Platypus Review # 33 | March 2011

Egypt, or, history's invidious comparisons: 1979, 1789, and 1848

Chris Cutrone

THE UPRISING IN EGYPT, which followed soon after the toppling of the old regime in Tunisia, succeeded in bringing down Hosni Mubarak on February 11, the 32nd anniversary to the day of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Already, before this timely coincidence, comparisons between the Iranian Revolution and the revolts gripping the Arab world had started to be made. But other historical similarities offered themselves: the various "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Central Asian states and Lebanon in recent years, and the collapse of Communism in the Soviet bloc and beyond (the former Yugoslavia) starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Behind these revolutions on the pattern of 1989 stood the event of which 1989 itself had been the bicentennial, the great French Revolution of 1789. The Bastille is to be stormed again, anew. Who would not welcome this?

A more pessimistic, if no less invidious comparison offered itself, especially prior to Mubarak's ouster: the equally dramatic but failed Green Movement in the election crisis in Iran that marked 30 years of the Islamic Revolution in 2009.[1] Just as the Green Movement posed the question of reforming the Islamic Republic, events in Egypt have raised the specter of authoritarianism continuing, despite everything, albeit without Mubarak as tyrant. Indeed, comparisons of Egypt with Iran in both 1979 and 2009 are telling in several different respects. To be sure, the emancipatory prospects in Egypt today are even more remote than in Iran in either 1979 or 2009. If there is a more fruitful comparison to be made it is with Iran not in 1979 but in 2009.

The destruction of the Left, historically, has been naturalized more completely in present-day Egypt than it had been in Iran by 1979. Going back to the 1950s, because of Nasserism's subordination and suppression of the Left, the strongest opposition movement in Egypt today is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a longer history and is much stronger than Khomeini-style Islamism had been in Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. While the Khomeinite Islamic Republic has destroyed the Left more completely in Iran since 1979, it is also the case that the reform movement in the Islamic Republic has had a longer history of organization—almost 20 years now—than the opposition in Egypt has at present. The prospects for organized reform, in other words, ran deeper in Iran at the moment of the Green Movement election crisis in 2009 than is the case in Egypt today. This poses both more radical possibilities and dangers for Egypt than in Iran two years ago. The Green Movement could beat a retreat in the face of defeat in ways that the unfolding crisis in Egypt might not be so controlled. But this spiraling out of control that has raised much greater radical prospects in Egypt, as opposed to Iran in 2009, may prove to be the case at least as much for ill as for good. The military has been

able to come to the rescue of the state in Egypt, and this has been met with joy not angry disappointment. What links both eruptions of democratic discontent, in Iran and Egypt, then, is their authoritarian outcome.

Putting aside the rather superficial narratives that emphasize how events in Egypt and Tunisia disprove the supposed intractability and lack of "democratic" spirit in the Arab or Muslim world—as if this needed proving—we must nevertheless ask about the legacy of the history of the Left—its defeats and failures—that condition present possibilities. The history of the Left, both locally and globally, and reaching back for generations, is important, perhaps not so much for the obvious reasons—a relative lack of "democratic institutions" in one or another part of the world, or indeed globally today, by contrast with the past—as that it raises the question of history *per se*. What resources does *history* provide to the present? For the comparisons—however invidious—with the situation in and for Egypt are all *historical* in nature. So the question of history and its effects presses for consideration. Whether one approaches the matter of historical precedence with hope or anxiety, still there is the question of how appropriate to the present any reach for such precedence may truly be. Like any event, the massive popular uprising in Egypt is in important ways *unprecedented* and *new*. This is its power. It demands its moment in the sun and refuses all comparisons, insisting upon its *sui generis* character, which it cannot be denied, even if it is not yet fully revealed.[2] What impresses itself is how much this moment will be allowed to realize itself—to make its departure from previous history. Or, conversely, how it will be drawn back into and subsumed by history's ineluctable force. Why should we care about history, when emancipation makes its attempt at escaping its dead hand? How is the unfolding present *already history*?

Beneath the elation—if not euphoria—of the international Left at the popular overthrow of Mubarak is the fundamental ambiguity and so radical ambivalence of democratic revolution in our time. But this has been so not only since 1979 or 1989, but since 1789. However, unlike the French Revolution of 1789, whatever its tortured career and the opposed judgments about it, democratic revolutions since then have been dogged by the specter of *failure*. One thing that cannot be said of 1789 is that it failed, however ambiguous was its success. Yet a repressed, largely unknown, and importantly failed moment has haunted the history of modern revolutions: the event that prompted Marx's famous phrase about history "weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living": 1848. "The Spring of the Nations" in 1848, that is, the revolutions in France, Germany, and beyond, has completely escaped the imagination of present considerations of the moment of democratic revolution. This present absence is itself quite revealing, and needs to be addressed. For it may be that the comparison with 1848 is the most obscure but important of all.

For Marxism, 1848 is the canon of failure. What once made Marxism—whose founding political statement was 1848's *Communist Manifesto*—such an important force in the world was its awareness of the *problem* of 1848; or, why 1789 has kept repeating itself over and over in modern history, but *without success*. The converse of the *Manifesto*'s rousing call to action, to treat history as the "history of class struggles," was Marx's *writing the history of his present*

moment, the culminating climax and failure of the 1848 Revolution in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.[3] But these two of Marx's most widely quoted writings were documents of both promise and defeat.

What made the 1848 Revolution so important to Marx and subsequent Marxism was the light that it shed on the history of the bourgeois revolution. 1848 was both the last of the classical bourgeois revolutions and the first of the socialist revolutions that have marked the modern, bourgeois era. Henceforth, the fates of liberalism and socialism have been indissolubly tied—even if their connection has been extremely fraught. Liberalism could not do without socialism, nor socialism without liberalism. Every democratic revolution since 1848 has faced this two-fold task—and has, without exception, foundered on the shoals of its contradictions. Marxism was the attempt to transcend the antinomy of individual and collective freedom—or of liberalism and socialism in "social democracy"—to realize both, by transcending both. Marx and Engels emblazoned this demand in their *Manifesto* with the slogan of "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!," which was to be realized in the "freedom of each" as the "precondition for the freedom of all." Importantly, Marx and Engels were the originators of neither of these catchphrases for what "communism" meant. The twin fates of liberalism and socialism after 1848 have shared in the failure of this Marxist vision for emancipation.[4]

What explains the undemocratic outcomes of democratic revolution in the modern era? Certainly one can take only so much comfort in Thomas Jefferson's saying that a revolution every generation or so is a good thing—as if frequent revolutions are necessary to restore democracy. Or, if so, the reasons for this must still be explained, beyond "corruption," the perennial complaint of the subaltern. Whence does this recurrent "corruption" of the democratic moment spring? And why does it manifest itself so much more dramatically at some times than others? Perhaps revolution is not always such an unambiguously good thing. Especially if, as Marx put it, it threatens to be the "first time as tragedy" and the "second time as farce." What comes of revolution if it is taken to be *fate*? There is nothing so "revolutionary" as *capital itself*.

The 1848 Revolution had secured universal suffrage and established the 2nd Republic in France, but at the price, wryly observed by Marx, of bringing an authoritarian demagogue, Louis Bonaparte (Napoleon's nephew), to power—to the horror of liberal democratic sentiment at the time—as its first elected President, promising to "save society." It is because Bonaparte overthrew the 2nd Republic and established a 20-year 2nd Empire that followed at the end of his term as President less than four years later that the massacre of the workers in June 1848 did not become forgotten as a historical footnote and regarded as merely a bump in the road of democracy, for it came to presage the authoritarian repression of society that followed, in which members of the bourgeoisie became subject to the same treatment first meted out to the rebellious workers. Marxists used the term "Bonapartism" to describe this phenomenon of suppression of democracy with popular assent, which has repeated itself so consistently in history after 1848—for instance in "Nasserism" in Egypt and other forms of Arab nationalism

(the so-called "Arab Revolution") in the 1950s–1960s. Such Orwellian reality of all subsequent history has its beginning, with Marx, in 1848. The soldier held aloft triumphantly on the shoulders of democratic demonstrators in the streets of Cairo already wears the mask of Bonaparte—not the greater but the lesser. For such turns of modern revolution, after 1848, do not vouchsafe progress, however dubiously, but rather wager its foolhardy chances, mocking them. As Horkheimer put it in the 1920s, after the ebbing of the failed world revolutionary wave of 1917–1919, "As long as it is not victorious, the revolution is no good."[5] So, the question becomes, what would be the conditions for true *victory*? What success *can* we aspire to win?

Marx attempted to capture this problem in his demand that the revolution "take its poetry from the future" rather than the past. But if this is more than the banal statement it appears at first glance to be, then it raises a rather obscure difficulty: In what way can present revolution draw upon the emancipatory energy of the *future*? And Marx's dedicated follower Walter Benjamin's caveat echoes closely behind, that faith in the future sapped the strength of the revolution, which, Benjamin wrote, needed to be "nourished with the image of enslaved ancestors rather than liberated grandchildren."[6] But we may need *both* imaginations—of emancipation and redemption—today. The question is, how so?

Marx and the history of Marxism still speak, even if their voices are drowned out in the clamoring din of the present. In history after 1848, Marx understood a world—the present—caught between past and future. Marx's term for this *historical* world, "capital," refers to the radical ambivalence of the present: its being already past, accumulating all of history and annexing the future, continually crowding the moment off stage; and its constant liquidation of that history, the incessant consumption of the moment in light of a future that never arrives. Past and future seem to recede infinitely beyond the horizons of a present that is as perpetual as it is empty and futile, trapped, static but constantly in motion. So we resign ourselves to the present's eternal passing and recurrence, in which "everything changes" and yet "remains the same."

Egyptians may be driven today by the specter of enslaved ancestry, provoked by the force of what Benjamin described as the "hatred" and spirit of "self-sacrifice" necessary to make a bid for history. But they are also certainly prompted, as Benjamin put it, to "activate the emergence brake" on the "locomotive" of history that would otherwise condemn posterity.[7] They may be motivated not only to redeem past sacrifice but to prevent future loss that could yet be rendered unnecessary. It is not that Mubarak's rule became too long or old, but that it threatened to become indefinite—the leering face of the son—that provoked the demand for its end, precisely at the risk of the present. "I don't care if I die," the sentiment widely expressed around Tahrir Square, is the signal moment to which Benjamin's philosophy of history attends: to bring time to a halt. But such resolve expresses the *will to live*, although *not* merely to continue life unchanged.

The problem we must face is that the imagination of emancipation—which defines the "Left" as such[8]—is today divided between the desperation of wishing for the unprecedented new and desiring for return to the missed moments of opportunity, the potential embodied in

past attempts, however failed: attempts at both the *escape from* and the *redemption of* history. 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1979, 1989: they will not return—thank God! But we mourn them nonetheless. What was lost with them? Perhaps nothing. An emancipated future beckons; however, it eludes our grasp, outrunning us in the onrush of time. "Time waits for no one." The future grants no refuge. There is no peace, not even of the graveyard. As Benjamin put it, "Even the dead are not safe." But history remains. It may be unavoidable—as much as the future is. So the question is, what are we going to do with it? If we are trapped between past and future, perhaps we will not be crushed but can bring them together and galvanize their force even more powerfully in the present: we are pulverized all the more surely for trying to slip the vise. Past failures may dispirit, and bewildering, dystopic futures may threaten. Or, history and utopia can both be enlisted to the aid of the present. If only.

"What now?," Egypt asks us. We do not ask it. This question should be posed, not as it is wont, as a hope or a fear, but as a task, however exclaimed or whispered. It is not to be answered with exuberance or resignation, but determination: the resolution that not only are we, inevitably, history, but the future will be. | **P**

1. See Danny Postel, Kaveh Ehsani, Maziar Behrooz, and Chris Cutrone, "30 Years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran," *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2010/02/18/30-years-of-the-islamic-revolution-in-iran/>. See also my "Failure of the Islamic Revolution: The Nature of the Present Crisis in Iran," *Platypus Review* 14 (August 2009), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2009/08/24/the-failure-of-the-islamic-revolution/>.

2. See Hamid Dabashi, "The False Anxiety of Influence," *Al Jazeera* English, February 12, 2011. Available online at <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201121215216318526.html>. Undeniably, as Dabashi writes, "From Tehran to Tunis to Cairo and beyond, our innate cosmopolitan cultures are being retrieved, our hidden worlds discovered, above and beyond any anxiety of influence."

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>.

4. See my "Marxist Hypothesis," *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2010/11/06/the-marxist-hypothesis-a-response-to-alain-badous-communist-hypothesis/>.

5. Max Horkheimer, "A Discussion about Revolution," in *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–31 & 1950–69* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 39.

6. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 260.

7. Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'," in *Selected Writings* vol. 4 1938–40 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 402.

8. See Leszek Kolakowski, "The Concept of the Left," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove, 1969), 144–158.