historical analysis) and “outliers” (a dismissive-sounding term in statistical analysis) come into focus. Especially in times of turmoil, it gets harder to generalize about large-scale processes when you are familiar with the variety of smaller-scale experiences. Inevitably, social science shepherds the evidence into a meaningful narrative. All humans do this, faced with a

potentially paralyzing overabundance of sensory information (Feyerabend 1999). But let us not lose our sense of wonder at the unruliness that attracted our attention in the first place.

Another contribution that professional social science offers to well-informed lay social science, I think, is to study the production and reproduction of institutions. Lay social science generally takes institutions for granted – it uses terms like “state” and “nation” as unproblematically real, while much of the social science that I appreciate the most explores how these come to be experienced as real, and how that experience makes us act as though they were real, and in so doing makes them real.

Race provides a crucial example of this process. “Race” as we understand it today was invented in the eighteenth century – previously, the term could refer to any group of people claiming common descent and cultural solidarity, such as the Germanic race or the Gallic race. In the eighteenth century, however, Europeans began to claim that they constituted a single race, alongside Africans, Americans, Asians, and – according to Karl Linnaeus (Linnaei 1758, 21-22), one of the inventors of biological taxonomy – the feral and monstrous human races. Europeans came to call themselves Caucasians, because they considered the people of the Caucasus to be the most beautiful people in the world (Painter 2010, 72-90). This new conception of race was epically unruly – both in the sense that it provoked widespread resistance and had to be repeatedly enforced through the application of violence, and in the sense that it was incapable of accounting for evidence that, for most characteristics, humans varied more within each race than between them (Montagu 1942). Much of contemporary social science now treats race as an institution, not a biological category, and explores how this institution is reproduced, challenged, appropriated, and otherwise manipulated – denaturalizing a concept that lay social science too often treats as inherent and inevitable. Similar transformations have occurred in the study of the state, which is increasingly viewed as a multitude of arenas rather than a singular entity (Abrams 1988; Duyvendak and Jasper 2015); the nation, which is now viewed as a project rather than a people (Anderson 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997); and many other institutions. Unruly action, if widespread enough, may gel over time into “ruly” institutions.

The chapters in this volume illustrate this contribution. Instead of treating human experience as a product of large-scale institutional causes, they examine how individual experience mediates and produces the phenomena that come to be labeled as causes.

This intervention begins in the introduction by James Jasper and Frédéric Volpi, who challenge the concept of “groups.” Lay social science, and much of

professional social science, treat groups as givens. Those approaches often explain behavior by membership in a group, the interests of the group, the resources or other characteristics of the group. For routine behaviors, when groups are stable and group membership is nonproblematic, such explanations may work. But in moments of protest and change, groups themselves may be the subject of conflict and negotiation. To capture the fluidity of collective identity, Jasper and Volpi replace the concept of groups with an alternative vocabulary of collective “players” (Duyvendak and Jasper 2015; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015). Players are “constantly shifting, dissolving, and recombining,” in this view, echoing studies from decades ago that viewed collective identity as the product of mobilization rather than an explanation for mobilization (Melucci 1989; Gamson 1991). Players still risk being reified the way groups are often reified – we may refer to them by collective labels, as though they were single actors. But the new term highlights how players play – how they strategically engage other players, sometimes playing by the rules, sometimes breaking the rules. Through the concept of players, along with the allied concept of arenas, Jasper and Volpi offer new organizing principles for the field of social movement studies, refusing to reduce people to institutional determinants.

The subsequent chapters deconstruct other structural explanations. Causal models of diffusion are scrutinized in John Chalcraft’s chapter on Arab “pirating” of models for revolt, for example. Chalcraft does not treat diffusion as automatic spillover or demonstration effects or political learning, which hide individual agency behind generic processes. Instead, he highlights the effort that some activists put into the consideration of which models to follow, debates over whether which of those models might apply locally, and what sorts of local alterations might be appropriate. His own appropriation of the concept of “piracy” signals a move closer to the lived experience of diffusion, and how that experience matters for diffusion.

Along different lines, Jillian Schwedler’s chapter on rituals of protest in Jordan asks what to make of small demonstrations that did not “matter” in terms of public opinion or political change. She suggests that these protests may matter in a different sense, in that they may illustrate the rituals of encounter between state officials and their activist opponents, the oppositional identities that activists develop, and – more broadly – the persistence of protest that is not necessarily calculated to produce policy or regime change, contrary to rational-choice images of activists’ strategic motivations. Schwedler locates herself at the protest: where she walked, among, in front of, or behind the activists and the security forces, shows how calmly ritualistic these encounters had become, and how different

protest felt when the *baltagiyya* militia was summoned, creating a more menacing atmosphere. Her methodological transparency allows us to follow the researcher as she engages with her subjects of study.

Wendy Pearlman's chapter focuses on another moment of change: the first days of what would later be called the Syrian uprising of 2011. The activists quoted in Pearlman's chapter tell us what it felt like (the fear, the excitement), how these feelings reflected the contours of state control (which buildings and which people were considered safe enough for risky conversations), and how those contours could reform in an instant when enough of one's neighbors decided they would not be intimidated by the prospect of coercion. From this perspective, state violence is not an abstract cause of obedience or revolt; it is a set of practices and threats that Syrians accepted, and then stopped accepting.

That moment of disobedience, when people stop accepting the institutions they have lived with for years, is shocking. We see the shock most clearly in Youssef El Chazli's chapter on activists in Alexandria, Egypt. On the morning of January 25, 2011, El Chazli writes, these activists – several dozen in all – had no idea that the demonstrations they had planned would draw hundreds of thousands of participants. "The numbers were incredible, unbelievable," one activist recalled. "We found ourselves in tears from the sight," another said. Their "maximal hope" had been to attract a thousand protestors, and they did not know what to do with the massive numbers that materialized. The crowds pushed passed police barriers, took up rude chants, and battled tear gas even after many activists had left the scene to regroup at a café. El Chazli does not argue that activist organization was unimportant – only that it did not "cause" the Egyptian uprising. It does not explain why hundreds of thousands of Egyptians suddenly decided to join in, which they had not done at the activists' previous protests.

Farhad Khosrokhavar's chapter examines the "effervescent community" that was forged among protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. Contrary to cheery visions of cosmopolitan youth demanding liberties that they saw their peers enjoying in Europe and North America, Khosrokhavar argues that the emergent solidarity of Tahrir distanced elite protesters from their Egyptian compatriots. Activists claimed moral superiority over less-well-off communities that did not participate as actively in the uprising, Khosrokhavar suggests, and did not address their concerns about economic degradation and political instability. This divide reflected long-standing class divisions in Egyptian society, but was activated and dramatized through the act of protest itself.

These studies offer glimpses into the breakdown of old institutions, although "breakdown" sounds too impersonal. More than that, they offer glimpses into the breakdown of causal reasoning: activist organization and

state violence and protest ritual and diffusion are not “causes” or “explanations” in the social-scientific sense but rather aspects of the institutional environment that obsessed protesters and potential protesters. Their importance lies in how they were interpreted, and how those interpretations could shift.

Of course, revolutions don't change everything. Even at moments of maximal confusion and deinstitutionalization, when the future seems entirely up in the air, revolutionaries may tie their shoelaces the way they've always done. They may buy bread where they've always bought it and obey traffic signals and engage in much of their usual participation in the large-scale institutions that encompass their lives.

Most of the population is never directly engaged in the upheaval. Most people keep going to work, if they can, even if it means making special plans to avoid the sites of protest. Some of the population may be actively opposed to the revolution, looking to undermine it through their own protests or violence or other means. At the same time, global capitalism and geopolitics continue to seek advantages. All is not chaos.

So the question is not whether institutions all fail, but which ones. And that can't be known in the abstract, but only in the moment, through the ways in which people abandon some routines in order to protect others, or vice versa. The chapter by Frédéric Volpi in this volume offers an example of this process. The Salafis in Tunisia were a coalition comprised largely of activists who were willing to maintain the current political order, at least for the moment, in order to change popular values and particular government policies. They did not seek a total break with the past, but a selective one. Within the coalition, also, were revolutionaries who were willing to consider violence. They had a different set of calculations: breaking with their past (nonviolent) political practice would allow them to maintain their ideological purity and trigger a clash that they expected to usher in a new set of institutions. In Tunisia, as Volpi describes, the militants assassinated political figures and the entire coalition was banned. Elsewhere, by contrast, Salafis have refrained from violence (at least thus far) to pursue a more cautious strategy of incremental change, even if it that means painful compromises.

In early February 2011, I had my laptop open at a mandatory administrative meeting at my university in the United States, watching a live-stream of President Hosni Mubarak's speech on Egyptian television. Listening on earbuds and trying to ignore the meeting around me, I waited for Mubarak to acknowledge the massive protests against him and resign. The television feed had a split-screen for much of the speech, one side close in on Mubarak and the other side zoomed out on Tahrir Square, where thousands



of protesters were also watching the speech. As Mubarak kept talking, it became clear that he was not planning to resign.

It occurred to me that the history of Egypt at that moment depended on the decision-making of one deluded old man, who was gabbing away in front of a television camera while I watched. If he resigned, the history books would say that massive protests drove him from power in just over two weeks. If he refused to resign, then – who knew? (As it turned out, another old man – one of Mubarak's cronies – announced the president's resignation the next day.) On the other side of the split screen, I wondered about the response from the crowd in Tahrir Square, and from other Egyptians watching or listening to Mubarak's speech around the country. If anybody at Tahrir Square had responded with rage and pulled out a gun, or brought a bomb and set it off, we would have an entirely different narrative of the upheaval – no longer an unarmed movement but a violent insurrection, possibly even a terrorist campaign. All it would take is a small group to change the language we use for the entire mass event, in keeping with the one-drop definition of political violence. Nonviolence takes a village, but violence only takes a cell.

Contrasting paths, and the grand causal theories that social science stakes on the outcomes, rest on the actions of small groups whose minds are not typical of the population at large – most people wouldn't dream of setting off explosives or ordering thugs to beat people up, as the regime's top officials did, but those decisions matter tremendously for our accounts. To understand the divergent trajectories of protest, in Egypt and elsewhere, we must be prepared to operate at multiple scales at once: at the mass scale, to understand how institutions are produced by hundreds of thousands or more; at the intermediate scale, to understand how hundreds or thousands of people mobilize on behalf of particular goals and strategies; and at the micro scale, where a handful of individuals may throw off everybody else's plans with a dramatic intervention.

Social scientists who privilege the mass scale may dismiss small-scale disruptions as statistical noise in the signal, but for the people living through these periods of unrest, they may be the signal itself. These small-scale perturbations can come to define the historic moment. They may be the iconic feature that people latch on to as they work out which institutions are finished and which ones remain intact.

That, to me, is the value of this volume. It draws us into the experience of the Arab Spring, in all its hope and pain, taking the uncertainties of the moment as its object of study. The social-scientific lens of the researcher does not displace the lay social-science of the researched, who are also trying to make sense of the institutional changes they are party to, willingly or not.

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