

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Asef Bayat. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017, 275 pp., paper, (9781503602588).

Asef Bayat, famed for his *Life as Politics* (2010, 2013), presents us with a rich theoretical and empirical study of the 2011 revolutions colloquially known as the “Arab Spring” in *Revolution without Revolutionaries*. The Arab Spring refers to the uprisings that felled long-held dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, shook the region and resulted in reforms in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, and led to utter chaos in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Reflecting on the very concept of “revolution,” Bayat attunes us to the theoretical notion that “every revolution is a surprise” (136), and instead of seeking to explain what *caused* the Arab Spring uprisings, his book instead *makes sense of* the Arab Spring. Bayat begins with a comparison between the revolutions of the 1970s, the liberation of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the revolution in Iran that ousted the Shah of Iran. Those revolutions were backed by an ideology, Marxist in the case of Nicaragua that swept Comrade Daniel Ortega and his fellow revolutionaries to power removing an ossified dictatorship and an ideology made up of Marxism and political Islam that came via the thoughts of Ali Shariati, a Sorbonne-educated sociologist, in the case of Iran. In Iran, the coalition between the left and the Islamists was hijacked by the latter, but that is not the main story here. The revolutions in the twenty-first century some three or four decades later were revolutions *without* a clearly defined ideology.

Bayat, an Iran-born, US-based sociologist from a working-class background who has a deep observational capacity to see and remember things as they unfolded in his own - first village - and then in the working-class Tehran neighbourhood where he grew up. In his work, he draws from his first-hand experience of the Iranian revolution and the revolutions of Arab Spring. In hermeneutic tradition, he wants to understand *how* these revolutions happen, not sparked by conscious decisions of great leaders, nor as results of teleology. He is an ethnographer of urbanity, and while other sociologists examine movement, Bayat coins and explores *nonmovement* (emphasis added). Echoing James Scott (1990), he illuminates how ordinary people doing ordinary things leads to extra-

ordinary outcomes, and contra Hannah Arendt (139), Bayat looks at the supposedly “non-political” mundane activities of everyday practices that have political implications. For example, he argues that we should not dismiss young people sitting on the street side cafes in Cairo as non-rational, non-purposeful actions. According to Bayat, pre-uprising Arab politics were a “complex mix of organized activism” with “politics merged in everyday life and labour” (139), likely the greatest form of resistance within totalistic control. A seemingly benign act of a Tunisian literature professor using George Orwell’s *1984* in her class, and other collective actions and nonactions could *not* be contained or controlled, unlike the organized “collective actors”, i.e., political parties or organized movements (142).

As an urban sociologist and urbanist ethnographer (93) – city, city-space, and square feature prominently in Bayat’s analysis, where he demonstrates that grassroots support for revolution came from urban populations, where he discusses “street politics” and “politics of the Street.” Bayat also examines the rise of the neoliberal cities in the Arab world – that he argues created a new form of marginality under the world Bank-initiated structural adjustments. The neoliberal city is a market-driven urbanity – shaped more by the logic of market than the needs of its inhabitants, —on the side of corporate interests instead of public concerns (94). The neo-liberal city in the Middle East is, what he calls, in part a city inside out, where urban subalterns live in (and, off) a substantial “outdoor economy”—a bustling public space (96). Bayat moves from “street politics” to “political street” – both potent concepts – to explore nonmovements, or the collective actions of the non-collective actors. (106). Yet, he is pragmatic about informality, which is not a panacea for urban ills. He exhorts not to romanticize but to recognize the agency of the dispossessed. The neoliberal strategy of “accumulation by dispossession is to be counteracted by “survival of repossession.” For him “Tahir moments” is an ensemble of “space, political economy, agency, insurgent space, “symbolic power”. To him the square life “is a liminal reality, a kind of transitory egalitarian community that navigates between utopia and reality” (118).

Bayat also covers the political economic forces as possible explanations, by viewing the political economy of the Middle East as a marriage of autocratic polity and neoliberal economy (113). In providing due attention to the spatial perspective, he critically engages with Alain Badiou (2011), Slavoj Žižek (2011), and David Harvey (2008). He agrees with Harvey that the Neoliberal urbanity is based on “accumulation by dispossession,” but he questions Harvey’s solution calling for a large-scale global social movement to undo or stop neoliberal onslaught.

He asks “If the dispossessed are to wait for a social revolution – what are they to do in the meantime?” (102). Bayat is also unsatisfied with Mike Davis’ (2006) optimistic view, where by alluding to radical Islam he suggests that formidable resistance is already taking place. Drawing on his earlier work, Bayat unequivocally holds that “...radical Islam is hardly the ideology of the urban dispossessed; rather, it builds on the attitudes and expectations of the broadly educated middle classes who feel marginalized in the prevailing economic, political and international domains” (102).

At the risk of stating the obvious, revolutions take place on the streets, in public squares – in physical spaces, not in cyberspace, which does play a part insofar as mobilization is concerned. The adds a valuable spatial perspective to examining revolutions. In Egypt, because of the “feeble hegemony” which allowed by default a vase informal socioscaples (kinship ties, back street communities, or informal worksites), this created alternative norms counter to state logic; the urban spaces that brought “subaltern subjects together”. Irrespective of whether revolutions succeeded or turned out to be what Bayat calls “refolutions”, the outcomes forced the rulers “to carry out meaningful reforms on behalf of the revolutions” (18). However, as one looks at Egypt today and the parts of the region that has become a rabble, questions arise: “are revolutions worthy of so much love, labour, sorrow, and sacrifice when there is no certainty that they will bring a just and free social order?” (226). Yet, Bayat would argue that: “In Tunisia and Egypt, the departure of the dictators and the apparatuses of coercion opened up an unprecedented free space for citizens, above all for all the popular classes, to reclaim their societies and assert themselves” (158). Revolutions are not *made*, they happen, and they happen not only for immediate results but also open up “new ways of doing things, new way of thinking about power and citizen’s rights.” (227).

The book would be of great value to scholars interested in revolutions, social movements, graduate students, and researchers of the Middle East politics.

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