

Two alternative translations into English of Alain Badiou's recent piece on Arabic revolutions in "Le Monde"

First, by by Antonio Cuccu and Mark Joseph

The Wind of the East Carries Away the Wind of the West

Until when will the idle and crepuscular West, the “international community” of those who still believe themselves to be the rulers of the world, continue to give lessons in good management and good behavior to the rest of the world? Is it not laughable to see well-paid and well-fed intellectuals, retreating soldiers of the capital-parliamentarism that serves us as a moth-eaten Paradise, offering their services to the awe-inspiring Tunisian and Egyptian people, in order to teach these savages the ABC of “democracy?” What pathetic persistence of colonial arrogance! In the situation of political misery that we’ve been living in for the last three decades, is it not evident to surmise that it is us who have everything to learn from the popular uprisings of the moment? Don’t we sense the urgency of giving a close look at everything, that, over there, made possible, by collective action the overthrow of oligarchic and corrupt governments, who — or maybe especially — stood in a humiliating position of servitude to the Western world? Yes, we should be the students of these movements, and not their stupid professors. For they give life, with the genius of their own inventions, to those same political principles that for some time now the dominant powers tried to convince us were obsolete. And in particular the principle that Marat never stopped recalling: when it is a matter of liberty, equality, emancipation, we all have to join the popular upheavals.

We Are Right To Revolt

Just as in politics, our states and those that benefit from them (political parties, unions and complaisant intellectuals) prefer management to revolt, they prefer peaceful demands and “orderly transition” to the breach of law. What the Egyptian and Tunisian people remind us is that the only action appropriate to the sentiment of scandalous takeover by state power is the mass uprising. In this case, the only rallying cry capable of linking together the disparate aspirations of those making a crowd is: “you there, go away!” The exceptional significance of the revolt, namely its critical power, lies in the fact that its rallying cry, which is repeated by millions of beings, gives the measure of what will be, undoubtedly, irreversibly, its first victory: the flight of the designated man. And whatever happens next, this triumph, illegal by nature, of popular action, will be forever victorious. Now, that a revolt against the power of the state can be absolutely successful is an example of universal reach. This victory points out the horizon over which any collective action, unencumbered by the authority of the law, itself outlines: what Marx called “the deterioration of the state.” The knowledge that someday the people, freely associated and resorting to their creative power, will be able to throw away the funereal coercion of the state. That’s the reason why this idea arouses boundless enthusiasm in the entire world and will trigger the revolution that ultimately will overthrow the authority in residence.

A Spark Can Set The Plain on Fire...

It began with the suicide, a self-immolation by fire, of a man who had been downgraded to unemployment, and to whom was forbidden the miserable commerce that allowed him to survive; and because a female police officer slapped him in the face for not understanding what in this world is real. In a few days this gesture becomes wider and in a few weeks millions of people scream their joy on a distant square, and this entails the beginning of the catastrophe for the powerful potentates. What is at the root of this fabulous expansion? Are we dealing with a new sort of epidemic of freedom? No. As Jean-Marie Gleize poetically said: “The dissemination of a revolutionary movement is not carried by contamination. But by resonance. Something that surfaces here resounds with the shock wave emitted by something that happened over there.” Let’s name this resonance “event.” The event is the sudden creation, not of a new reality, but of a myriad of new possibilities. None of them is the repetition of what is already known. This is the reason why it’s

obscurantist to say “this movement claims democracy” (implying the one that we enjoy in the West), or that “this movement pursues social improvement” (implying the average prosperity for the *petit bourgeois de chez nous*). Starting with almost nothing, resonating everywhere, the popular uprising creates unknown possibilities for the entire world. The word “democracy” is hardly uttered in Egypt. There is talk about “a new Egypt,” about the “true Egyptian people,” about a constituent assembly, about complete changes in everyday life, of unheard-of and previously unknown possibilities. There is a new plain that will come after that which no longer exists, the one that was set on fire by the spark of the uprising. This plain to be stands between the declaration of an alteration in the balance of forces and the grasping of new tasks. Between the shout of a young Tunisian: “We, children of workers and of peasants, are stronger than the criminals;” and what a young Egyptian said: “As from today, January 25, I take in my own hands the matters of my country.”

The People, Only the People, Are the Creators of Universal History

It's amazing that in our West, the governments and the media consider that the insurgents in a Cairo square are “the Egyptian people.” How can that be? Aren't the people for them, the only reasonable and legal people, the one usually reduced to the majority of a poll, or the majority of an election? How did it happen that suddenly, hundreds of rebels are representative of a population of eighty million? It's a lesson that should not be forgotten, and that we will not forget. After a certain threshold of determination, of stubbornness and of courage, the people, in fact, can concentrate their existence in a square, an avenue, some factories or a university... The whole world will witness the courage, and especially the wondrous creations that go with it. These creations prove that there, there is a People. As an Egyptian rebel strongly put it: “before I watched television, now television is watching me.” In the stride of an event, the People is made of those who know how to solve the problems brought about by the event. Thus, in the takeover of a square: food, sleeping arrangements, watchmen, banners, prayers, defensive actions, so that the place where it all happens, the place that is the symbol, is kept and safeguarded for the people, at any price. Problems that, at the level of the hundreds of thousands of risen people mobilized from everywhere, seemed insoluble, all the more that in this place the state has virtually disappeared. To solve insoluble problems without the assistance of the state becomes the destiny of an event. And this is what makes a People, suddenly, and for an indeterminate time, exist where they have decided to assemble themselves.

Without a Communist Movement, There Is No Communism

The popular uprising we speak about is obviously without a Party, without an hegemonic organization, without a recognized leader. In time, we can assess whether this characteristic is a strength or a weakness. In any case, this is what makes it have, in a very pure form, undoubtedly the purest since the Paris Commune, all the necessary characteristics for us to call it a communism of movement. “Communism” here means: a common creation of a collective destiny. This “common” has two specific traits. First, it is generic, representing, in a place, humanity as a whole. There we find all sorts of people who make up a People, every word is heard, every suggestion examined, any difficulty treated for what it is. Next, it overcomes all the substantial contradictions that the state claims to be its exclusive province since it alone is able to manage them, without ever surpassing them: between intellectuals and manual workers, between men and women, between poor and rich, between Muslims and Copts, between peasants and Cairo residents. Thousands of new possibilities, concerning these contradictions, arise at any given moment, to which the state — any state — remains completely blind. One witnesses young female doctors from the provinces taking care of the injured, sleeping in the middle of a circle of fierce young men, and they are calmer than they have ever been, knowing that no one will dare to touch a single hair of their heads. One witnesses, just as well, a group of engineers entreating young suburbanites to hold the place and protect the movement with their energy in battle. One witnesses a row of Christians doing the watch, standing, guarding over bent Muslims in prayer. One witnesses merchants of every kind nourishing the

unemployed and the poor. One witnesses anonymous bystanders chatting with each other. One can read thousands of signs where individual lives mix without hiatus in the big cauldron of history. All these situations, these inventions, constitute the communism of movement. For two centuries the only political problem has been how to set up in the long run the inventions of the communism of movement? The only reactionary assertion affirms that “This is impossible, verily harmful. Let’s trust the state.” Glory to the Tunisian and Egyptian people because they conjure the true and only political duty: the organized faithfulness to the communism of movement taking on the state.

We Don’t Want War, But Are Not Scared of It

The peaceful calm of the gigantic demonstrations was mentioned everywhere, and this calm was associated with the ideal of elective democracy that was attached to the movement. Let’s point out nevertheless that insurgents were killed, hundreds of them, and that they are still being killed every day. In more than one instance, those killed were fighters and martyrs of the event; they died for the protection of the movement. The political and symbolic places of the uprising had to be defended by means of ferocious fighting against the militiamen and the police forces of the threatened regimes. And who paid with their lives but the youth from the poorest communities? The “middle class” — of which our preposterous Michèle Alliot-Marie said that on them, and only on them, depended the democratic outcome of the events — should remember that, at the crucial moment, the persistence of the uprising was guaranteed only by the unrestricted engagement of popular contingents. Defensive violence is inevitable. It still continues, in difficult conditions, in Tunisia after the young provincial activists were sent back to their misery. Can anyone seriously think that these innumerable initiatives and these cruel sacrifices have as their main objective to prompt people “to choose” between Souleiman and El Baradei, as happens in France where we pitifully surrender our will in choosing between Sarkovzky and Strauss-Kahn? Is this the only lesson of this majestic episode?

No, a thousand times no! The Tunisian and the Egyptian people are telling us: raise up, build up a public space for the communism of movement, protect it by all means while inventing the sequential course of action; such is the real of the politics of popular emancipation. Certainly, the Arabic states are not the only countries that are against the people and, notwithstanding elections, are illegitimate. Whatever will happen, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings have a universal meaning. They prescribe new possibilities and thus their value is international.

The Eastern wind is getting the better of the Western one. How much longer will the poor and dark West, the “international community” of those who still think of themselves as masters of the world, continue to give lessons of good management and behaviour to the whole planet? Isn't it laughable to see certain intellectuals on duty, disconcerted soldiers of the capital-parliamentarism that stands as a shabby paradise for us, offering themselves to the magnificent Tunisian and Egyptian peoples in order to teach these savage populations the basics of “democracy”? What a distressing persistence of colonial arrogance! Given the miserable political situation that we are experiencing, isn't it obvious that it is us who have everything to learn from the current popular uprisings? Shouldn't we, in all urgency, closely study what has made possible the overthrow through collective action of governments that are oligarchic, corrupt and—possibly, above all—humiliatingly the vassals of Western states?

Yes, we should be the pupils of such movements, and not their stupid teachers. That is because, through the genius of their own inventions, they give life to some political principles that some have been trying for so long to convince us that they are outdated. And especially the principle that Marat never stopped reminding us of: when it comes to freedom, equality, emancipation, we owe everything to popular uprisings.

We are right to be revolted. Just as with politics, our states and those who take advantage of it (political parties, unions and servile intellectuals) prefer management to revolt, they prefer claims, and “orderly transition” to any kind of rupture. What the Egyptian and Tunisian peoples remind us is that the only kind of action that equals a shared feeling about scandalous occupation by state power is mass uprising. And that, in such a case, the only watchword that can federate the disparate groups of the masses is: “you out there, go away”. The extraordinary importance of the revolt in this case, its critical power, is that repeating the watchword by millions of people will show the worth of what will undoubtedly and irreversibly be the first victory: the man thus designated will flee. And no matter what happens afterwards, this triumph of the popular action, illegal by nature, will be forever victorious. That a revolt against state power can be absolutely victorious is a lesson universally available. This victory always indicates the horizon where all collective action, subtracted from the authority of the law, stands out, the horizon that Marx called “the failing of the state”.

That is, one day, freely associated in the spreading of their own creative power, peoples could do without the gloomy coercion of the state. And it is for this reason, for this ultimate idea, that a revolt overthrowing an established authority can determine unlimited enthusiasm throughout the world. A spark can set a field on fire. It all starts with the suicide through burning of a man who has been made redundant, whose miserable commerce that allows him to survive is threatened to be banned, and with a woman-officer slapping him to make him understand what is real in this world. This gesture expands within days, weeks, until millions of people cry their joy in a far-away square and the powerful rulers flee. Where does this fabulous expansion come from? The propagation of an epidemic of freedom? No. As Jean-Marie Gleize poetically puts it: “a revolutionary movement does not expand by contamination. But by resonance. Something emerging here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something emerging out there”. This resonance, let's name it “event”. The event is the sudden creation, not of a new reality, but of a myriad of new possibilities.

Neither of them is the reiteration of something we already know. This is why it is to say “this movement is demanding democracy” (implying the one we enjoy in the West), or “this movement is demanding social improvements” (implying the median prosperity of the small-bourgeois in our countries). Born from almost nothing, resonating everywhere, the popular uprising creates unknown possibilities for the whole world. The word “democracy” is practically never mentioned in Egypt. There's talk of a “new Egypt”, of “the real Egyptian people”, of constituent assembly, of an absolute

change of existence, of unprecedented possibilities. This is about the new field that will be there where the previous one, set on fire by the spark of uprising, will no longer be. It stands, this new field to come, between the declaration of overthrowing forces and the one of assuming new tasks. Between what a young Tunisian has said: "We, the sons of workers and farmers, are stronger than the criminals"; and what a young Egyptian has said: "Starting today, 25th January, I take charge of the affairs of my country".

The people, and only the people, are the creators of universal history. It is very surprising that, in our West, governments and the media consider that the revolts in a square in Cairo are "the Egyptian people". How come? Isn't it that, for these men, the people, the only reasonable and legal people, is usually reduced to either the majority in a poll or in an election? How is it possible that all of a sudden hundreds of thousands of revolted people have become representative of a population of eighty million? It's a lesson to remember, and we will remember it.

Once a certain threshold of determination, obstinacy and courage has been passed, a people can indeed concentrate its existence in one square, one avenue, a few factories, a university ... The whole world will be witness to this courage, and especially to the amazing creations that accompany it. These creations will stand as proof that a people is represented there. As one Egyptian protester has put it, "before, I used to watch television, now it's the television who is watching me". In the midst of an event, the people is made up of those who know how to solve the problems that the event imposes on them. It goes the same for the occupation of a square: food, sleeping arrangements, protection, banderols, prayers, defence fight, all so that the place where everything is happening, the place that has become a symbol, may stay with its people at all costs. These problems, at a scale of hundreds of thousands of people who have come from all over the place, may seem impossible to solve, especially since the state has disappeared in that square. Solving unsolvable problems without the help of the state, that is the destiny of an event. And it is what determines a people, all of a sudden and for an indeterminate period, to exist, there where it has decided to gather.

There can be no communism without communist movements. The popular uprising we are talking about is manifestly without a party, without any hegemonic organisation, without a recognised leader. It should always be determined whether this characteristic is a strength or a weakness. It is in any case what makes it have, in a pure form, without a doubt the purest since the Commune of Paris, all the necessary traits for us to talk about a communism as movement. "Communism" here means: common creation of a collective destiny. This "common" has two distinctive traits. First, it is generic, representing in one place humanity in its entirety. In this place there are people of all the kinds a population is usually made up of, all words are heard, all propositions examined, all difficulty taken for what it is. Second, it overcomes the great contradictions that the state pretends to be the only one capable of surmounting: between intellectuals and manual workers, between men and women, between rich and poor, between Muslims and Copts, between people living in the province and those living in the capital ...

Millions of new possibilities for these contradictions spring with every moment, possibilities that the state—any state—is completely blind to. We see young female doctors, who have come from the province to treat the wounded, sleep in the middle of a circle of fierce young men, and they are more at ease than they've ever been, knowing that no one will touch a hair on their heads. We can equally see an organisation of young engineers addressing youngsters from the suburbs to ask them to hold on, to protect the movement with their energy for combat. We also see a row of Christians standing in order to keep watch over the Muslims bent in prayer. We see vendors feeding the unemployed and the poor. We see each person talking to their unknown neighbour. We can read thousands of banners where each and everyone's life is mingled to the grand History of all. All these

situations, inventions, constitute the communism as movement. It's been two centuries since the unique problem is the following: how can we establish in the long run the inventions of the communism as movement? And the unique reactionary statement is: "that would be impossible, even detrimental. Let's put our trust in the state". Glorious be the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples who remind us the true and unique political duty: faced with the state, the organised fidelity to the communism as movement.

We do not want war, but we are not afraid of it. The pacifist calm of gigantic movements has been talked about everywhere, and it has been linked to the ideal of elective democracy that we bestowed upon the movement. We should, however, note that there have been hundreds of dead, and their number increases each day. In many instances, these dead have been combatants and martyrs of the initiative, then of the protection of the movement itself. The political and symbolical places of uprising had to be kept by paying the price of fierce combat against the militia and the police of the threatened regimes. And who has paid with their own lives if not the youth from the poorest classes? The "middle classes", of whom our inspired Michèle Alliot-Marie has said that the democratic outcome of the movement depended on, and on them alone, should always remember that during the crucial moment, the duration of the movement has only been guaranteed by the unrestricted commitment of the people's militia. Defensive violence is inevitable. It still goes on, in difficult conditions, in Tunisia, after the young provincial activists have been sent to their destitution.

Can we seriously think that all these innumerable initiatives and cruel sacrifices' fundamental goal is to make the people "choose" between Souleiman and El Baradei, just as we here resign to arbitrate between Mr. Sarkozy and Mr. Strauss-Kahn? Will that be the only lesson of this splendid episode?

No, a thousand times no! The Egyptian and Tunisian peoples tell us this: to rebel, to construct the public space of the communism as movement, defending it by all means and making up its successive steps of action, that is the reality of the popular politics of emancipation. It is not just the Arab states that are anti-popular, of course, and, fundamentally, with or without elections, illegitimate. Whatever their future, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings have a universal significance. They prescribe new possibilities whose value is international.