

EVERYTHING SOLID MELTS INTO THE STREET

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(Translated by Cristina Cielo.)

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The hunger riots that have shaken the Arab world are only the first waves in the great social tsunami engendered among the poorest peoples of the planet. The phenomenal increase in the price of foods (corn 58%, wheat 62%, over the course of a year) is the fuse that sparks the eruptions. These are fueled, however, by the brutal financial speculation that is again focusing on raw materials. Some prices top the highest spikes in 2008, and the World Bank and the IMF are incapable of putting the brakes on speculation on food commodities, that is, on life.

Two points about the Arab revolts call our attention: the speed with which the hunger riots turned into political revolts; and the fear of the dominant elite which over the last decades only responded to social and political problems with internal security and repressive measures. The former speaks to a new politicization of the poor in the Middle East; the latter, to the difficulties that those in power have in dealing with that politicization. The system is showing only too well that it can co-exist with any state authority, even the most “radical” or “anti-systemic.” But it cannot tolerate people on the street, revolts, permanent rebellions. The people in the street are a spanner in the works in the accumulation of capital, which is why one of the first “measures” taken by the military after Mubarak left was to demand



Egypt January-25 Revolution
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that citizens abandon the street and return to work.

But if those in power cannot co-exist with the streets and occupied squares, those of us below – who have learned to topple Pharaohs – have not yet learned how to jam the flows and movements of capital. Something much more complex is needed than blocking tanks or dispersing anti-riot police. In contrast to state apparatuses, capital flows without territory, so it is impossible to pin down and confront. Still further: it traverses us, it models our bodies and behaviors, it is part of our everyday lives and, as Foucault pointed out, it shares our beds and our dreams. Although there is an outside to the State and its institutions, it is difficult to imagine an outside to capital. Neither barricades nor revolts will suffice to fight it.

Despite these limitations, the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system. These will not remain unscathed by the destabilization in the Middle East. The progressive Israeli

press was right in noting that what is least needed in the region is some kind of stability. In Gideon Levy’s words, “stability encompasses millions of Arabs living under criminal regimes and evil tyrannies Maintaining Middle East stability means perpetuating the intolerable situation by which some 2.5 million Palestinians exist without any rights under the heel of Israeli rule” (*Haaretz*, 10 February 2011).

When millions of people take the streets, everything is possible. As tends to happen with earthquakes, first the heaviest and most poorly built structures fall, that is, the oldest and least legitimate regimes. But once the first tremor has passed, fractures begin to appear, cracked walls and overburdened beams can no longer hold up the structures. Violent upheavals are followed by gradual but more profound changes. We saw something of that in South America between the Venezuelan Caracazo in 1989 and Bolivia’s second Gas War in 2005. Over the years, the powers that shored up the neoliberal model were forced to abandon governments; a new relation of forces was established in the region.

Translator’s note: The Caracazo was a wave of violent protests in Venezuela against pro-market reforms imposed by the government, and the Gas Wars were mass mobilizations protesting Bolivian government support of multinational exploitation of natural gas resources. Both sets of protests eventually led to the deposing of neoliberal governments.

We are entering into a period of uncertainty and increasing disorder. In South America, the emergent power of Brazil has assembled a regional architecture as an alternative to the collapsing order. The

Union of South American Nations is a good indicator of this. Everything suggests, however, that things will be far more complicated in the Middle East, given the enormous political and social polarization in the region, the ferocious interstate competition and because both the United States and Israel believe that their future depends on sustaining realities that can in fact no longer be propped up.

The Middle East brings together some of the most brutal contradictions of the contemporary world. Firstly, there are the determined efforts to sustain an outdated unilateralism. Secondly, it is the region where the principal tendency of the contemporary world is most visible: the brutal concentration of power and wealth. Never before in the history of humanity has just one nation, the United States, expended as much in military spending as the rest of the world combined. And it is in the Middle East where that armed power exercises its supreme force to buttress the world-system. What's more: a small state of some seven million inhabitants has twice as many nuclear weapons as China, the second world power.

The Arab revolts may open a fissure in the colossal concentration of power that has been manifest in the region since the Second World War. Only time will tell if what is brewing is a tsunami so powerful that not even the Pentagon will be able to surf its waves. But we mustn't forget that tsunamis make no distinctions: they sweep up rights and lefts, the just and the sinners, the rebels and the conservatives. Nevertheless, they are in many ways similar to revolutions: they leave nothing in their place and they provoke enormous suffering before things return to some kind of normalcy, better perhaps than before, or maybe just less bad.