

seemed an alternative to contest and struggle, a pure utopia where others failed. Some people will view this as too high a price for relevance. But if the alternative is irrelevance, it is a small price to pay.

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## ‘The people want...’: Street Art and Power in the New Arab World

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‘The people/want/the fall of the regime’. A simple sentence chanted by protestors in Arab cities, with two pauses after the subject and verb, each one stressed as if pronounced in a grammar lesson. Repeated, so that the lesson is not forgotten. Enunciated, to send a clear message about who is speaking, the act of the speaker, and the target of this act. The subject of the sentence is speaking – ‘the people’, who, for decades had been silenced by authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Now the people have taken to the streets and are referring to themselves as subjects in a sentence, not subjects under a regime. Subjectivity has overpowered subjugation. Citizenship has replaced subjection. ‘Want’. Arab citizens had been mostly referred to in the passive voice, the objects of verbs, acted on by the regime. ‘Want’ reverses this power dynamic. It is an active verb, a ‘transitive’ verb, as it is called in English grammar, a verb that itself demands an object. In Arabic grammar, one similarly cannot simply say ‘X wants’. ‘Wants what?’ would be the question, for the sentence to be complete. So ‘want’ is about action with an outcome. But not only that: While transitive verbs can be inert in their meanings, ‘want’ is a special verb in the context of contemporary Arab history. It used to be the ruler’s wants and wishes that prevailed – the ruler wants the people to be grateful; the ruler wants the people to shut up. The people had no right to have wants of their own. Now they want, and their want is directed at the ruler. ‘Want’ is about more than expressing wishes. It is a demand, a clear expression of power. ‘The fall of the regime’. The want is direct. No potential double meaning about the fate

of the regime that is wanted. But the English translation here fails to communicate the full meaning. In Arabic, the word chanted by the masses in Tunis, Cairo, and other metropolises referring to 'fall' is 'isqat', not 'souqout'. 'Souqout' simply means fall, the state of falling. Something in the state of 'souqout' could have fallen by itself. But 'isqat' is very different. It means, 'to make something fall'. So although the prevailing English translation of the sentence has been 'the people want the fall of the regime', the more accurate translation would be 'the people want to make the regime fall'. This transforms the meaning of 'want' into a much more powerful declaration of action, stripping the regime of agency completely. So we are talking about no less than four layers of power reversal in this one sentence: the people as possessing agency; the people as expressing an imminent action; the regime as lacking agency; and the regime as the object of people's action.

This power reversal between people and leaders in the Arab world is the defining feature of the Arab Spring and must not be underestimated. The Arab Spring has seen a fundamental change in the status quo: A region of political dormancy, where people possessed very few rights, has finally awoken. And with this Arab awakening comes a new potential for self-expression. The self-expression that manifested itself so publicly, verbally as well as visually, during the 2011 protests in the Arab world, whose dynamics are summarized above, was not new. It had existed underground, pronounced by activists, intellectuals, and artists who often risked their lives and livelihoods when calling for change under authoritarian rules. What was new was its publicness, directness, and the way it was expressed on a mass scale. Self-expression became a powerful political tool possessed by individuals, many of whom had never previously considered undertaking acts of political dissent. The right to express oneself freely, as a human being, as an individual with dignity, had been stolen by Arab dictators and their regimes. Human rights often existed only on

paper, with regimes ratifying certain international human rights laws but acting in complete contravention of them. The status quo was one of abuse – or at least the ability to abuse people with no or few repercussions.

In this stifling environment, individual artistic expression driven by a human rights or political agenda was not only rare but also commonly oblique – artists would hint, rather than point the finger directly, and those who crossed the line were frequently driven to exile, or risked persecution. The few who dared speak out directly and escaped harassment either had this experience because a given regime would have judged them as nonthreatening – politically engaged art was sometimes seen as a safety valve that would allow people to 'vent' while not posing any real threat to the status quo – or because a regime used liberalization as a method of self-preservation (opening up a little to quell dissent and show the outside world that one is engaging in reform). Arab art persisted in many places regardless, in underground circles, in the diaspora, but it mainly occupied the position of 'despite' – red lines, censorship, lack of freedom of expression.

Of course, those abysmal conditions did not apply to all Arab countries in the same way – experiences varied wildly from almost complete lack of self-expression in Gaddafi's Libya to the possibility of mild allusions in Assad's Syria to the ability to engage in more blatant critique in Mubarak's Egypt. In a way, the extent of permissible self-expression in those countries mirrored the extent of upholding human rights – bad in Egypt, worse in Syria, and worst in Libya.<sup>1</sup> It also varied in different time periods. The Damascus Spring, which happened soon after Bashar al-Assad assumed Syria's presidency after the death of his father in 2000, saw a degree of liberalization that allowed more freedom of expression than that seen under his father Hafez al-Assad's rule; but the spring quickly regressed into winter as Bashar al-Assad tightened his grip on the country. Ali [Ferzat](#), the prominent Syrian

political cartoonist, saw in the Damascus Spring a glimmer of hope, establishing Syria's first independent newspaper since Hafez al-Assad took over in 1963, but the paper, *al-Doomari* (The Lamplighter), which specialized in political satire, only lasted three years (2000-03) before he was forced to close it down. Yet in some countries, like Libya and Tunisia, winter was the only season all year round. Not only artists, but citizens at large, were always mindful that the 'walls have ears'.

Now the walls have murals. It is no coincidence that the most prominent art form to erupt across Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt after their revolutions has been street art. Through the work of Ahl El-Kahf in Tunis, Ganzeer in Cairo, and many others, the face of Arab cities has transformed into an arena for citizen self-expression. Before the Arab Spring, only the regime controlled public space and expression within it, including expressing oneself through movement in this space. With the fall of authoritarian regimes, the first thing that Arab citizens have reclaimed from their rulers is public space. Street art is the ultimate expression of this reclamation. The narrative told by street art is different from the ousted regimes' narrative (which, despite there having been different authoritarian regimes in different countries, was a largely uniform narrative nevertheless). The new narrative is both about pain and glory, sacrifice and eternity. But only as they relate to the citizen: the citizen's point of view, the citizen's experience, the citizen's emotional journey. Cairo is where the most diverse murals can be found, invariably documenting the revolution, its martyrs, its episodes, and its people. As Egypt undergoes a critical period of transition that is still witnessing contestation between new political voices and remnants of the old regime, murals continue to be created to challenge the old elites and the continuing infringements on human rights. From the jailing of activists and the sexual harassment of women to the physical assault on those who continue to speak up against

oppression, post-Mubarak Egypt has not fully shaken its old shackles. By continuing to narrate those experiences, murals give the citizen narrative agency over the trajectory of history in Egypt.

Street art, then, is a visible marker of the agency of the citizen. Its mere presence sends a strong message. It screams: I exist. I am here. I am no longer silent. Its content expresses the range of emotions previously suppressed: anger, sorrow, but also, dignity. Its location, out there in the sun, unashamed, in your face, alludes to newly found courage. Unlike the visuals sanctioned by the state that were the only images witnessed in public space besides garish adverts in Arab metropolises before the uprisings, street art creations obey no rules, bow to no rulers. Created with abandon, their presence exudes the spirit of freedom: freedom to create, freedom to move. One can imagine Ganzeer with his spray cans roaming the streets of Cairo at night, a free spirit shaping his own environment, his own city.

The 'right to the city', as Henri Lefebvre calls it, demands further attention.<sup>2</sup> David Harvey reminds us:

*The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.*<sup>3</sup>

Viewed through this prism, street art becomes the epitome of where human rights and art intersect. Here I want to pause at two things in Harvey's statement. The first is that he talks about bodies and cities as two parts in one continuum: 'make and remake

our cities and ourselves'. The space of the city and the body of the citizen are interlinked. Remaking the city in our own image is, then, also about expressing a new identity for the self. The citizen as the object of the ruler's want has been replaced with the citizen as powerful. As Michel Foucault argues, power is productive. It produces knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Previously, the self-knowledge of Arab citizens was that which was produced by authoritarian regimes. The 'citizen', even when named in a country's constitution as being thus, was not a citizen. The citizen's very existence was defined by the ruler. The Arab citizen now is the producer of a new kind of knowledge about what constitutes being. Living with dignity, so simple yet so fundamental, is what constitutes being today. The new individual is remade by a revolution of their own creation. And here is where we should pause at a second idea in Harvey's statement. Changing the city, he argues, is a 'common rather than an individual right'. The work of street artists is not only about singular artistic vision, it is also about connecting with a community. The act of reclaiming the city through street art is, therefore, about expressing 'collective power'. Unlike art that is exhibited in a gallery, which does not change the environment around it, street art entails just such a change. Put a mural in a gallery and it becomes part of an existing space. Put it on a wall on a street and it has power over the space around it.

Let us remember that this public space is always a shared space. Street art is a firmly collective power exercise. It is not just about drawing in the community in viewing it. It is also about citizens, in the plural, having power over their environment. So we are not just talking about collective expression, or collective consumption, but also collective production as a component of collective public action. Sometimes, this collective public action takes a more literal form: In Tunisia, not only is street art after the Jasmine Revolution meant for collective engagement, the creation of this street art is also

a collective effort. A number of street art collectives have emerged in Tunisia after the revolution, the most prominent of which is a group who call themselves Ahl El-Kahf. The name is deeply evocative. 'Ahl' means 'family' or 'the indigenous occupants of a location'. It has a strong allusion to affinity, authenticity, and belonging. 'El-Kahf' means 'the cave'. 'People of the cave', as one might translate the name, becomes a reference to the concept of a people with very strong ties, previously in hiding in a primordial setting, who have finally come out of their slumber. In this, we see a direct reference to the dark days of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. The people – authentic, belonging to the nation in solidarity – have finally awoken and are speaking collectively.

But the name 'Ahl El-Kahf' is also derived from the Quran, where the tale of the 'people of the cave' is narrated, about a people saved by God from their tyrant by making them sleep in a cave for a hundred years, until the days of tyranny were over. Ahl El-Kahf is a secular group, a collective of liberal Tunisian artists. In reclaiming this powerful religious reference, they fight back against the Tunisian state's adoption of religious identity as well as the conservative forces that emerged after the revolution. In this they remind us of the Green Movement in Iran: a movement fighting, among other things, the state's interpretation of Islam, but which is 'green' because green is the colour of Islam. Green Movement activists and artists have been reclaiming religion from the state, showing that religion and democracy need not be incompatible, and that the Movement members are also 'authentic' in that they emanate from Iranian society.<sup>5</sup> The members of Ahl El-Kahf, as a collective whose graffiti often allude to human rights violations under the Ben Ali regime, put forth a notion of religion as an advocate of human rights, as opposed to an agent incompatible with such aims. The name also affirms their insider-status, thereby countering those arguments about human rights that see them as foreign values imposed from outside.

For human rights are universal. But the concept of universality has been misconstrued by totalitarian forces looking for excuses to continue suppressing the societies they control. In the Arab world, as elsewhere, tradition is sometimes invoked as the reason why certain rights – for minorities, for women, but also for men – cannot be applied. Yet, who is to say that tradition is always correct? And to fix tradition as immovable, incapable of change, is to deny the very essence of culture itself. Culture, any culture, is a living thing. It breathes, it grows, it gets inspired, it inspires others. It is human nature to strive to live in a better world. Condemning ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ to fixity is thus against human nature itself. The authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had hijacked culture and tradition to the extent that they disturbed even the natural components of human needs. For what were the demonstrators in Tunis and Cairo asking for? Bread and dignity: two extremes on the scale of human needs. One is a fundamental requirement for life; the other is a rarefied, though no less fundamental, right.

Let us pause to reflect on the gravity of these twin demands being uttered simultaneously. Let us also think of the people’s other needs, which were not as explicitly communicated during the revolutions but were equally repressed by the regimes. In this we are reminded of Abraham Maslow’s matrix of fundamental human needs: physiological needs; safety; love and belonging; esteem; and self-actualization.<sup>6</sup> Under authoritarianism, it was not only two of those needs (physiological – due to poverty and unemployment, and esteem – lack of dignity) that were not met, it was all of them: Arab citizens’ lives and livelihoods were under threat; their sense of belonging was taken over by rulers who viewed the nation as reflecting little more than their own self-image; and they had no control over their fates. Gabriel García Márquez wrote, ‘human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them... life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves’.<sup>7</sup>

Under the Arab dictatorships, the usurpation of the right to this rebirth eroded all aspects of what it means to be human. The phrase ‘bread and dignity’ summarized the protesters’ demand to be allowed to live as human beings ought to live. ‘Bread and dignity’ is thus one of the strongest indicators of the universality of this demand, and thus, of the universality of human rights.

The Arab world still has a long way to go before it can become democratic in the full sense, but we should be patient. The road to democracy is long and rough. What we should never forget is the groundbreaking change that happened in 2011: that the region has finally taken the important first step in this journey. Change in policy will take time to materialize, and conflicts between citizens and regimes that refuse to cede power are ongoing, but the door has opened for debate on human rights to start to flow freely in the Arab world. Art is playing an important role in this critical historical juncture. The status quo – political and artistic – has changed, and with it, there are new possibilities for citizen engagement and public expression. ‘The people want...’ is the mantra for the new Arab world ruled by the empowered citizen – the self-expressive citizen who has torn down the wall of fear and is now transforming walls into art.

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- 1 The first Arab Human Development Report, among several other human rights reports, documents the human rights situation in the Arab world. See: UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, 2002. Available: [www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2002e.pdf](http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2002e.pdf)
  - 2 Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Éd. Anthropos, 1968.
  - 3 David Harvey, ‘The Right to the City’. *New Left Review*, volume 53, Sep.-Oct. 2008, p. 23.
  - 4 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972-1977. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
  - 5 Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. London: IB Tauris, 2012.
  - 6 Abraham Maslow, ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’. *Psychological Review*, volume 50, issue 4, 1943, pp. 370-96.
  - 7 Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. New York: Penguin, 1989, p. 165.