

Political Semantics of the Arab Revolts/Uprisings/Riots/ Insurrections/Revolutions

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Ever since the outbreak of the Arab revolts/uprisings/riots/ insurrections/revolutions, the question of which of these terms best describe recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and now Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, has formed the fulcrum for a deeper political rift reflecting the unconsolidated ideological nature of early 21st century politics. At stake in whether we consider, say, the popularly forced ousting of President Mubarak in Egypt as a revolution is an interconnected set of strategic, ideological and conceptual questions. Of all the aforementioned terms the deployment of 'revolution' to describe these changes sharpens these questions to the point of separating erstwhile allies, bringing to the surface deep disagreements that cannot be suppressed in the actuality of practice. For example, even whilst not hesitating to affirm unconditional support for the Tunisian events, French philosopher Alain Badiou's (2011) description of them as "riots" provoked his former student, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, to launch the following tirade against the intellectual figures he sees as the arch-provocateurs of the Western "extreme-left":

It's obvious that Badiou and Žižek ... know absolutely nothing about the situation, although, in Badiou's case, it's truly spectacular: almost like Sarkozy he manages to talk about the Tunisian revolution as if it were no more than some 'riots'. (Kacem, 2011)

In a further deepening of the divide it transpires that it is not just Badiou's ignorance that is condemned by Kacem; rather, it is Badiou's fidelity to the Marxist-Leninist heritage of the 20th century, which sought to transcend the formal-freedoms of liberty under capitalism to realise communism. So Kacem also adds:

I'd been wondering for years if it wasn't necessary quite simply to forget nearly all of twentieth-century politics. That is, to forget the failure of Leninism and its deep causes.

With the insistence on the term ‘revolution’, and in attaching it to Tunisia 2011, comes a concomitant demand for the erasure of the 20th century’s revolutionary sequence. The meaning of revolution today therefore becomes a potentially explosive question.

But why exactly is the term ‘revolution’ so politically-charged in comparison to others such as ‘revolt’, ‘uprising’, ‘riot’ or ‘insurrection’? Let us propose that it is because of all the above terms, ‘revolution’ is the one that implies the deepest *content*. It does not simply describe mass political actions, crowds on the street, or governments falling. Instead, it announces an affirmation of the systematic overhaul of existing socio-economic conditions, within which the popular mobilisation plays an essential role even while it remains insufficient to represent the overhaul itself (this, at least, is the French revolutionary and Marxist conception—and even non-Marxist revolutionaries would like to maintain its potency of implication). Thus, the question moves. Once the innocuous language of ‘revolts/uprisings/riots/insurrections’ is delineated from the more affective term ‘revolution’, the ideological divide between the two vocabularies becomes an expression of the hermeneutic claim over ‘revolution’, which is necessarily bound up with the continuities and ruptures of the 20th century’s revolutionary and anti-revolutionary sequences.

The aim of this theoretical commentary is to unpack the subjective core of this matter by way of an extrapolation on the thought of Alain Badiou, whose philosophy of the event would seem ideally placed to provide theoretical rigour here. We proceed in three parts. The first of these underlines the inadequacy of the sociological literature on this topic, pointing out how it has occluded the role of political subjectivity in attaching content to the term ‘revolution’. The second part then goes on to formalise the subjective splits that pertain to the word ‘revolution’, making use of what Lacan and Badiou call ‘mathemes’. Finally, the third part uses this discussion to draw some conclusions with regard to recent events in the Middle East and North Africa

Sociological (un-) grounding

What is revolution? Such a simple question, but one that unleashes an array of entangled theoretical considerations. On the one hand, it is not adequate to seek to determine the nature of this nomination solely through its invariant characteristics like masses on the streets, governments falling, or new leaders rising to power. All these are ultimately too ambiguous to serve as anything more than the loosest schematic, which then falls apart with the entrance of active subjectivity. For a Marxist, if the bourgeoisie remain in power, this negates any procedural semblance of a revolution. For a liberal democrat, the survival of cliques from the old nomenclature deflates the democratic revolution. Whichever way it

is examined, on closer inspection there is no single set of characteristics that will serve to unite all around a common content. On the other hand, neither is it satisfying to sophistically divide up revolution to fit individual preferences and leave the matter there—a ‘you have your revolution, and I’ll have mine’ approach. What is rather needed is an investigation into the conditions of possibility for nominating a political event as a revolution.

To do this we firstly have to differentiate our concept of revolution from the academic typologies produced by the likes of Samuel Huntington and Theka Skocpol (see Goldstone, 2001 for a broad comparative overview of all these conventional sociological approaches). Revolution, I insist, cannot be defined in a manner consistent with these forms of social science. The notion is contradictory; we would have to accept the idea of a static social world that can be measured, tested and made amenable to prediction and forecasting. Hence, our first Badiouian axiom regarding revolutions is that the complete social overhaul indicated by the word cannot be fully predicted: a revolution relies on the introduction of novelty that reconfigures the sense of what is possible. Following Badiou’s conception of an event, despite all the associations we might have with revolution—say in the case of the French Revolution: the storming of the Bastille, the Terror, and so forth—these terms cannot define ‘revolution’ *in its entirety*, for if they were to occur again (with no new element added) they would not compose revolution, but just repetition (or a sanitised historical recreation). Social science discourse has a blind spot for precisely this necessary *change* in content. And this is where Badiou’s idea of the event comes into its own. Instead of presenting the idea of the event as an *abstraction*, he conceives it as a *subtraction*, and likewise for the subjective process of affirming an event. The essential difference can be put as follows: the revolution conceived of by social science is one based on the accumulation of knowledge of the phenomenon filed under the signifier ‘revolution’, whereas for Badiou the event—in an ambiguous mathematico-epistemological register—is the occurrence of the void: the empty set of inconsistency asserting itself as a momentary, vanishing, partitive excess over belonging (see Badiou, 2006, meditations 16-20, pp. 173-211). Or, dropping the quasi set-theoretic language, the difference is that Badiou’s event occurs and recedes as quickly as it happens, leaving only an indelible mark on those subjects given the choice to affirm it and see through its consequences to the end. It disrupts the regime of knowledge with an irreducible novelty.

But at the same time, if we want to follow Badiou, contra sociology, all the way down this line of thought, we need to insist on keeping event and revolution as separate terms, despite the similar way in which they are conceived. Significant in this regard is the fact that Alain Badiou (2005) and former comrade, Sylvain Lazarus (2007), consider ‘revolution’ an exhausted term in the context of the contemporary political impasse. Yet since Badiou has marked a number of revolutions as key examples of events (the French Revolution, the Chinese Cultural revolution, etc.), this has led to a conflation of

‘revolution’ with ‘event’ in some readings of his philosophy. Most seriously, this confusion resulted in Toula Nicolapoulos and George Vassilacopolous (2006) charging Badiou with infidelity to the retreat of the political event; by which they mean Badiou romanticises the event in bad faith, knowing full well the implications of the end of the global, revolutionary movement in the late 1970s. To untangle this claim one needs to be attentive to the fact that as tempting as it might be to draw a one-to-one correspondence between the term ‘revolution’ and ‘event’—even if what is and is not a revolution is defined according to criteria in line with Badiou’s idea of the event – they still do not match precisely. It is worth clarifying this relationship in more depth, taking Badiou beyond Badiou.

The meaning of ‘revolution’ split in two

Let us first mark the most crucial difference: namely, that the term ‘event’ operates as an idea, whereas a revolution, on the other hand, consists of a concrete set of factual occurrences. To take an archetypal example, in the case of the Russian revolution, the rupture arguably spans from February 1917 to the end of the Civil War in 1921. One should not consider this period itself as a single event, though, even if we could consider it as one revolution. Different subjectivities have always named events at different sites in this single revolutionary sequence:

- *The February revolution*: which all can affirm, except the extreme reactive figure of the recalcitrant monarchist;
- *The Bolshevik October seizure of power*: the political Fall, according to liberals;
- *The dissolution of the Soviets*: for left-communists, the Bolshevik’s first counter-revolutionary action; or
- *The extinguishing of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921*: for anarchists, further demonstrating the necessity of resistance to the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat and transitional socialism.

The splits issuing from the events within the Revolution led to the event’s promulgation through the loyalties of sects to the possibilities of the ruptures within the revolution. Since there had never been a successful communist revolution in history before (excluding the short lived Paris Commune), there was no textbook to follow, no obviously right or wrong answers even for those strictly adhering to the Marxist orthodoxy of the time. The full force of the *undecidable* made its presence felt.

In rendering the possibility for splits like these into formal language, we have to go beyond Badiou to make the distinction that a revolution has to be both a revolution (a term of itself, much the same as how Badiou constructs the *matheme* of the event), and

also must contain *at least* one event thought separately from the revolution itself. This leads to an extremely simple matheme for revolution, (1), which for simplicity's sake is presented as a formalisation of a revolution containing a single event *for the subjects who affirm an event within in*:

- (1) $R_x' = \{R_x, e_x\}$
- (2) $e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}$ (Badiou, 2006, p. 204)
- (3) $R_x = \{(\sum R_y, R_z \dots), X\}$

Matheme (1) indicates that R (revolution thought as a loosely determined ahistorical invariant—the masses on the street bringing down government, for example), given a determinate site R_x is coupled with an event e_x , leading to a revolution necessarily containing novelty R_x' — i.e. a revolution has to be both a revolution *and* contain an event; the axiom for those who subjectivate themselves to the 20th century's sequence. R_x' is irreducible to what is known of revolutions past. This novelty is contained in Badiou's matheme of the event (2), where an event is both a term of itself and contains an evental site X. Finally, the third matheme (3) determines R_x as a revolution only insofar as it presents an iteration of other revolutions, the sequence that gives sense to its terms. So the Russian revolution would be determined insofar as it repeats certain traits of earlier revolutions ($\sum R_y, R_z \dots$), which in turn repeat historical revolutions preceding them.

For those who never subjectivated themselves to the Marxist revolutionary sequence of the 20th century, revolution (3) contains only the evental site X, and the term 'revolution' R_x simply describes this historical repetition of the accumulated traits observed in past revolutions ($\sum R_y, R_z \dots$). Consequently, in this conception of revolution we have no novelty, created by e_x and to be affirmed by a subject leading to R_x' . Whereas revolution for subjects within the event horizon of the 20th century's revolutionary sequence (1) is denoted as R_x' to emphasise the necessary novelty introduced through the event, for non-subjects (social scientists of revolution, say) R_x denotes that revolution only need couple knowledge of past revolutions with a specific site. Or to render into plain English: for a non-subject, a specific revolution R_x is solely the sum of what is known of revolutions past framing the contemporary evental site X. This expresses particularly well non-subjects' inability to perceive anything more than contingent spatial and temporal variants in each revolution, and also the social science methodology, which conceives revolution by cumulatively adding the features of each past revolution to just modify the definition, controlling it within the encyclopaedic regime of knowledge. It gives no indication of what classes a revolution as a revolution other than it bearing similarities to past revolutions, resulting in an ever-wider array of definitions by which 'revolutions' may fit the criteria of equivalence as time goes on.

Theda Skocpol faced this problem in the late 1970s, when she was forced to

invent new categories to divide the term (political vs. social revolutions) in order to police its growing ubiquity and indeterminacy. It was her subject position as expressed through social science discourse that necessitated splitting the set as it grew ever larger. But still, by trying to contain revolution within this framework, the proliferation Skocpol sought to curtail continued unabated as “researchers sought to apply the structural theory of revolution to an increasingly diverse set of cases,” with the result that: “Two recent surveys of revolution... list literally hundreds of events as “revolutionary” in character.” (Goldstone, 2001, p.142) And adding an ideological twist to boot: “whereas the “great revolutions” had all led fairly directly to populist dictatorship and civil wars, a number of the more recent revolutions—including that of the Philippines, the revolutionary struggle in South Africa, and several of the anticommunist revolutions of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—seemed to offer a new model in which the revolutionary collapse of the old regime was coupled with a relatively non-violent transition to democracy” (ibid., p. 141).

What does this formal theorisation of ‘revolution’ reveal? It demonstrates that if revolution is perceived to have reached an end, we need to take that not literally to mean that there are no longer any revolutions, as in the phenomena of an act of a revolutionary uprising, or the toppling of a government. It is rather that once revolutions no longer take place within the sequence of Marxism, or in the context of any new sequence, the term collapses to its non-subjective definiens. As Lazarus (2007, pp. 262-263) concludes: “Revolution... belongs as a category to the historicism that is fuelled by both defunct socialism and parliamentarianism,” because, “historicism keeps a place for the word ‘revolution’... in post-socialist parliamentarianism following the fall of the Berlin Wall.”

We are now in a position to understand the relation of ‘Marxism’ to ‘revolution’ and to ‘event’. If Marxism was the sequence which created an event horizon dividing subjects and non-subjects across the 20th century, it is only from a position subjectively inside that event horizon that we can talk of a ‘last revolution’—as Badiou, a Maoist, considers the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Only as part of that sequence does his theory of the event make any sense. Take away revolution, and all you are left with is the *idea* of the event in its subtracted purity: $\mathbb{R}_x = \{\mathbb{R}_x, e_x\}$. Thus we have to repudiate Nicolapoulos and Vassilapopolous’ charge of Badiou’s infidelity to the retreat of the revolutionary event; on the contrary, on the event horizon of the Marxist sequence, Badiou’s theory of the event can only make sense within the retreat of that revolutionary sequence. As Badiou (2005, p.483) puts it: “the word itself lies at the heart of the saturation.” The idea of the event is hermeneutically situated in the context of the contemporary retreat of revolutions containing novelty, and hence for those subjectivated to the 20th century’s sequence, the events, for instance, in the Eastern and Central European anti-Soviet uprisings of the late 1980s, are not revolutions insofar as all they did was end up affirming a pre-existing global,

capitalist status quo and normalising their political and economic regimes within it.

Revolution today?

Two notions of revolution have been identified: a non-subjective idea, and a subjective idea—the latter premised on the introduction of novelty. For the non-subjective sociological understanding of revolution, there would probably be no problem in labelling events in the Arab world as revolution as long as they match an adequate number of features present within the sociological knowledge. The question is rather more difficult for those who reserve the term ‘revolution’ *R_c* for socio-economic upheavals that bear a novel event with the potential to form a future sequence of novelty-bearing subjectivation.

At the root of some leftwing fears about events in the Arab world is that these events have more in common with the anti-Soviet pro-democracy liberalisations than they do with the bold revolutions preceding them in the 20th century. On the other hand, there has also been a marked enthusiasm from others for affirming their break with the cynical repetition of pro-Western ‘colour revolutions’ of the past twenty years. Badiou’s principal interlocutor to the Anglo-American philosophical world, Peter Hallward, was unreserved in endorsing their importance:

For whatever happens next, Egypt’s mobilisation will remain a *revolution* of world-historical significance because its actors have repeatedly demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to defy the bounds of political possibility, and to do this on the basis of their own enthusiasm and commitment. (Hallward, 2011) [Emphasis added]

Ray Brassier, however, was more reserved about the potential (note the shift in terms):

But it remains too early to tell what will ultimately come of these *rebellions*, so I am wary of any overly optimistic prognoses: there are too many powerful vested interests ready to do whatever it takes to ensure the preservation of their privileges, amply assisted by their US and European sponsors needless to say. (Brassier, 2011) [Emphasis added]

What is also significant in almost all assessments is the reduction of the question of these revolts/uprisings/riots/insurrections/revolutions as being against (1) Western influence and (2) neo-liberalism, as pre-conditions for securing their potential, hence a legitimate stake on the term ‘revolution’. But in this reduction a number of other factors have been left by the wayside. In all cases—including the cases of the ‘successful’ examples of ‘revolution’ in Egypt or Tunisia—we have not seen any group take control of the state. A

most primitive historical condition for the application of the term ‘revolution’ has not been met, which might even make the sociologists flinch. And herein lays the nub of the problem: by not going all the way to capture power, the insurrectionists capacity to affect a shift in the direction of the new, and especially to introduce measures against capitalism, is severely curtailed. Given that, in the context of capitalist globalisation, any genuine socio-economic overhaul is *prima facie* obliged to face up to the structural reality of capitalism, invocations of justice and democracy are inadequate on their own for this task—ideas are needed. This is why I think Badiou, for all his unreserved affirmation of these events, steps back from calling them revolutions, and settles on the—perhaps too diminutive—term ‘riot’:

In my opinion, the rioters’ disposition arises in interval periods [périodes intervallaires]. What is an interval period? There is a sequence in which revolutionary logic is clarified and where it explicitly presents itself as an alternative, succeeded by an interval period where the revolutionary idea has not been passed on to anyone [déshérence], and in which it hasn’t yet been taken up, a new alternative disposition has not yet been formed. (Badiou, 2011)

Which is to say, for Badiou, as a subject to the revolutionary sequence of the 20th century, a revolution has to also contain an event; and for an event one needs ideas; and today, without an ideological assemblage of sufficient potency to confront and solidify an anti-capitalist program, one is left without a necessary condition for the experimentation and drive to novelty in reordering society that was indicative of those great ruptures of the last century. ‘Revolution’ remains a term that still lies out of reach after the first decade of the 21st century.

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