

models. Thus, while some immediately sought to categorize and co-opt the revolutions for their own purposes (Žižek's impassioned, albeit simplistic, "freedom is universal"), others listened closely to the voices on the ground in Tahrir and elsewhere. Now, if ever, is the time to critically reevaluate some of our theoretical models, our tenacious binaries (chiefly among them secularism versus Islamism) and our catch-all monolithic frameworks, such as "the military dictatorship," "authoritarianism," and even "neoliberalism."

In particular, rethinking neoliberalism (or resistance to it) in terms of these revolutions will require a more nuanced attentiveness to historical specificity while avoiding the pretensions of universalizing and totalizing logics that seek a pro-forma explanation in terms of the primacy and purity of economic forces and center-periphery dynamics. Accounts that seek to understand the forces of change in terms of an "either/or" logic—liberalism or Islamism, revolution or counter-revolution—will need to be replaced by careful sociohistorical genealogies of governance, political subjectivity, and popular protest and mobilization. This will surely include a return to structural and class analysis, but any such understanding need no longer be grounded in orthodox conceptions of class as a universal subject of history. Rather, we may be better served by the conception of a multiform social, perhaps best conceived as an assemblage of complex forces and contradictions, in which class is ever present, albeit cross-hatched by other histories of struggle and alterity, subjectivity and solidarity.

## Literature and Revolution

**SAMAH SELIM**

Department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J.; e-mail:

sselim@rci.rutgers.edu

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The three-week uprising in Egypt that ended with the removal of Hosni Mubarak on February 11 happened to coincide with the section of my spring course syllabus on the Egyptian novel from Najib Mahfuz to Ahmed Alaidy. As was the case for many of my colleagues and their students, the rapid and awe-inspiring events unfolding daily before us pushed purely academic concerns to the margins of class discussion. This tidal wave of revolutionary politics erupting into the classroom forced me to the realization that my larger syllabus was not simply some neutral or systematic survey of half a century's worth of Arabic literature. I began to think about the largely invisible dystopic intellectual and historical paradigms through which modern Arabic literature is often framed, at least in the United States. The *nahḍa/naksa* narrative, which compelled many of us to read Arab cultural history of the 20th century as a story of brief "awakening" followed by irredeemable decline and corruption, is clearly no longer tenable in the wake of February 11. This same narrative underpinned the highly self-conscious postmodernism that began to emerge in Egypt in the 1990s and that reached its apogee a couple of decades later at the end of the 2000s, a postmodernism that was celebrated (though by

no means universally) as the true beginning of literary modernity and the emancipation of the subject from the dead weight of a past ideological age.

Is revolution compatible with postmodernism? Will the new literature to emerge from Egypt's revolution represent a return to realism or to older "committed" models? What might an avant-garde revolutionary poetics of the 21st century look like? How will the uprisings and ongoing revolutions in the Arab world force us as translators and teachers to rethink and reproduce our unofficial "canon" of modern Arabic literature in English translation? These are all questions that now require urgent answers.

## **Arab Revolutions and the Study of Middle Eastern Societies**

**ASEF BAYAT**

Department of Sociology, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Ill.;

e-mail: abayat@illinois.edu

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The speed, spread, and democratic thrust of Arab revolutionary uprisings conjure up the revolutionary waves of 1848 and 1989 in Europe. Spearheaded by educated youth, the Arab uprisings have been brought to fruition by the masses of ordinary people (men, women, Muslims, and non-Muslims) who have mobilized at an astonishing scale against authoritarian regimes in pursuit of social justice, democratic governance, and dignity. If this broad observation is valid, then these social earthquakes are likely to unsettle some of the most enduring perspectives on the region. To begin with, they should undermine "Middle East exceptionalism," with its culturalist focus informed by assumptions of "stagnant culture," "fatalist Muslims," and "unchangeable polity." In political science, students of "regime stability" and the "authoritarian resiliency" of Arab states may have to reevaluate their conceptual premises. The analytical relevance of the concept of "rentier state" as the political basis of authoritarian stability might likewise need serious reformulation. The blatant cash handouts by some Arab Gulf states to "buy opposition" during the wave of protests in February and March 2011 do not seem to have worked.

Although scholarly focus on elite politics as a key factor shaping the political dynamics in the region is likely to stay, the study of the social basis of politics—the politics of ordinary people and especially youth—might get more attention. Scholarly work on youth in the Middle East had already begun in the late 1990s, largely from the perspective of the labor market. But the study of youth as political actors has been almost non-existent (exceptions include Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, eds., *Being Young and Muslim: Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010] and Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010]) and should now draw serious attention. Finally, the largely civil and democratic character of the current political uprisings stands in clear contrast to the prevailing Islamist politics of the 1980s and 1990s. Scholarship on "political Islam" is likely to take a back seat in favor of themes and methods that bring Middle Eastern politics into the global realm of social theory and comparative work.