

Commentary

Static imaginations and the possibilities of radical change: reflecting on the Arab Spring

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Revised manuscript received 17 May 2012

Leaving Damascus in 2007, the experience of living in the city can be crystallised in the last few hours we spent in the Jebel Qasioun district before heading to the airport. Packing at 3 am was a chore: there had been a blackout since the previous evening. Looking out over Damascus, the only spot of bright light on the urban landscape below us was the monolithic Four Seasons hotel, which has its own generators. Most evenings, when looking down on the city from the slopes of Mount Qasioun, the complex pattern of intermittent brownouts and blackouts made the sprawling urban area seem like it was engaged in a dance, except that there was no melodious tune. The lights in various neighbourhoods would fade, then regain brightness as other districts would fade in turn, and other areas of the city would disappear altogether from the urban nightscape as energy flows failed to power lights in those parts of Damascus.

We packed by candlelight, and caught a cab. The taxi driver was warm and friendly, representative of our interpersonal interactions with Syrians during our stay. The rear windscreen of the taxi carried on it a frieze of Basel el-Assad's face. He was the brother of current (at the time of writing) president Bashar el-Assad, and had died in a car crash on his way to the airport in January 1994. His face was emblazoned on car windscreens, buildings and posters. And, as we set out at 3.30 am, the only people to be seen on the streets of the slumbering city seemed to be the ever-present soldiers patrolling empty crossroads, AK-47s slung behind their backs, their glowing cigarette butts visible in the cold night air. Their presence signalled something that had become abundantly clear during our stay: power did not sleep, and it was always watching. It also underlined the resignation we had heard from indi-

viduals we talked with, encapsulated in the idea that there was too much control, and that things would never change.

Static geographical imaginations

That resignation – or is it an (academic) enshrinement of assumed fact? – has echoed in much scholarly work about geopolitics in the region constructed as the 'Middle East' over the past three decades at least, both in geography and political science. Notwithstanding theories about 'Arab exceptionalism', which are based on the premise that countries in the region come pre-installed with resistance to processes of democratisation and globalisation, it can be argued that much research and scholarly work on political stability and change in the region has constructed the region as a quasi-homogenous 'bloc' characterised by a certain static inertia. This is reflected in quantitative, macro analyses of the political landscape in the region: for example, a quantitative scoring system for the level of democracy in world regions revealed that although the 'Middle East' became marginally more democratic after 1980, the 'bloc' as a whole had not seen much significant change since 1965 in terms of democratisation. In this light, the Middle East became seen as an 'authoritarian centre' surrounded by 'democratic geographic peripheries' (O'Loughlin 2001, 93). The upheavals of the second Iraq war and the invasion of Afghanistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century also caused some authors to observe that change had, perhaps, most recently happened *towards* a re-entrenchment of autocracy rather than towards more liberal and open regimes (Fukuyama and McFaul 2007).

Therefore, it can be argued that much scholarly work on the politics of the region in the past few decades has perpetuated a geographical imagination, or a set of imaginations, of the region as a relatively politically stable (if malignant) and economically and socially stagnant collection of autocracies. There is little in the literature that suggests awareness of the potential for a range of uprisings such as those that have occurred in the 'Arab' Spring – perhaps because *imagining* political change does not seem to be, in these postpolitical consensual times, akin to *theorising*, let alone *practising* political change. However, it is precisely the production of static geographical imaginations of Middle Eastern/Arab/'Other' immobility and resistance to change that have led scholars and commentators alike to be largely unprepared for the ruptures and upheavals that have characterised the political landscape in countries from Tunisia to Egypt and Syria since December 2010.

Thus, when considering the blindness to the possibilities of wide-ranging change that has prevailed in much of the literature, we argue that there has been a failure of radical imagineering focused on the region. This is not to say that geographers and political scientists, as well as scores of writers and commentators from the wider social sciences, have not critically engaged with *current* socio-political conditions in the region, and with the roots of these conditions in autocratic rule, imperialism, neo-conservatism and a raft of other -isms (take your pick). Indeed, analyses of the Spring that focus on the various constituent elements coalesced around the protests (globalism, class, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the like), rather than ascribing the movements to an assumed 'Arab' characterisation, are welcome. This type of work is tremendously useful and necessary, as is definitional and conceptual analysis around the key terms used in debates over the politics and geopolitics of the region. For example, it has been increasingly recognised that, at the level of geographical imaginations, in foundational terms the 'Middle East' is a predominantly Western construct (Culcasi 2010 2011). We do not challenge or question the utility and potential of these research emphases. What we argue is that these emphases only go so far. In reflecting upon current geographical imaginations in and of the region, scholarly work risks reproducing precisely those visions it seeks to critically interrogate. This is, we suggest, at least one of the reasons for the lack of the envisioning of radical change in the area. Indeed, when conveniently imagined as static and autocratically unchanging, the geopolitics of the Middle East become banal (Sidaway 2008). The events of the Arab Spring have highlighted the need for geographers and political scientists to re-engage with the political and to not stop at analysis, but to go further and *imagine* radical, alternative trajectories and outcomes. This does not mean the production of blue-

prints for a new world order, but the teasing out of potential ways forward and opportunities for change: indeed, radical and critical geographers 'seek not only to interpret the world, but also to change it through the melding of theory and political action' (Blomley 2008, 285). In the context of this short piece, this may mean engaging in more depth with actors on the ground and with the global and local networks of debate and activism that can promote change, as Bernal (2006) pointed out in analysis of the Eritrean diaspora's transnational influence on political change in Eritrea through both local movements and their connection with wider 'Internet intellectuals' active in internet-mediated diasporic networks.

Trajectories of change

Having suggested that static visions are counter-productive to the project of imagining alternative political futures, a key question remains as to how these alternative visions can be imagined and thereby produced. Part of the answer to that question lies in the events of the Arab Spring and in the agency of actors directly involved in, or impacted by, specific socio-political contexts and formulations. Intervention in Libya notwithstanding, what was striking across a range of locations, from Tahrir Square in Cairo to the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrain, is the lack of extensive external involvement in these popular uprisings. What was also inspiring is the decentred nature of most of the protest movements: in many states touched by the Spring, protests did not begin in the 'centre': they generally did not coalesce (at least initially) around the capital, but were sparked in locations – such as Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia – which are generally considered peripheral.

The events of the Arab Spring can also be understood in terms of broader mechanisms of political change: potential pathways for change in the case of authoritarian regimes in the region are generally understood to be either 'slow', constituted by transition along the East Asian model, or 'fast', characterised by change 'from below': 'regime collapse might provide the conditions for a negotiated democratisation pact cutting across the state-society divide' (Hinnebusch 2006, 392). Notwithstanding the fact that 'democratisation' became a tarnished term in the neo-conservative and neoliberal first decade of the twenty-first century – and a concept that needs to be positively and constructively reclaimed – these two broad possibilities for change can both be understood in terms of critical and radical geographic strategies and projects. For example, 'slow' change can be appropriated by critical thinkers if it is thought about in terms of a gradual and coordinated 'war of position' along Gramscian lines, while 'fast' change from the grassroots is a concept and process that lends itself to radical and revolutionary

approaches to societal, political and ideological transition. In the case of the Arab Spring, it may be posited that both processes took place: 'slow' change in this case can perhaps best be understood as the awakening of a consciousness of disenfranchisement among youth and other groups. Perhaps part of this conscious awakening took part through and because of the availability of internet-based communication technologies and online spaces where shared (and imagined) identities could be forged and plans of action catalysed and discussed. 'Fast' change clearly occurred in the sense of tipping points having been reached in Tunisia and Egypt, sparking similar events and social phenomena in other states in the region. This does not mean that resulting regimes will be democratic, but it does mean an enabling of processes of change. Furthermore, we are academics working within two disciplines, geography and political science, which tend to be much better at explaining change rather than envisioning it. For us the Arab Spring can be seen as a call to engage with the making of geographical imaginations (and perhaps radically so).

Promisingly, some commentators (see, for example, Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004) have pointed to the need to reformulate enquiries about political transitions by starting not from questions about why specific regimes *do not democratise*, but from an examination of the necessary conditions that *allow* authoritarian governments to persist. Analyses of this kind, carried out from a critical standpoint, cannot help but uncover intricate webs of ideology, culture, power and economics at a variety of scales and in multiple locations, from local markets in countless dusty towns to the rarefied 'black box' corridors of transnational decision-making and power politics.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, almost all our contacts with the friends we made in Syria have been cut. Those who were lucky managed to emigrate before 2011, but very few

managed to do so. Heading into 2012, we cannot help but feel privileged to be able to live and write without the pervasive, oppressive fear and uncertainty that seemed to invisibly flow through every street and public place we visited in Damascus, Hama or Aleppo. At the same time we are sure that the equally pervasive resilience, hope and humour of the many Syrians who gladdened our stay will prevail, and that the alternative possibilities opened up by the Arab Spring will become available on the streets of Syria.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the anonymous referees for comments on an earlier draft of this article, and to Kevin Ward for his editorial help and encouragement.

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