TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF REVOLUTIONARY SITUATIONS

REFLECTIONS ON THE ARAB UPRISINGS

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“Uprisings have a body with which one can engage in combat. Revolutions, on the other hand, have a lot in common with ghosts.”
Metternich to Guizot, 31 October 1847

When we contemplate the apparent domino-effect of upheavals precipitated by the rapid and unexpected fall of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, the first image that comes to mind is that of 1848’s “Springtime of the Peoples”, when a demonstration in the streets of Paris prompted three days of insurrection, the restoration of the Republic and, thanks to the telegraph, the railways and the rotary press, over ten days of uprisings across cities as distant as Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Milan and Venice.

However, just as when considering the revolutions of 1848, we should be wary of overly generalizing interpretations that seek to describe the events of 2010-2012 as the product of a unified wave of insurrections. Aside from the trigger provided by Ben Ali’s downfall, the trajectory, and consequently the shape, taken by the Egyptian, Moroccan, Bahraini, Libyan, Yemeni, and Syrian uprisings were all very different. It is only if we do not understand their respective contexts or if we are blinded by a well-meaning enthusiasm that we may collectively refer to them as the “Arab revolutions”. It is too soon to tell if any of these movements can be labeled as revolutionary. Such a question can only be answered with hindsight, in light of the results produced. This is therefore outside the scope of our investigation. We will instead focus on “uprisings” – a vague term which has the merit of not judging what particularly complex processes may be produced in the end. We are nonetheless aware that certain Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis and Syrians believe that they are living through a revolution and are currently fighting to make it happen, to encourage or protect it. Likewise, although the descriptive term “Arab” has many implicit connotations and possible misunderstandings, we have nevertheless decided to use it for ease of reference.

In the fields of political science, sociology and history, countless pages have been devoted to the study of revolutions. The frequency of publications regarding recent events has been particularly high. What would be the rationale, therefore, behind subjecting our readers to yet another of these studies? Two well-founded reasons justify our endeavor. On the one hand, although social scientists are prolix on the causes and consequences of revolutions, they are much less loquacious regarding revolutionary situations specifically, including their
characteristics and the processes that lead to them. As we will show in this introduction, recent publications have often fallen into this trap. On the other hand, all the contributions in this volume stem from field surveys carried out at the very heart of the action and seek to understand how individual and collective actors “caught” in the revolutionary momentum perceive situations and adapt their behavior – an approach which is still rare in the existing literature.

In this introduction, we shall return to our justification for this two-fold approach. However, we shall begin with a critical, albeit non-exhaustive, review of the existing literature. Then we shall explain a certain number of our theoretical and methodological propositions, chiefly relying upon empirically documented experiments.

The paucity of revolutionary sociology

“To look for false troubles one gets real misery”.
Daniel Desbiens, My Contemporary Maxims

Causality and the nomological drive

Revolutionary events always strike their contemporaries as radically new, subject to rapid upheavals and full of uncertainty regarding the future. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that few people have been able to “face the revolution with one’s mind made up”, like Marat, or to claim to have predicted the fall of the Soviet Union.

Pierre Favre has astutely discussed the issue of the unpredictability of the social order. Let us here recall three of his conclusions. Firstly, “with regard to the future, we are faced with an unfinished, on-going process, about which we can naturally only have incomplete knowledge. Predictions are therefore impossible”. Secondly, “there exist periods where a political regime possesses an extreme structural vulnerability, and crumbles when confronted with a protest that reveals its lack of consistency”. Thirdly, unpredictability does not mean that “all predictions are impossible and will ultimately be disproven. Predictions, which in reality we cannot do without, are only conditional, or in other words probabilistic”.

Among researchers who study the history and the sociology of revolutionary phenomena, an increasingly number have subscribed to this point of view and begun to reject any general theory of revolutions. In this regard, it is helpful to recall the two conferences organized by the American Sociological Association at the beginning of the 1990s to better understand why the events of 1989 were so surprising. Although certain articles published in the two

4. P. Favre, Comprendre le monde pour le changer, 61.
5. P. Favre, Comprendre le monde pour le changer, 171-3; see also 195.
6. P. Favre, Comprendre le monde pour le changer, 198.
8. The proceedings of the first conference are published in Theory and Society, 23(2), 1993. Those of the second conference can be found in the American Journal of Sociology, 100(6), May 1995.
journal issues mentioned above (footnote 8, p. 2) still defend particular types of predictability, they are increasingly met with suspicion, as Charles Kurzman explains in his straightforwardly titled work, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*.¹ He criticizes scholarship’s never-ending quest to retrospectively reconstruct the causal elements of revolutionary phenomena in order to determine the factors behind their emergence. Rejecting all causality, Kurzman proposes an “anti-explanation” which abandons all attempts at retrospective prediction and instead focuses on the lived experiences contained within revolutionary situations. In other words, even if one cannot doubt that what really happens is by its very nature determined,² one must simultaneously recognize the immense difficulty involved in identifying this reality based on a study of its often distant causes.³ Such issues hint at three weak points in the existing research: an etiological illusion,⁴ a nomological drive, and the absence of a theory of agency and rational choice.⁵

The etiological illusion harkens back to one of revolutionary sociology’s most serious dead-ends.⁶ Having primarily focused on why rebellions emerge, the discipline has generally stuck to finding distant and remote causes. These causes are often attributed to the disruptive effects of social change or the advent of new opportunities. The focus placed on these factors comes at the expense of considerations on the robustness of the means implemented by the various protagonists or on “possible causal mediations between the suggested ‘causes’ and the characteristics of their alleged outcomes”.⁷ Hence the necessity of clearly differentiating, as Charles Tilly and Rod Aya have done, between revolutionary intentions, outcomes and situations,⁸ especially as the latter tend to transcend the conditions of their creation and their outcomes do not allow us to comprehend them retrospectively.⁹

The nomological drive – or how to explain historical sequences insofar as an explanation requires laws linking cause and effect, laws which history does not possess – leads to a two-fold reductionism of the model. On the one hand, explanatory matrices are often developed based on a specific historical example; extrapolation is thus compulsory. This can be seen in Crane Brinton’s model based on the phases of the French Revolution,¹⁰ or Theda Skocpol’s identification of 1789, 1917 and 1949 as genuine social revolutions led by the peasantry.¹¹ On the other hand, because general theories are by definition beyond the lookout

². To echo Pierre Favre, methodological determinism thus involves the opposite of causality: P. Favre, *Comprendre le monde*, 54 and 67-79.
⁵. Rod Aya, “The Third Man; or agency in history; or, rationality in revolution”, *History and Theory*, 40, December 2001, 143-52.
⁶. As a matter of fact, this illusion is less widespread among historians. It is clearly condemned by François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009 [1st edn 1978]), 40, 39 and 44.
⁸. Charles Tilly defines the revolutionary situation based on the concept of Trotsky’s “dual power”, as any situation in which the state’s sovereignty is subject to multiple, competing claims supported by a significant portion of the population, and where the aforementioned state power cannot, or does not wish to, crush the oppositional coalition. Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 189-222.
for recurring causal patterns, they significantly reduce the complexity of phenomena: at best to stylized versions of themselves, at worst to a quest for sole causes. This is notably true in the case of Robert Palmer and Jacques Godechot,\(^1\) but also more generally in the field of cultural studies, where Patrice Higonnet’s work overemphasizes the impact of the Protestant religion and the role of the “Anglo-Saxon consensus”.\(^2\)

The absence of a theory of agency becomes apparent when we try to link together micro and macro phenomena. How can we explain a social phenomenon when all we have to rely on is the observation of individual actions? The existing literature answers this question with three different tools: structural conditions (structures of political opportunity, the density of horizontal networks and links to the elite, suddenly imposed grievances, etc.), cultural idioms (cultural frames, Weltanschauung, traditions, etc.) and mobilization structures (leadership, material and organizational resources).\(^3\) In this tripartite configuration, structures, culture and the availability of resources dictate the course of events; conversely, these events can also provoke changes in existing structures, cultures and resources. And yet, in this framework, “structure (with an assist from culture) constrains agency to make the events – by violence; and the events constrain agency to change the structure – again by violence. Agency is the Third Man between structure and event who does the killing and coercing. He makes the action happen.”\(^4\)

In reality, very few works have avoided falling for the etiological illusion and developing a reductionist model, and most have likewise failed to adopt an explicit theory of agency.\(^5\) This no doubt explains the unfortunate fact that studies in this domain, while relatively numerous, have not built upon the findings of their predecessors in order to globally advance research in the field.

Where everything is in everything, and vice-versa

Written in the heat of the moment, recent studies on the “Arab uprisings” are no exception to this trend. The unpredictable nature of the events in question serves as an almost obligatory introduction to the proposed explanatory frameworks.\(^6\) After spending a long time investigating the “causalities behind the lack” of democracy,\(^7\) the next step is to examine why the events of 2010-2012 have sounded the death-knell of the Arab world’s “exceptionality”\(^8\)

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3. For an illustration of this sort of tripartite explanation, see Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
5. We would nevertheless like to take a moment to mention several studies which do avoid these scholarly pitfalls. For example, Wayne Te Brake’s *Shaping History. Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), whose account of the politicization processes of revolutionary groups and the constant gap between initial intentions and subsequent actions in situational logics is remarkable.
6. The editors of the issue published by the journal *Mouvements* trace the intensity of this surprise back to a vague orientalism which sees the Arab world as fixed and unchanging (Agnès Deboulet, Dimitri Nicolaïdis, “Les hirondelles font-elles le printemps?”, *Mouvements*, 66, 2011, 7-10).
and heralded a new threshold in the universalization of revolutionary action.\(^1\) And yet, this development also conversely means that these same “flaws” and even “anomalies”,\(^2\) hitherto highlighted as so many obstacles to democratization, ultimately become the causes of successful revolutionary movements, thanks to the emergence of history.

It is true that the nomological studies no longer propose monocausal models, but instead now prefer so-called “combinatorial” approaches.\(^3\) But such multifaceted approaches are often little more than the juxtaposition of various causes, factors and decisive elements, which allegedly present an account, at different levels and moments of observation, of revolutionary intentions, situations and outcomes.\(^4\)

We do not have the space here to analyze in detail this rash of explanatory attempts. Instead, we would like to offer a more free-form history and educational classification of the main theories of revolution: Marxist-leaning interpretations, structuralist paradigms, theories of relative frustration and modernization, and cultural and diffusionist approaches.

Taking interpretations of Marxist origin first: events in the region have given new life to analyses that erect the crisis of global capitalism as their main explanatory variable. In this framework, the authoritarianism of regimes in the Arab world is only “the political form of capitalism” in the region,\(^5\) “crony capitalism”\(^6\) not being an “aberration of the system” but rather a normal feature of the processes of capitalist accumulation throughout the world. From this perspective, the Egyptian uprising marked the culmination of 30 years of neoliberal reforms imposed by international financial institutions and which exacerbated the country’s vulnerability to the global crisis by concentrating the vast majority of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority and contributing to the growing class divide.\(^7\) Such a reading can take different forms. For the editors of Globalizations’ special issue, the Arab uprisings are a facet of the “global revolution” against the prevailing liberal economic system, against the exclusions and contradictions produced by this world-system.\(^8\) In this light, the uprisings are so many grass-roots attempts to create an alternative world “from the bottom up”.\(^9\) From a revised dependency perspective, the events of 2010-2012 can be interpreted as a new attempt for countries like Egypt to rise up against their “current status as a dominated region” and against the “demands of globalized economic liberalism”.\(^10\) These approaches have the merit of not focusing on the region’s “exceptionality” and of proposing a nuanced reading of globalization. Nevertheless, as has already been observed countless times before, such paradigms suffer from their emphasis on the economic: everything automatically stems from

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5. Adam Hanieh, “Egypt’s uprising...”.
what is played out on the economic field, including relations between nations, the state itself, social classes, social movements, etc.

Conversely, a number of other studies subordinate economic determination to the primacy of politics. From a structuralist perspective like that adopted by Skocpol,¹ the autonomy of the state is posited as a basic condition; its determining factors, crisis or downfall are at the heart of the analysis. Extending this approach, some authors have attempted to illuminate the contrast between the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents and the resilience of other regimes in the region (in particular Libya and Syria). Such authors identify “true” and “false” nation-states, “moderate” and inclusive monarchies versus republics, fragmented or homogenous societies, oil profits, a past marked by violence, etc.² Revolutions are thus seen to rid “regimes that were too open and too closed, too modern and too anachronistic, too rational and too ‘insane’”,³ of medieval garbage. Placing political conflict at the center of everything, some authors have examined the structural causes of the “Arab uprisings” under the dual lens of the global economic crisis and the spread of the crisis within the sphere of the state.

First of all, in these accounts, and contrary to third-wave democratization processes, the recent “Arab uprisings” owe nothing to Western democratic struggles. Quite the opposite: these rebellions are seen to have emerged despite the “exceptional” treatment of authoritarian regimes by major world powers, obsessed with the “Islamist specter”,⁴ careful to preserve the status quo in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and eager to maintain their influence over oil resources. The tone used in such studies is particularly caustic⁵ – some have even gone so far as to point out the means used by Westerners to prevent revolutions.⁶ In such interpretations, the decisive international factors are understood as pertaining to the economic realm. Some argue that the global rise in food and energy prices prompted the emergence of revolts; 2007’s financial crisis being “the straw (or the bale) that broke the camel’s back”.⁷ The spread of the crisis throughout the region is then linked to the drop in exports, the reduction in financial flows towards non oil-based economies, the credit crunch and the defunding of national development programs and developmental aid.⁸

Secondly, rather than enabling the renewal of the social foundation of non oil-based regimes, these reforms are alleged to have increased the number of malcontents,⁹ the state’s withdrawal leading to the breakdown of “social contracts” hitherto considered as one of the main reasons for authoritarianism’s resilience.¹⁰ The rise in corruption and the predation on national

1. According to Theda Skocpol, three elements play an essential role: the international context, the financial crisis and the division of the elites, and peasant rebellions (T. Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions).
2. For example, Georges Corm, “Première approche d’une contextualisation des révoltes populaires arabes”, Confluence Méditerranée, 79, 2011, 93-111.
10. For example, Béatrice Hibou, “Économie politique et morale d’un mouvement social”, Politique africaine, 121, 2011, 5-22.
economies by “cliques” made up of individuals with close ties to the heads of state is thus seen as frustrating the marginalized elite, as well as the army in Egypt’s case. Politically speaking, “de-liberalization” then translated into the spread of repression beyond Islamists alone and into the opposition’s limited access to the institutional political sphere. In Egypt, the constitutional amendments leading up to the November and December 2010 elections – a key step in preparing Gamal Mubarak’s rise to power – provoked a large voting boycott; the number of opposition members in the parliament dropped below 2005 levels. As access to institutional political life was blocked, taking to the streets thus became the only viable alternative.

Such interpretations are useful for reintroducing the state into the equation and focusing on relations between social groups, between these groups and the state, and between different states. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable to the same criticisms as structuralist interpretations: that is to say, the marginalization of cultural and ideological dimensions, the lack of attention paid to the uprisings themselves, and, more generally, a certain negligence with regard to process.

In another realm of scholarship, analyzing the recent wave of protests has led a number of authors to employ the mechanisms of relative frustration. As the symbol of the Tunisian uprising, Mohamed Bouazizi was first portrayed as an “unemployed college graduate”. This piece of information – no matter how false it was – prompted a whole slew of interpretations that emphasized the loss of social status and feelings of humiliation and injustice. The media made extensive reference to such interpretations, interactive graphs and charts in hand: The Economist Online even published “The Shoe-Thrower’s Index”, developed on the basis of a group of statistical indicators.

As we remarked ten years ago, frustration approaches “take several different forms: an economic crisis, ‘alienation’ caused by the rapid transformations experienced by Maghrebi and Middle Eastern societies, be it rural exoduses and accelerated urbanization or ‘demographic ruptures’ provoked by the massive influx of post-independence generations on the job market, the housing market, etc.; the failure of the ‘imitated State’ or the ‘imported State’ [...] a rise in feelings of being excluded by globalization”. Likewise, since the 1980s, Arab youth has been observed “through the prism of the crisis” and unemployment among college graduates has been touted as the main argument used to explain a whole host of phenomena: population pressure, difficulties with workplace integration and feelings of social degradation, as well as housing, marriage, and economic and political crises.

5. For a critique of these types of interpretations, see in particular Amin Allal, Youssef El-Chazli, “Figures du déclassement et passage au politique dans les situations révolutionnaires égyptienne et tunisienne”, in Ivan Sainsaulieu, Muriel Surdez (eds), Sens politiques du travail (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), 321-36.
These interpretations single out empirically observable and quantifiable phenomena. However, they also elicit the same objections as interpretations that rely on the theory of relative frustration: the “volcanic” nature of the model, the predominance of a psychological, rather than sociological, point of view, a vague description of the connection between objective conditions and tautologically-deduced perceptions, a weak justification of the transition from relative deprivation to mobilization, etc.¹ Not to mention the fact that this notion has traditionally been quite popular in studies of Maghrebi and Middle Eastern societies, whether such studies have sought to explain Islamist movements, urban riots, or suicide attacks.

As the central player in the “Arab uprisings”, Arab youth is no longer solely portrayed by the figure of the unemployed college graduate, but also by the more glamorous image of the young and educated man or woman who loves modernity, democracy and digital technology – in part because this image is much more attractive to Western commentators. Thanks to this iconic figure, the paradigm of modernization has resurfaced in new garb.² According to such interpretations, because it is progressive and because it is open to Western democratic culture – notably via its cultural products and its access to more and more information, controlled with increasing difficulty – the “globalized” youth of Arab societies inevitably brings with it a democratic awakening.³ This refrain is not new. If we exclude the parenthesis marking the “end of the great developmentalist narrative”, when these same youths become “Islamists”, “fanatics” and “terrorists”, we are not far from the aftermath of national independence, when “young people” were considered to be “the motor of social and political change, embodying the values of modernity”.⁴ The only new elements present in 2011’s rhetoric are a handful of adjectives: this youth is “connected” and “globalized”. As a result of its creativity, the “Arab public” has now been put forth as an example for all disenfranchised peoples,⁵ demonstrating that “political innovation can emerge from the margins of society”⁶.

In these attempts to decipher recent events in the Arab world, technology has been presented as the active revolutionary agent. Here again, the idea is not new. Theorists of modernization already granted a central role to technology with regard to the implementation of social change. But with the development of new information and communications technologies (NICTs), the frequency of publications on the subject has continued to rise; this fervor is moreover periodically rekindled by specific events, such as the Zapatista insurrection in 1994, various anti-globalization movements, the coalition against the Iraq war in 2003, and, of

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¹ Philippe Corcuff, “Frustrations relatives”, and Isabelle Sommier, “Privation relative”, in Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, Cécile Péchu (eds), Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009), 242-8 and 441-8 respectively.
² For Samuel Huntington, revolutions are a component of modernization. They are a response to an overly rapid and poorly controlled process of modernization, for example when there are important discrepancies between sectors’ different rates of modernization and, more specifically, when the development of political institutions lags behind social and economic change. Samuel Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
³ See, for example, the enthusiasm displayed for the “Wired, educated and shrewd, young Egyptians guide revolt” article from The New York Times, 10 February 2011. 1. See also Farhad Khosrokhavar, The New Arab Revolutions that Shock the World (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).
course, the Iranian and Moldavian rebellions of 2009, hastily termed “Twitter revolutions”.1 As a result of the media hype surrounding 2011’s calls for mobilization on Facebook, the expressions “Facebook Revolution”, “Revolution 2.0” and, in Tunisia’s case, “WikiLeaks Revolution” gained traction. According to the “cyberphiles” and “cyber-utopians”, the new information and communications technologies would democratize information production and allow for an almost instantaneous diffusion of texts, images and videos within national spheres and beyond, thus sidestepping the monopoly held by traditional media outlets. Moreover, these technological developments would allow for most of the problems linked to mobilization in repressive environments to be solved: “This new technology represents, if not the end, at least the death throes of Lenin’s What is to be done? When a simple click allows individuals to get in touch and protests to be orchestrated, the role of organization disappears.”2 As for arguments against “cyber-utopianism”, they downplay the role played by NICTs with regard to instigating and organizing rebellions, demystify the power of the Internet,3 and remind us that the public virtual counter-space can also be “yet another ruse of the Orwellian regime”4 and that technology does not a revolution make.5

The double emphasis placed by scholarly and media discourse on “globalized” youth and the idea of “Revolution 2.0” revived a certain condemnation of the concept of unilinear, teleological change and progress; it also renewed the debate surrounding neo-Orientalism. Consequently, for Rabab El-Mahdi, the very fact of describing uprisings as “young” and “nonviolent” and of establishing social media as the “champion” of rebellion betrays a “binary” Orientalist reading which seeks to confirm the West’s supremacy by contrasting tradition – associated with obscurantism, violence and all sorts of obstacles to progress – with “imported”, liberating modernity.6

The episteme of modernity can also partly be found in interpretations that focus on cultural factors “which also allow for a radical break to be envisioned and desired”,7 or which deal with changes in the forms of obedience and the cultures of resistance that engender rebellion. Comparing the “cultural origins” of the French and English Revolutions, Roger Chartier analyzes five different factors previously identified by Lawrence Stone:8 the transformation of attitudes towards religion; the importance of legal references; a “cultural ideal” marked by the exclusion of the court and the capital; a state of mind characterized by the gradual erosion of the family, the state and the church’s authority; and intellectual frustration tied to “the excessive development of education”. Recent studies have often implicitly relied upon this five-part analysis.

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1. For a comprehensive approach to the relations between the media and mobilizations, see Érik Neveu, “Médias, mouvements sociaux, espaces publics”, Réseaux, 17(98), 1999, 17-86; and more specifically concerning NICTs: Dominique Cardon, Fabien Granjon, Médiaactivistes (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010).
The epithets used in such readings immediately reveal the capital importance placed on values and ideas: revolutions are characterized as “modern”, “democratic”, “citizen”, “post-modern” or “post-Islamist”, for example. In a radical departure from previous political generations, which were nationalist and Islamist, the current protestors are thus seen as the standard-bearers of a cultural and intellectual revolution. These new men and women have allegedly forged “a new relationship to the self, a new relationship with others, with the world and in particular with the West”, as well as with political, religious and familial authorities. Now is the time for the individual to triumph over denominational, sectarian, or tribal allegiances. This “democratization of minds” is understood to have its roots in the elaboration of an Arab public sphere, in large part thanks to Al Jazeera, the latter having helped to mold “a new Arab public”, to circumvent official demands and to promote unprecedented media pluralism granting space to “opinions... and other opinions” (ar-ra’y wa ar-ra’y al-akhar). In the same vein, some studies have emphasized the role played by the off-stage discourse of subordinate groups – rumors, anecdotes – and by a multitude of cultural objects – video clips, films, TV series, essays, novels, plays, blogs, etc. – in the dissemination of liberal values and the delegitimization of existing authorities by means of the critique of authoritarianism and corruption. The “leader’s disgrace” would thus anticipate his downfall.

Readings like these highlight the impact of ideas and values, otherwise marginalized by a large number of studies. We must still, however, “update their dynamics and be careful not to overlook their role at the heart of the action, that is to say, their ‘effectiveness’ [...] ‘Rhetorical logic’ is not the same thing as ‘a reason for acting’”.

We shall conclude this rapid overview of the existing literature on “Arab uprisings” by invoking a leitmotiv in tribute to Dwight Eisenhower. The fall of Hosni Mubarak four weeks after that of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali instigated a flood of colorful expressions, such as “domino effect”, “contagion”, “tsunami”, “breaking wave”, “snowballing”, etc. Regardless of the causal links evoked, these expressions always referred to the notions of diffusion and dissemination. There is a specific point to be made here that departs from the usual debates surrounding this question. The conflationary effect of “Arab” or “Islamic” causes has often led scholars to posit the existence of “an ‘Arab or Muslim public’, an ‘Arab or Muslim voice’,

ready to mobilize and rise up as a uniform entity, with a single shared motivation, mode of action, and understanding of the stakes”. While criticizing the illusory homogeneity conveyed by the use of the adjective “Arab” to describe the “uprisings”, these scholars have nevertheless argued that an “imagined Arab community” has been fashioned. This community has purportedly been constructed thanks to a dialogue encouraged by a shared language and civilization, as well as similar historical experiences; it has been solidified by pilgrimages, travel, labor migration and the media. From this point of view, Al Jazeera’s satellite channel is viewed as the vehicle for a new grassroots pan-Arabism constructed by individuals, just as Gamal Abdel Nasser’s radio station “Voice of the Arabs”, created in 1953, could be seen as the symbol of Arab nationalism supported by Arab states.

If, until now, the transnational character of revolts throughout the region has primarily been understood through the lens of Al-Qaeda and Islamist movements, today emphasis is instead placed on the role of transnational networks and that of Western foundations and organizations with regard to the dissemination of democratic ideas. If we accept this vision, we do not have far to go before erecting the American scholar and activist Gene Sharp as the instigator of the Arab revolts – a step that many have already taken. According to Sharp’s followers, Egyptians and Tunisians were introduced to non-violent protests thanks to his famous manual, From Dictatorship to Democracy, as well as any training they may have received at the Centre for Applied Non Violent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS) founded in Belgrade by the Otpor! movement, or at Qatar’s Academy for Change.

This does not mean that we reject out of hand all diffusionist interpretations. On the contrary, we would like to revive the debate with other researchers who have rejected causality as well as the macro-sociological perspective. In reality, it would be fruitful to connect the study of cognitive processes with network analysis and the sequential analysis of activist trajectories, in order to better reconstruct the “lived experiences of diffusion”, or how ideas, causes and performances are adapted and transformed.

What to conclude from this incomplete and summary literature review? First of all, the academic community’s responsiveness should be commended, especially when it has been faced with major events that have threatened many a theory or now-shaky thesis. We should also highlight the stimulating nature of some of the works cited. However, we have no choice but to admit that almost none of the impasses described above have truly been resolved. Most studies are still plagued by retrospective prediction and the hunt for macro-sociological causation. Several causes are put forward and often “everything is in everything”, without

4. For example, Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam. The Search for a New Ummah (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
an undeniable causal ordering really being demonstrated. It remains to be seen if this has been caused by the weight of respective research traditions or, more generally, to use one of Pierre Favre’s expressions, by the evaporation of evidence in sociology. In another respect, the analysis of revolutionary situations – in the sense of the clarification of the internal processes and sequencing of these situations – remains largely unexplored: individuals are everywhere present, but merely as shadow puppets. What, then, should be done? We argue that researchers should abandon the search for causes and instead focus their attention on situations and individual actions in said situations, and subsequently attempt to delineate the typical processes that lead to them.

**Performances and processes**

“It is the details that theories in history have to grasp if they are to be any good”.¹

This volume analyzes revolutionary situations, understood as instances of dual power,² in order to identify the *sequences of action* – defined here as *performances*, i.e., the cumulative whole of interactions between all the actors participating in a conflict – that lead to them. The concept of performance (also borrowed from Charles Tilly³) signifies that participants rely on engrained forms but also re-interpret them, sometimes subverting or abandoning them entirely, as a result of dynamics which are determined on the ground. We propose that the observation of micro as well as meso level interactions must allow us to identify *processes*, which we define as a series of events capable of altering the relationships between given groups of elements, in a similar or identical manner, in a variety of different contexts. These processes may be relational (at the meso level of relations between individuals and groups) or cognitive (at the micro level of individual perception).⁴ Studying performances thus amounts to conserving the most noteworthy features of certain sequences, or significant differences between sequences, and explaining them by identifying robust processes of relatively general scope at work within these sequences. More specifically, beyond establishing the original conditions (i.e. the context), we must attempt to identify and describe the processes which lead (or not) to a revolutionary situation – as this situation cannot stem directly from its original conditions.

This type of classification is in keeping with the ambitious project launched by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly which seeks to restructure the political process model around the study of *mechanisms* specific to different kinds of *episodes*.⁵ Although we

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2. See Charles Tilly’s definition given in footnote 8, p. 3.
4. We borrow here the distinction introduced by Arthur Stinchcombe in his discussion of the concept of mechanisms, in *The Logic of Social Research* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). He adds the level of environmental mechanisms, which we see as referring to long-term processes pertaining to different regimes of plasticity (to use a geological metaphor). Therefore, environmental mechanisms such as the nationalization of political spheres or de-differentiation are long-term processes and, in the case of revolutionary situations, should be viewed as conducive elements (to use Smelser’s term) existing outside of the temporal framework of a crisis. Thus defined, this term also includes individual processes (for example, assurance games) and meso sociological mechanisms. We will demonstrate this below.
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share their desire for a dynamic approach, it nevertheless seems to us that, its ambiguities aside, this model remains overly causalist and structuralist.

Moreover, our approach relies on three postulates which diverge significantly from the assumptions made in Dynamics of Contention. First of all, we believe that in order to identify the make-up of revolutionary situations and consequently, to observe and define their processes, we must base our analysis on what actors are, do and say in situ. Macro-social facts are nothing more than the emergent consequences of individual actions, according to an ultimately Weberian reasoning.

On the other hand, and against a strong trend prevalent in the sociology of social movements that seeks to limit analysis to protest movements, protestors and their relationship to the state, we believe that processes and performances are built relationally and require that we take into account all the actors present in the space of a given conflict. Finally, abandoning the search for causes has led us to consider, like Pierre Favre, that “the work of science consists in studying two different and successive states of a system, isolating the pertinent traits of each and arriving at the rules governing the transformation between these two states”. Each sequence of actions is modified by processes which lead to its results (new states of equilibrium), which in turn help to define the environmental, relational and cognitive elements that influence the calculations of the following sequence. In this cumulative perspective – which shares some characteristics with Paul Veyne’s concept of narrative and intrigue – previous choices force subsequent choices, as in a game of chess.


3. Considering conflict between the different protagonists in a balanced way is at the heart of several studies which, starting with research on how public order is maintained (Olivier Fillieule, Donatella Della Porta (eds), Police et manifestants (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2006)), have now spread to other aspects of the social world. On this subject, see the ambitious research project evoked by James Jasper in “A strategic approach to collective action. Looking for agency in social-movement choices”, Mobilization, 9(1), 2004, 1-16, elaborated in Getting your Way. Strategic Dilemmas in the Real World (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), and implemented in Jan W. Duyvendak, James M. Jasper (eds), Players and Arenas. The Interactive Dynamics of Protest, forthcoming. From another perspective, see also Neil Fligstein, Doug McAdam, A Theory of Fields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).


5. P. Favre, Comprendre le monde, 72.

6. For an implementation of this concept of multi-level analysis and causation inspired by symbolic interactionism, see Olivier Fillieule, “Disengagement from radical organizations. A process and multi-level model of analysis”, in Bert Klandermans, Cornelius Van Straalen (eds), Movements in Times of Transition (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, forthcoming).
In what follows, briefly recalling some of the properties of revolutionary situations will allow us to determine the role played by agency. We will then focus on the most emphasized dimension of this volume: performances. This trajectory will allow us to conclude that a certain number of processes exist that imply rules governing changes in state, and which are likely to lead to revolutionary situations.

The spread of mobilizations and how coalitions are formed

Revolutionary situations depend on a challenge to existing power structures which spreads to a significant percentage of the population and the subsequent breakdown between traditionally more or less airtight divisions between social spaces. The majority of case studies pinpoint a small number of properties shared by all revolutionary situations: divisions or defections within the central bodies of the state; divisions or defections within security forces; the creation of large inter-class coalitions which lead to the spread of the protest movement; and finally, the modularity of the shaping of conflicts (that is to say, how situations are framed as well as tactical repertoires).

Michel Dobry has proposed formalizing several of these properties around the concepts of multi-sectoral mobilization and political fluidity. Situations of political crisis are thus viewed as the spread of a given mobilization to different sectors of society, to such a degree that the latter’s daily functioning is disrupted. Then a window of political fluidity opens up, during which sectors no longer function according to their usual logic: they become much more interdependent and uncertainty prevails, insofar as the usual rules of the game are no longer respected.

Merely describing the properties of revolutionary situations is not sufficient. We must also try to understand the contexts that encourage them and the processes which lead to them. This is precisely what Misagh Parsa endeavors to do when he suggests that attention should first be paid to what allows for the creation of coalitions across class lines. Starting with a study of the strategies employed by students, members of the clergy, blue-collar workers and business owners during the Iranian, Nicaraguan and Filipino revolutions, Parsa identifies both favorable structural factors, linked to the form of the state (how interventionist is it, and how exclusive?) and the shape of the class conflict (how polarized?). He also pinpoints the factors that relate directly to the action’s momentum, since once the conflict is instigated, the situation’s logic may transcend the decisive elements that produced it. For example, depending on the form that it takes, the use of repressive force may speed up or slow down the creation of large coalitions and thus the spread of mobilizations.

3. This was the case with the Chinese students’ uprising in 1989. Authorities blocked inter-class sympathies by treating students and workers differently. The latter were generally punished more harshly and at times were forcibly trapped within their factories during protest activities; to which should also be added the students’ lack of appetite for a communal struggle. See Elizabeth J. Perry, “Intellectuals and Tiananmen. Historical perspective on an aborted revolution”, in Daniel Chirot (ed.), *The Crisis of Leninism and the Decline of the Left. The Revolutions of 1989* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 129-46. On the ambivalent effects of repression with regard to dissenting groups as well as individuals, see Hélène Combes, Olivier Fillieule, “Repression and protest. Structural models and strategic interactions”, *Revue française de science politique (English)*, 61(6), 2011, 1-24.
All the contributions gathered here underscore the importance of groups that are normally separated from each other momentarily coming together: Islamists and left- and extreme left-wing activists; urban, educated youths and “slum-dwelling, street-smart dropouts”; the downward-trending middle classes, but also business owners and intellectual professionals excluded from power’s inner sanctum. Even in Bahrain, the rebellion was poised to surpass the Sunni/Shiite divide – which overlaps with significant socio-economic cleavages – when its spread was stopped by Saudi Arabia’s military intervention.

Defection can be observed at many different levels. First of all, many analysts have elaborated hypotheses regarding the attitude of “the army” in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Four salient factors have emerged: the army’s relationship to the government; its involvement in business affairs; its level of training; and finally, its openness to Western armies. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis still needs to be conducted in order to account for the heterogeneity of institutions, hitherto considered as “monolithic apparatuses of repression”; in order to decode, sequence by sequence, the processes which have underpinned calculations at the different stages and different hierarchical levels of revolutionary phenomena. Secondly, researchers have examined dissension within dominant parties, the crumbling of their clientelist networks and how former supporters of the regime may be swayed to the side of the insurgency (in particular, see the two papers about Tunisia in this issue). Other regimes in the region may have learnt lessons from observing these events, in the hopes of preventing internal divisions and military defection. Such strategies would thus amount to “complex, multilevel games”. In such situations, regimes try to buy social peace: they create a public discourse that “aim[s] to influence citizens’ strategic calculations” by highlighting the risks of deep social unrest (fitna). They also organize pro-government demonstrations to stem the tide of activist movements; they condemn the sectarian nature of these protests and suggest their manipulation by the West; they observe diplomatic strategies deployed in the region and adapt accordingly. In Morocco, for example, in addition to the aforementioned strategies, the government has offered reforms that are likely to lure citizens led “astray” back to institutional politics. Furthermore, the Moroccan regime has increased official and unofficial negotiations, as well as exerting more individual and collective pressure; it has revived networks of local elected officials; it has modified its repressive actions from one sequence of protest movements to another, all the while adapting to perceived regional and international pressures (see the article by Bennani-Chraïbi and M. Jeghlaly). In Yemen, the current regime has attempted to compensate for early defections by establishing new internal support and rallying its traditional foreign allies – albeit not without brandishing the fear of a security threat (Bonnefoy & Poirier).

The concept of “modularity” also allows us to highlight one of the properties associated with the spread of mobilizations. This term designates the diffusion of conceptual frameworks and modes of action throughout a national sphere and potentially – as in the case of the “Arab uprisings” – from one country to another. Modularity is of course encouraged by emulation; that is to say, when the success of one particular performance leads others to believe that it would obtain similar success elsewhere. But a certain “attribution of similarity” is still necessary. This identification is produced by institutional or cultural characteristics that are shared or believed to be shared, as El Chazli has shown in his contribution to this issue regarding the call to protest on 25 January, in the wake of Ben Ali’s rapid downfall; however, a similar form of identification also occurred when the region’s dictators learnt from their neighbors’ successes and errors when attempting to restore the peace.

The case of the “Arab uprisings” has revealed how the attribution of similarity is largely the product of the sidelining, at least temporarily, of differences regarding methods and objectives, and of political footwork on the part of courtiers involved in unifying perceptions – footwork which is aided by the shape of the “encampment”, which we will address below, and the circulation of slogans within Tunis’ Kasbah and Egypt’s Tahrir Square (El Chazli). In the streets of Casablanca, observing the morphology of the demonstrations revealed a great deal of work on unification: coordination committees to decide on slogans, communication and logistics – including of course public address systems – and marshalling organizations (Bennani-Chraïbi & Jeghlaly). Likewise, in Yemen efforts were deployed to keep objectives broad and vague, thus allowing all kinds of meaning to be attributed to the protests and strong, visible identities to be preserved (Bonnefoy & Poirier). The work of political unification is nowhere more apparent than when it falls apart, as when a small number of Islamist students in Tunis chanted la ilaha illa Allah to counter the left-wing slogans on 14 January (Allal), or when, for example, after Mubarak was ousted, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists partnered up with the military. Tahrir Square then became a site of confrontation between secular and “religious” groups, between “moderate” revolutionaries who sought a return to peace and “radical” revolutionaries who wanted to force the army to retreat into its barracks. Nonetheless, recognizing the work of political unification does not necessarily lead to a strategic bias; with regard to Tunisia, Béchir Ayari emphasizes that reducing the number of grievances to a lowest common denominator – “dignity” or “get out!” – was not merely “intentional”, but also relates to the country’s much longer history of socio-political conflicts.

**The Third Man**

Not without irony, Rod Aya underscores how although the sociology of revolutions consistently condemns rational choice theory, it does not propose a general alternative theory of

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2. Doug McAdam, “Pour dépasser l’analyse structurale de l’engagement militant”, in Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin, 2005), 49-74. The mechanism of the attribution of similarity means that information alone does not suffice for a new idea or practice to be adopted. In order for diffusion and thus imitation to occur, potential imitators must at least partially identify with the original actors.
3. Choukri Hmed, “‘Si le peuple un jour aspire à vivre, le destin se doit de répondre’”, *Les Temps modernes*, 664, 2011, 4-20.
human action; even in the most structuralist of revolutionary models, individuals are at one point or another called upon to explain “the transition from word to deed”, thus surreptitiously reintroducing the rejected theories through the back door.1

It is thus not surprising that under such conditions, the existing literature ceaselessly swings between rather unconvincing binary oppositions: the spontaneity of the masses and emotional contagion, versus the calculated and manipulative actions of group leaders;2 the prevalence of tactical choices and innovation versus reliance on engrained forms and cognitive shortcuts during situations of structural uncertainty.3

This systematic ambiguity is fostered by both the difficulty of perceiving the structured nature of crowd behavior4 and the ambivalence exhibited in the discourse of witnesses and actors themselves.5 In her reading of the Civil Rights Movement’s “sit-ins” at the beginning of the 1960s, Francesca Polletta gives us a striking example of this phenomenon, actors oscillating between a feeling of spontaneity and unpredictability, and the simultaneous recognition of the crucial role played by the movement’s leaders and their preparations.6 Likewise, the “Arab uprisings” provide us with a plethora of examples, whether they take the form of participant interviews or journalistic reports, filmed and broadcast by Arab and international media.7

Dobry’s concept of “calculation evaporation”, which is halfway between the inertia of systems of disposition (or habitus) and the break in intelligibility, seems to us quite useful here. By relying on Goffman’s notion of “mutual anticipation”, Dobry suggests that during periods of broad desectorization, where structural uncertainty prevails, participants base their decisions to commit or not on the information they gather from the attitudes of other actors – all of this occurring in a structurally determined but malfunctioning normative framework which is about to partially or completely collapse.8 “From this perspective, invention is

1. R. Aya, “The Third Man”.
3. Michel Dobry has emphasized how the “heroic illusion” was embedded in works on crisis situations, as well as the dead-ends to which it led. This criticism can be extended to a certain number of interpretations of the event as a “break in intelligibility”, opening up a situation in which invention dominates and frees itself from all structural determination. For example, Alban Bensa, Éric Fassin, “Les sciences sociales face à l’événement”, Terrain, 38, 2002, 5-20.
5. We refer of course to Immanuel Kant’s reflections on revolutionary enthusiasm in The Conflict of the Faculties (11th section). Specifically on the subject of the French Revolution, see also the actors’ declarations reproduced and analyzed in Michel Vovelle, La mentalité révolutionnaire (Paris: Messidor/Éditions sociales, 1985), and also the pages devoted by Timothy Tackett to the night of 4 August 1789, marked by “a utterly unanticipated spirit of enthusiasm and self-sacrifice”, in Becoming a Revolutionary. The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 167.
7. For example, Stephano Savona’s beautiful film (Tahrir, 2011) and the eyewitness accounts published in Hatem Rushdy, 18 Days in Tahrir. Stories from Egypt’s Revolution (Hong Kong: Haven Books, 2011).
8. In his book on “collective abdications”, Ivan Ermakoff offers a similar analysis of decision-making processes in these situations of political fluidity. He bases himself on game theory, and thus does not link together the cognitive explanation with his contextual analysis. In particular, he develops the idea that, in high-stakes situations where the outcome is uncertain until the very end, the processes of alignment among participants constitute a decisive explanatory factor. See Ivan Ermakoff, Ruling Oneself Out. A Theory of Collective Abdications (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
neither the pure and simple replica of what has been internalized, nor the sudden and mysterious eruption, *ex nihilo*, of innovation*.  

Admitting this also means that rational choice theories should not be dismissed so quickly. In fact, they should be given credit for having determined that individual actions are the combined result of rational choice (which nevertheless does not explain what motivates such choices) and the hope of success (which does not presuppose the “reasonable” nature of said choices). Starting with these two premises, which we wholeheartedly accept, it is possible to proceed to a reflection on the micro-foundations of revolutionary action and on aggregation mechanisms in situations of uncertainty.

Those studies which adhere to rational choice theory outline a certain number of processes specific to revolutionary situations that can help us, in an ideal-typical manner, to understand how actors calculate their moves. We refer specifically to critical mass theory, which predicts that one’s decision to get involved in an event depends on the expected participation of a sufficiently large number of people, and is linked to several other results, in particular to propositions on the gap between private and public preferences in authoritarian states, a discrepancy which is bolstered by fear of repression. As a consequence, when a revolutionary situation is triggered and individuals feel that their private preferences regarding a regime change are shared by many others, they may, once a certain threshold is crossed, join the cause very rapidly and in large numbers: thus providing an explanation for the “revolutionary bandwagon” phenomenon.

Numerous personal accounts illustrate this phenomenon. For the novelist Alaa El Aswany, 25 January was a day like any other – until about mid-day. Turning on his television, the novelist saw that a “miracle” had happened, that Egyptians had risen up in great numbers against the current regime. He immediately got dressed to join the protesters on Tahrir Square. In his contribution to this issue, El Chazli shows that the discrepancy observed by “lay protesters” between the size of the 25 January protests and the intimacy of the usual sit-ins had a galvanizing effect. Hmed notes that in Sidi Bouzid, Ben Ali’s 13 January speech had more of a motivating than demotivating effect on the population, precisely due to this feeling of anticipation. Likewise, in Morocco, many people rallied to the enthusiasm drummed up by the pioneers of the February 20 Movement and the earlier leaders of the

“Arab Spring” movement once they had witnessed early successes. Conversely, as Bennani-Chraibi and Jeghlaly demonstrate in this issue, the ebbing of the movement coincided with a sort of “counter-bandwagon effect”: the feeling that the movement had lost the fight and that history was slowing down contributing to general demotivation.

Beyond the mechanisms that it outlines in a stylized manner, however, rational choice theory is of little help when attempting to reconstruct how actors make calculations in situ. First of all, rational choice theory is primarily interested in predicting commitment, based on the identification of pre-existing preferences. For our purposes here, all the depth and particularity of events is not accounted for in such an analysis.1 In effect, individuals adjust their calculations based on cost/benefit analyses which are indexed on highly volatile circumstances: this is precisely what we must address. In this vein, Tackett offers a considerably more convincing approach to calculations in revolutionary situations. He meticulously reconstructs the means by which members of parliament, or of general assemblies, gradually become revolutionaries. This involved studying the transformation of their values and modes of thinking in all aspects of their lives, from theoretical ideas to financial worries, often expressed in their personal correspondence.2 El Chazli has similarly shown how Tahrir Square witnessed the gradual birth of a revolutionary psychology and culture.

Second, the anthropological foundations of rational choice theory often circumscribe it within the confines of cognitivism, even when attempts are made to “contextualize” the explanatory models. We are therefore still very far from obtaining an adequate account of actors’ socio-cultural anchors, be that concerning the nature and strength of pre-existing ties, of the opportunities and obligations that the latter engender, or of their spatial anchoring in cost/benefit matrices.3 Furthermore, and here we come back to the previous criticism, a very large number of historians have demonstrated how the momentum of riots or rebellions also significantly contributes to the redefining of social ties and forms of inter-individual attachment, thus making it futile to try to reconstruct cost/benefit structures by means of static, one-dimensional models.4

By seeking to describe as accurately as possible the practical dilemmas faced by actors at every moment in time and by attempting to reconstruct their motivations by closely following individual actions and thoughts, we can hope to replace the missing “third man”5 at the center of every explanation, the actor who acts for “good reasons” (whether these seem rational or not in the eyes of the researcher and the world, and even if they are only loosely linked with, if not downright contrary to, the causes they serve).

5. R. Aya, “The Third Man”.

19
Revolutionary performances

Under the guise of unpredictability and collective effervescence, events paradoxically fall within prescribed norms and are fostered by modes of action drawn from select repertoires, which we shall attempt to describe as thoroughly as possible. This is not to deny the potentially transformative nature of certain characteristic elements of revolutionary situations. Quite the opposite: it seems to us that we can best understand the rules governing the plasticity of structures when we recognize their “sensitivity to mobilizations, actors’ tactical activity and the blows exchanged”. From our point of view, although revolutionary situations do amount to exchanges governed by interactional logic, attention must nevertheless be paid to the manner in which observable behaviors are historically established, since the social norms involved therein are and have been the object of gradual, multiple and simultaneous developments.

These comments call for a close observation of revolutionary performances, which are subject to two competing rationales. On the one hand, actors – both protesters and the forces of law and order – often participate in structurally regulated interaction sequences; these attest to the existence of a shared understanding of the situation, and thus of explicit and implicit rules of the game (legal frameworks, social mores) bolstered by local police culture and protest history, with all their attendant tactics and predictable moves. On the other hand, the multiplicity of actors present and the complexity of the battles over meaning that occur during interactions and interpretations introduce large margins of uncertainty. In other words, only a blow-by-blow contextualized analysis of a situation can allow us to understand how protest dramaturgy can activate and orient a revolutionary situation – so long as we take into account the actions of demonstrators, the authorities being challenged and the forces of order.

Specialists in Northern African and Middle Eastern social movements have remarked how the observable behaviors of demonstrations are historically established and how the social norms displayed therein are borrowed from the knowledge of previous struggles, either directly reused by activists or indirectly transmitted to younger generations. Whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco or Yemen, the turn being taken by protest movements must be linked to previous demonstrations: actions supporting “Arabic” or “Islamic” causes; unprecedented protests in Redeyef and Gafsa in 2008 and in Ben Guerdane in 2010; the growing wave of labor strikes in Egypt, starting in 2004; protests against the high cost of living, such as those occurring in Morocco until 2009; and the development of groups which transcend

3. O. Fillieule, Stratégies de la rue.
4. Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Olivier Fillieule (eds), Résistances et protestations dans le monde musulman (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003); Joel Beinin, Frédéric Vairel (eds), Social Movements, Mobilization and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). The same goes for the forces of law and order, which have also acquired know-how from past conflicts.
ideological cleavages (such as Kifaya, the April 6 group and the National Association for Change in Egypt, as well as various human rights organizations across different countries). These protests have allowed for the partial overlap between actors belonging to competing socio-political networks (see the articles by Bennani-Chraïbi and Jeghllaly, Hmed, and El Chazli). They have likewise encouraged millions of people to learn how to engage in collective mobilization; in addition, such protests also allow hardened activists to learn from their previous mistakes, to innovate in order to surprise the forces of law and order (see Hmed; El Chazli; Bennani-Chraïbi & Jeghllaly). In addition, we should not overlook the know-how acquired or the informal networks constructed by football club ultras groups, or more generally, throughout sites of urban dissidence (see Allal). Finally, we must take into account everything that can be gleaned and adapted from one movement to another – including transnationally – for both protestors and security forces.

But actors’ behaviors do not, however, solely stem from learnt forms – they also depend on situational logic, marked by a profusion of critical moments. We can see this clearly in the ambivalent effects of repression, which can radicalize opponents by establishing binary structures that accelerate the crumbling of authoritarian legitimacy; this may consequently drive participants to go far beyond their initial goals (see Allal and Hmed), even though for the authorities in power, indiscriminate violence and savage repression sought to reduce the strength and number of protests.

This phenomenon was especially evident throughout a whole series of cathartic events that acted as “turning points” (such as Egypt’s “Friday of Anger”, on 28 January 2011; see El Chazli), marked by the disappearance of security forces, the ambiguous role of the army, and the establishment of neighborhood self-defense committees. In Yemen, on 18 March 2011, the “Friday of Dignity” saw security forces intervene to oust protestors from Taghyir Square and more than 50 individuals were assassinated by isolated gunmen, thus spurring on the movement and speeding up the rate of defections. In Manama, although the first protests on 14 January 2011 only numbered a few hundred, the repression they provoked played a significant part in inciting revolt. The installation of an encampment at the Pearl Roundabout and its subsequent repression transformed the nature of the protest in just two days. First of all, demands became increasingly radical, moving from requests for reform to calls for a regime change. Secondly, having previously been confined to human rights activists, the protest movement spread to students, engineers, professors, lawyers, and even members of the opposition: trade union activists and Shiite religious leaders. This demonstrated that the spirit of rebellion had permeated throughout many different social classes and environments. This handful of examples illustrates the self-propelling dynamics of transformative events. The very strength of events leads participants to go far beyond what they had initially envisioned, let alone dreamt of (see the articles by Allal, Hmed, and El Chazli). And although the protestors of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia’s Kasbah, Tahrir Square and Deraa are remarkably aware of the historical significance of their actions, they are nonetheless still unable to explain it, as the situation’s logic surpasses their individual calculations and expectations.

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2. C. Alexander, Performative Revolution in Egypt, 3.
3. J. Gelvin, The Arab Uprisings, 46; H. Rushdy, 18 days in Tahrir.
Given a certain limited set of circumstances, the choice of one form of action over another stems from both tactical and strategic concerns, and from an attempt at framing undertaken by protestors in order to give meaning to their movement. During the Arab uprisings, heterogeneous modes of action have been observed: general strikes, mass protests, political funerals, manifestations, riots and even guerrilla actions. This variety is tied to the actors’ politicization, their pre-existing networks, the places they inhabit and the timing they chose for protest movements. The Tunisian examples in this volume demonstrate this clearly. The “débrouillard” youths (or young “hustlers”) work together thanks to neighborhood, friendly or familial relations; they tend to engage (usually at night) in urban guerrilla actions against the police on the streets of their neighborhoods. Union leaders and members of the political opposition, on the other hand, mobilize through their pre-existing activist networks and organize (daytime) events inspired by the lessons of the past: general strikes, sit-ins, solidarity caravans and protests along major city streets. Nevertheless, this variety does not prevent some amount of overlap from occurring.

For example, in the case of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, Libyan and Yemeni uprisings, all of the events converged around the physical presence of encampments. This allows us to interpret this mode of action as an effective means for the spread of protest movements.1 Tahrir Square in Cairo is the most evocative illustration of this phenomenon:2 the “Egyptian Revolution” symbolically took shape there and its fate now seems completely intertwined with the square’s life.3 This phenomenon – and the same sentiment – could also be observed in Tunis’ Kasbah, Sanaa’s Taghyir Square and Manama’s Pearl Roundabout, but also in Benghazi’s Al-Shajara Square, and in Tripoli’s Martyrs’ Square, etc.4 In non-democratic contexts where participating in a street demonstration can be very risky for oneself and one’s loved ones, occupying a public space is a gesture that is both symbolically disruptive and particularly adapted to the limits imposed by a repressive regime (see in particular the cases of Egypt and Yemen). First of all, encampments allow for the establishment of “liberated” spaces that help to overcome fear and anchor the protest over time (somewhat like the older technique of the barricade).5 Encampments are also a way to construct a unified image for the movement, supported by a mass – and largely peaceful – uprising of all sections of society against an illegitimate regime.6 Finally, as El Chazli, and Bonnefoy and Poirier, have shown in this volume, encampments are a powerful tool to stoke revolutionary enthusiasm,

1. See the conclusion to Olivier Fillieule and Danielle Tartakowsky’s *Demonstrations.*
2. This form of action is so prevalent and widespread that is has often caused other forms of revolt to be overlooked, both in the eyes of outside commentators as well as of participants. Similarly, attention was very quickly concentrated on capital cities, neglecting the contribution of other cities to the momentum of protests.
3. In the eyewitness accounts collected in *18 days in Tahrir*, the persons interviewed were firmly convinced that everything was staked on Tahrir Square, and that nowhere else in Egypt had much importance.
4. This form of action was not invented in Tunis’ Kasbah or on Tahrir Square and thus merits an explanation. The first example that comes to mind is that of Tiananmen Square in 1989, as well as more recent movements like *Los Indignados* and Occupy in Europe, the US and Israel. Moreover, these spaces did not become epicenters of rebellion overnight: like Cairo’s Tahrir Square or Casablanca’s Mohammed V Square (Lahmam Plaza), they had very often been construed as symbolic sites of activism well before 2011.
particularly by strengthening the “esprit de corps” of small groups. Two elements are crucial here.

On the one hand, due to its longer timeframe and the nature of the relationships it establishes, camping out in a protest site is likely to have a greater effect than sporadic participation in street demonstrations, no matter how violent or engaged these may be. This is attested to by a number of different elements, including first and foremost Facebook posts and Twitter feeds updated in the heat of the moment. The obstacles which may prevent us from collecting such testimonials and analyzing them aside, these messages are an exceptional opportunity to recreate the hour-by-hour development of participants’ morale, perceptions, and decisions: in other words, “the emergence of a situational norm.”

On the other hand, the intensifying of interpersonal connections, contradictory debates and discussions as well as the “liberation of political speech” echo the observations noted by historians of the French Revolution when analyzing that revolutionary mindset. In the Kasbah and on Tahrir Square, just like in the Palais Royal in 1790s Paris, individuals can become impromptu orators, ranting at passers-by, and roundtable discussions (halaqat niqash-hiyya) are improvised based on pre-existing networks, to which small groups may then adhere. Saturated with political symbols – flags, signs, graffiti – this is also a space for singing and dancing, for sharing food and having fun (El Chazli). The occupation of popular sites and the protests that punctuate their daily existence allow demonstrators to “witness or participate in the birth of new practices, of new goals and of a new conceptual framework, which reveal a more or less radical transformation of habits and customs and thus contribute to the creation of a new identity”. Initiation to group know-how takes place in several different ways. Organizers from the lower-middle class may transmit their experiences to “lay protesters”; likewise, “upper-middle class members may choose to slum it, to open up in a whole new way to urban youth culture, the latter teaching them how to protect themselves and how to procure rare items”. These observations underscore the importance of the spatial dimension when analyzing social movements; as both a resource and one of the elements at stake, space can potentially provoke sociability and politicization (see Hmed and Allal).

In this introduction, we have proposed an approach which refutes all causality and focuses on revolutionary situations, instead of searching for decisive factors and instigating elements,
or reflecting upon the consequences and outcomes of these situations. This is not to suggest that identifying contextual factors for understanding the dynamics of emergence is superfluous,¹ nor that considering the outcomes of revolutionary situations is pointless.² However, the lion’s share of research has hitherto been focused on these two aspects, and has thus neglected the study of revolutionary situations themselves. The summary literature review we have provided above has confirmed that this is not merely our point of view.

This sea change has been accompanied by another, equally important, shift in scholarly research. Studies on revolutionary situations, or more broadly on crisis situations, first and foremost attempt to examine and define the resulting properties of these situations. Deseccorization, the creation of inter-class coalitions, internal divisions or defections within the central bodies of the state and “calculation evaporation” are all results of the opening up of a revolutionary situation. We therefore propose examining the sequences of actions – defined as series of complex but observable interactions – which lead (or not) to these results. Two different avenues are possible here. One may reconstruct the various steps of the conflict between all the participants in a given revolutionary situation, in order to isolate the most important elements and outline their momentum. This is the approach adopted by the articles in this issue.³ On the other hand, one may also identify a series of relational and cognitive processes of general scope operating within the performances that lead to revolutionary situations (this without considering their success or failure). In doing so, the modes of transformation from one state to another which are typical of revolutionary situations may be gleaned. As we have noted above, such an objective is not far from that which drives mechanistic approaches. Nevertheless, it differs due to its methodological determinism and its subsequent rejection of causality, both in terms of the scales of observation used and its focus on the micro-foundations of action. Hence our emphasis above on actors and their decision-making processes in situ, as well as conflicts and their potential saliency. The following chart shows the breakdown of the aforementioned elements, divided into two categories.

First of all, we choose to distinguish between conducive elements, processes and revolutionary situations. This diachronic distinction between three different classes of elements is naturally porous and requires a case-by-case evaluation. Firstly, because the processes that lead to revolutionary situations can continue to operate therein as the latter develop; and secondly, because the distinction between starting conditions and the components of change between states are difficult to pin down. This is a classic problem for neuroscientists and biologists, both of whom ultimately make decisions based on pragmatic considerations.⁴ To limit ourselves to a single example, what is crucial here is to separate, at the environmental

². Studies on the outcomes of protest movements are indeed fascinating, whether they are conducted at the level of heavy macro-level social variables (for example, cultural changes), the orientation of public policy, or even the biographical consequences of involvement. For a review of the existing literature on this subject, see, Didier Chabanet, Marco Giugni, “Les conséquences des mouvement sociaux”, in O. Fillieule, É. Agrikoliansky, I. Sommier (eds), Penser les mouvements sociaux, 145-62.
³. This is also the approach adopted by the authors of a forthcoming volume which, like this special issue, brings together texts stemming from eyewitness observations on the ground: Amin Allal, Thomas Pierret (eds), Devenir révolutionnaires. Au cœur des révoltes arabes (Paris: Armand Colin, forthcoming 2013).
level, the more or less exclusive and interventionist character of the state\(^1\) from the predominant forms of social segmentation.\(^2\) At the micro and meso levels, those elements contribute to frame the incidence, the form and scope of processes of emulation and attribution of similarity. Hence they generate, among other results, modularity – in other words the heightened transferability of modes of action and recognizable frameworks across space and time, or the spread of protests to a significant portion of the population. Secondly, a similarly difficult distinction must also be made between the three scales of analysis used. For example, the process of the attribution of similarity (the strategic identification of potential imitators with original instigators) observable at the relational level is linked, at the cognitive level, to emulation (i.e., the hope of success). However, this distinction seems useful for the purpose of isolating different levels of observation of these processes, some of which cannot be easily reduced to cognitive processes (e.g., brokerage).\(^3\)

The list of elements above is tentative and non-definitive; it should be complemented by further research. In addition, the distinction between events and processes should be refined. If processes are defined as the succession of moves made by individual and collective actors, then they are composed of, but not reducible to, events. In its current state, the chart above

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does not specify what we mean by repression as a process (that is, a strategy employed with a specific aim and which is based on predicting the moves of adversaries as well as allies) and repressive events as moves made at a given time.

Finally, it is clear that processes develop in different ways depending on their preliminary conditions; it is likewise possible that they are not all equally central to the emergence of a revolutionary situation. Most importantly, however, processes acquire their power by combining with each other both synchronically and diachronically – with the result that a process, by itself, explains nothing. As we know, the authors of Dynamics of Contention faced criticism for inconsistently shifting between the production of historical narratives and the identification of mechanisms as explanatory variables.¹ We believe that studying sequences of actions and thus the combination of processes activated and experienced by the involved parties will allow us to unravel the successive stages that potentially lead, here and there, to revolutionary situations. In this fashion, we avoid establishing both the laws governing the development of revolutionary situations and the unique and circumstantial narrative of any particular revolutionary trajectory.

For example, at the beginning of 2011 similar processes were at work in both Egypt and Morocco. And yet, these processes did not produce similar results: in the former case, they led to a revolutionary situation, while in the latter they opened up “reformist” possibilities. Both countries witnessed the attribution of similarity and the construction of strategic identities, which translated into the creation of coalitions transcending pre-existing cleavages and polarizations. On the other hand, the modalities of crisis management combined differently. In Egypt’s case, concessions came too late following lengthy and indiscriminate repression. In Morocco, however, the rapid proposals for reform, redistribution capacity building – in part thanks to international aid – and the use of selective and timely repression combined to result in the implementation by protestors of organizational tools allowing them to “control the streets” and prevent the kind of “spillage” which in Egypt led to instigators being overrun by their followers. In other words, in Morocco, the protestors’ self-limitation helped to prolong the mobilization’s momentum; unlike in Egypt, the point of no return was never reached, and thus a gradual path towards change remained possible.

In conclusion, we would like to briefly return to the question of how best to study sequences of action. We believe that it is necessary to systematically connect the description of phenomena with the meaning that actors attribute to the actions they take, when they take them. This is the only manner in which researchers can avoid imputing motivations to individuals based solely on the observation of their acts. As Aya sarcastically remarks, without the meaning that actors attribute to the different steps of a process, the analysis of situations cannot be rooted in evidence or facts but “gratuitous assumption – usually some sociological cliché”.²

1. Pamela Oliver describes this tension well when she remarks that “a generalizing strategy focused on one process can never explain a historical episode, and should not try to. But conversely, a research program focused on explaining particular historical events cannot yield a general understanding of any process.” “Mechanisms of contention”, Mobilization, 8(1), 2003, 119-22 (121). See also Ruud Koopmans, “A failed revolution – but a worthy cause”, Mobilization, 8(1), 2003, 116-19 (117).

2. R. Aya, “The Third Man”. John Bohstedt directs this same criticism at E. P. Thompson regarding the concept of “moral economy” which he deems to be a romantic notion, even though greater attention paid to the riots would have allowed him to better understand the role of morality and decorum at the heart of actors’ calculations – both rioters and representatives of law and order. John Bohstedt, “The moral economy and the discipline of historical context”, Journal of Social History, 26(2), 1992, 265-84.
of success”.¹ We believe that the authors included in this volume have contributed several answers and opened up at least two different avenues for future research.

First of all, in order to avoid imputing wild meanings and making homogenous classifications, as well as the groundless guesses of pragmatic sociology, we must attempt to elaborate a precise sociography of participants in all their diversity, by restating their actions and perceptions in a personal and familial historical perspective. This involves focusing on the main principles of socialization and connecting the investigation of personal dispositions towards action with the way in which activist experiences and events transform individuals.² In other words, according to a perspective that is neither “causal” nor “linear”, one should measure how “commitment generates or modifies dispositions towards acting, thinking and perceiving – including self-perception – in continuity with or breaking with the previous products of socialization”.³ To do this, longitudinal studies are necessary. We will of course have to wait several years before being able to answer these questions, but if we hope to address them by means of longitudinal rather than retrospective studies, we must begin today.

Secondly, having recourse to the sociology of revolutionary situations requires instruments and methods of observation that allow for the thick study of sequences of action. From this perspective, the visual materials accessible on the Internet,⁴ either produced by researchers or collected in situ, are precious,⁵ in particular in situations where artistic production (cartoons, graffiti, photography, videos) played an important role in the protests.⁶ But most of all, as scholars have increasingly realized, ethnographic methods⁷ are without a doubt the best suited to reconstruct the complexity of conflicts and calculations at every step of a

⁴. A plethora of resources are available online. Social networks link to a wealth of images and videos on YouTube, while collective national blogs disseminate tracts, calls to action, photos, videos, graffiti (for example, <https://www.facebook.com/GraffitiEgypt/photos>), caricatures, interactive maps of protest sites, opinion pieces (for example, Nawaa.org created in Tunisia in 2004 and Mamfakkineh.com launched in Morocco on 17 February 2011, in relation to the February 20 Movement). In turn, bloggers’ networks such as Global Voices, a foundation created in 2004, select, translate and publish articles in 25 different languages. The number of political analysis blog aggregators is growing (for example, <http://www.arabist.net/>). The international media has also chosen to put documentaries online. Very rapidly, individual or group initiatives for archiving were taken, both activist and academic (for example, <http://www.tahrirdocuments.org/>). An open letter was even posted on Facebook asking for the network to open up part of its archives (<http://europe-liberte-securite-justice.org/2011/01/27/lettre-ouverte-a-facebook-sidibouzid/>). With regard to Tunisian events, the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Bibliothèque du Congrès collaborated with the American non-profit Internet Archive to archive traditional media sites, information portals, journalists’ blogs and activists’ Facebook pages, etc. In terms of Egypt, these same partners collaborated with Stanford University, the American University in Cairo, the British Library and the Alexandria Library. Moreover, as early as 28 March 2011, the Committee for Documenting the Revolution was founded by the Egyptian National Library and Archives: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/newsatauc/Pages/story.aspx?id=640;http://blog.bnf.fr/lecteurs/index.php/2012/07/02/la-revolution-du-jasmin-sur-la-toile;http://www.archive-it.org/public/collection.html?id=2323>).
sequence of action. And yet, the existing literature on the sociology of revolutions, and more generally on the sociology of mobilizations, is particularly silent in this department. It is unfortunate that the possibilities for research opened up by authors as diverse as Snow and Anderson, Roy, Peterson and, of course, Lichterman and Auyero have not prompted a widespread move towards an ethnographic approach to the sociology of social movements and revolutions, barring a few rare but notable exceptions.

Finally, when faced with such an overabundance of sources, it is evident that dissecting the sequences of action that lead to revolutionary situations is beyond the capacity of a sole researcher: this objective instead requires the creation of multidisciplinary research teams, endowed with linguistic and IT skills, but also with a deep understanding of the historical nature of the areas studied. We hope that the articles which follow will fully demonstrate this need. From this point of view, we must stress that focusing our observations on revolutionary situations does not mean neglecting an understanding of the socio-history of practices and the sociology of activist careers.

When asked for his opinion on the French Revolution in 1789, Zhou Enlai is said to have cleverly responded that it was too soon to tell. As we conclude this introduction to the current and ongoing Arab uprisings with this wise anecdote, we must therefore concede that we are only now in the first stages of this journey.
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