

Revolution and Redistribution: Reflections on France and Egypt

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When we think about revolutions, don't economic interests tend to be left out of the equation? For the last two decades political and cultural questions have made social justice appear a secondary concern. According to historian Charles Walton, the problem of redistribution, already apparent in 18th century revolutions, is also central to Egyptian revolutionaries.

"It's the economy"

"It's the economy, stupid!" This legendary slogan from Bill Clinton's successful presidential campaign in 1992 has been repeated and improvised on for more than two decades, and not only in the United States. It has been invoked by the media in recent elections in Britain and Israel and has been scripted into films and television shows about politics. Why the ongoing popularity of the phrase? The answer is not so obvious. That the economy should be considered politically important is hardly surprising; electors always want their officials to secure their interests. It is the "stupid" part that stands out and begs an explanation: how could anyone forget or fail to see this?

Context sheds light on this question. In the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, debates about pluralism and minority rights overshadowed those about class and social justice. As a talking point in the presidential campaign, "the economy" was thus refreshing. But the phrase's ongoing resonance may have to do with its insolence towards market economics, which began their heyday in the post-Cold War years. From this perspective, politics and the economy were understood to be separate spheres: While politics were about civil and political rights, markets were about material interests. Politics engaged citizens; markets served consumers.

Market economics presumed that since "the economy" was a scientific matter, governments should heed the advice of economists, not the demands of electorates. This way of thinking sought to evacuate politics of one of its most vexed problems: social justice. Of course, not everyone agreed with free-market theory, but liberalism succeeded in imposing its conceptual assumptions on public discourse. Francis Fukuyama's thesis about the end of history — by which he meant

the triumph of liberal over social democracy — was criticized by many on the political Left when it appeared, but it must be said that, in hindsight, the book accurately reflected the post-Cold War moment: political and economic liberalism seemed to go together; communism was dead; Keynesianism was pushed back on its heels; no robust alternatives were in sight.

“It’s the economy, stupid” cut through these prevailing assumptions. It reminded people — however superficially — that the economy might be a political matter and that governments might be entrusted with the task of ensuring the fair and plentiful distribution of material benefits. Of course, it was merely a phrase, not a philosophy. It did not alter the overall conceptual framework of market economics, which, by the late 1990s, had pervaded the Left in Europe and North America, including the Clinton administration and British New Labour.

These shifts — from “class” to “culture” and from social justice to liberalism — were reflected in studies of the French Revolution. Focus on the socio-economic, so prevalent in the mid-twentieth century, declined. Attention turned to political culture and ideas (sovereignty, representation, public opinion), human rights (civil and political, *not* social and economic), individual subjectivity (sentiments, emotions), morality and religion (regeneration, counterrevolution), and political violence (war, terror). Few scholars entertained the idea that economic factors — be they material or cultural — might explain why the French Revolution broke out or why it radicalized.

Recent events in the Arab world should remind us that “the political” and “the economic” are so intertwined that it makes little sense to prioritize one over the other in interpreting revolutions. The spark that ignited protests occurred in Tunisia in December 2010, when a fruit-stand seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself before a police station after the police had appropriated his merchandise and, more importantly, his scale for weighing produce. (The police commonly availed themselves of the best produce of unlicensed vendors. The blind eye that the regime turned to this practice was a tacit form of redistribution). When officials refused to return his scale, or even to meet with him to discuss the matter, Bouazizi poured gasoline over himself and cried out “how do you expect me to make a living?”¹ He lit a match. The Arab world exploded.

A month later, when the anonymous administrator of a Facebook page, Wael Ghonim, encouraged Egyptians to demonstrate against Mubarak’s regime on January 25, 2011, he invoked poverty, corruption, and unemployment in the announcements. He explained, “If the invitation to take to the streets had been based solely on human rights, then only a certain segment of Egyptian society would have participated.” His strategy proved effective. In revolutions, “it’s the economy, stupid!”

¹ Marie Gad, “A better future for Africa,” *OECD Yearbook 2012*.

From “the economy” to redistribution

But is “the economy”, as a concept and object of investigation, helpful for analyzing revolutionary politics? From the perspective of “the economy,” states tend to be assessed in terms of how well they understand and adapt to market “realities”. Often overlooked is how political legitimacy depends on meeting material demands, especially of those who can undermine the regime. Material demands are, to be sure, more than biological, and material benefits are about more than individual satisfaction. Both have social and psychological dimensions and are thus cultural phenomena. Material demands can express sentiments of empathy or jealousy. Material benefits can generate social prestige, if deemed to be merited, or resentments, if not.

How leaders weigh and prioritize material demands and how benefits are morally assessed (are they just or corrupt?) are politically charged issues, especially in revolutions, when the relevant criteria is in flux. How revolutionaries try to maintain the allegiances, or at least the deference, of the losers — those whose interests are not served by the new order — is also central to how revolutions unfold. Keeping the losers in line usually requires a mix of coercion (or the threat of it) and the spread of ideas about virtuous self-sacrifice — for the leader, the nation, the revolution. Although scholars have written much about coercion and ideology, they rarely relate them to the problems of redistribution and distributive justice.

But if revolutions are about the delegitimization of old regimes and the legitimization of new ones, perhaps we need to be attentive to how redistributive practices and competing ideas about distributive justice figure in this process.

Hobbes grasped the importance of redistribution. For him, it was a means of forging alliances and securing power: “Riches joined with liberality is power; because it procureth friends and servants; without liberality, not so; because in this case they defend not, but expose men to envy, as a prey.”² What Hobbes understood theoretically, Louis XIV understood intuitively. Historians have largely abandoned the model of “absolutism” to describe his reign, preferring “social collaboration” instead: Louis maintained the allegiances of potentially “frondeur” elites through redistribution. Concretely, he raised taxes on the weak and occasionally fleeced financiers, then shared the gains through gifts, offices, privileges, pensions, and kick-backs. In arresting the powerful Nicolas Fouquet at the start of his personal rule, he took over his former councilor’s vast patronage network, positioning himself as the kingdom’s chief patron. He also founded academies to subsidize the arts and sciences. Louis XIV understood what all sovereigns do, though not all master this truth: redistribution is power.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-wealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Crooke, 1651), p. 41.

The Old Regime underwent several redistributive crises, notably during interregnums, when the monarchy was weak. What turned the redistributive crisis of the late 1780s into a revolution? Arguably, revolutions occur, or radicalize, when a redistributive crisis, which weakens the sovereign's command of allegiances and deference, combines with a crisis over the terms of distributive justice — over who *should* get what? and who *owes* what to whom? The Enlightenment provided especially novel answers to these questions. Can they account for the outbreak and radical course of the French Revolution?

From Tocqueville to Polanyi

The problem of redistribution leads down interpretive paths quite different from the ones blazed by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*. Tocqueville has had enormous influence in revolutionary studies. Political theorists, sociologists, and historians have all drawn inspiration from this work, especially his chapter “How towards the middle of the century men of letters took the lead in politics and the consequences”. Tocqueville attributed the Revolution to the “abstract literary politics” of Enlightenment philosophers who, excluded from power, failed to moderate their heady ideas with the wisdom of experience. When revolutionaries tried to realize these ideas, frustrations and calamities inevitably followed.

Curiously, Tocqueville's criticism of the Physiocrats, who sought nothing less than the complete overhaul of the regime's economy, was tempered. These enlightened economists “perhaps did less than [our other philosophers] towards bringing about the Revolution”. “Though they never lost sight of theory,” he observed, “they paid more attention to practical politics.”³

But did they? Attempts to liberalize the economy between the 1760s and 1780s often provoked revolts and the downfall of ministers. Yet, many in the regime remained committed to the doctrine. Take, for example, the justification for (re)liberalizing the grain trade in 1787, advanced by the Controller General, Charles Alexandre de Calonne: “The public good should not be a pretext for curtailing this freedom.”⁴ For Calonne, market freedom was based on the same natural and irrefutable principles as freedom of expression. Moreover (and contradicting Tocqueville's thesis), he saw economic liberalism as leading to smaller, less intrusive government: “The great art of administration is less to act than to *laisser faire*”. Despite the fact that prior experiments with economic liberalization had backfired, late Old Regime authorities — and early revolutionaries! — persisted with them. They sought to remake the world according to their abstract *economic*

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), p. 158.

⁴ Charles Alexandre de Calonne, “Mémoire sur le commerce des grains,” in Henri Pigeonneau et al., *L'administration de l'agriculture au contrôle général des finances (1785-1787): procès-verbaux et rapports* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1882), p. 474-476.

politics, which clashed not only with moral economy but also with the interests of many elites.

Did economic liberalism contribute to the outbreak and radical course of the French Revolution? I think so, but to see how, we must put aside Tocqueville's framework. His "big state, bad state" thesis fails to account for how economic liberals sought to unburden the state of the one of its most important if challenging responsibilities: subsistence. The insights of Karl Polanyi, I believe, are more helpful.

In his *The Great Transformation: the Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944), Polanyi revealed the dangerous implications of economic liberalism, especially its faith in the "self-regulating market". The "transformation" he sought to explain was not, as is often thought, the rise of the self-regulating market. Polanyi insisted that this market system had never, nor could ever, exist; it was utopian. Rather, the transformation was the collapse of post WWI liberalism and the rise of fascism.

Polanyi's argument has many facets. Salient for understanding revolutions is his demonstration of how attempts to realize the self-regulating market involved attempts to achieve the "institutional separation of society into an economic and a political sphere".⁵ These attempts provoked what he called the "double-movement": society (and not just the lower classes), finding itself unable to withstand the excruciating social dislocation and volatility of free-market forces, ends up pressuring the state to intervene to protect it. Polanyi suggested that the more stridently a regime tries to evacuate material demands from the sphere of politics, the more likely those demands will storm back into politics with a vengeance. The political form of this return varies according to circumstances and available political and ideological currents, but it is likely to be illiberal. Unlike Fukuyama, who saw political and economic liberalisms as compatible and mutually reinforcing, Polanyi believed that were at odds. And unlike Marxists and free-market fundamentalists, who envisioned historical progress, Polanyi's model had no telos: the crisis can play out differently according to contingent conditions.

Although Polanyi sought to explain fascism and not the French Revolution, his insights are helpful for understanding 1789, the Year II, and, perhaps modern revolutions more generally.

Redistribution in the French Revolution

The French Revolution began as a crisis of redistribution. As every student of the event knows, its most immediate causes were the regime's financial insolvency and food shortages. Less known is what the National Assembly did the first day of its existence, June 17, 1789, when the Third Estate seized sovereignty. First, it put the

⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: the Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 71.

regime's debts under its own safeguard and promised to make interest payments on them (a form of redistribution). Second, it called for a Committee on Subsistence to examine the bread crisis and propose solutions. The deputies realized that the Assembly's legitimacy — its ability to command allegiances and deference — depended on its ability to meet these two redistributive demands: rents and bread.

How did the National Assembly deal with these problems? After abolishing privileges and the old tax system in the summer of 1789, deputies found themselves facing the same problem the king had faced: lack of revenue. Experiments with voluntary contributions and patriotic gift-giving were initiated. While some deputies saw these initiatives as temporary, others believed that taxes should always be voluntary. Schemes were proposed for bestowing honorary emblems on civic contributors in function of how much they gave, an alternative to noble titles. The paltry sums collected through voluntary giving were hardly sufficient for maintaining interest payments on the debt. Aware of this, the National Assembly made one of its voluntary contribution schemes mandatory in the spring of 1790, but local officials proved to be lax in collecting it. An official in Tours observed: "Since [collecting this surtax] is disgraceful for municipal officials and makes them odious to their fellow citizens, it has been carried out neither in Paris nor in any other city"⁶. The sorry state of tax collection lasted for nearly three years. Revenue increased once war was declared in 1792 and again during the Terror, when many wealthy but delinquent contributors were coerced into providing patriotic "gifts".

Early revolutionaries thus counted on citizens to uphold their civic duty voluntarily. In the age of freedom, governments were not to coerce. But revenues remained meager. Worse, the fact that some gave while others did not generated resentments within communities. As early as 1790, officials in Lyon collected rumors and denunciations concerning citizens who had failed to give, or to give sufficiently according to their wealth.⁷ Initially a sign of civic virtue, then, patriotic giving soon became a litmus test of loyalty to the new regime.

What about bread? In debates over a declaration of rights in the summer of 1789, economic and social rights were frequently proposed. These rights have been largely overlooked in recent histories of human rights, yet their presence proves that they were not, as often claimed, later socialist inventions. The model rights declaration drafted by the abbé Sieyès, for example, included an article that read "Any citizen unable to provide for his needs has the right to assistance from his fellow citizens." Another model read, "Property should not hinder one's subsistence (...) any man unable to work should be aided."⁸

⁶ Archives municipales de Bordeaux, G20, 24 octobre 1790, Lettre d'un officier municipal de Tours aux officiers municipaux de Bordeaux.

⁷ Archives municipales de Lyon, 310 WP 1284, fol. 13(3), "Notes individuelles sur divers particuliers relatives à la Déclaration de la Contribution patriotique, 1790".

⁸ Antoine de Baecque, Wolfgang Schmale et Michel Vovelle, *L'An I des droits de l'homme* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1988), p. 78, 229.

Why were economic and social rights omitted from the final draft? The reason, I suspect, had to do with the influence of economic liberals in the National Assembly. Whereas in early July, the National Assembly's Committee on Subsistence was proposing state intervention in grain markets, by late August, it was proposing a free-market solution.

Just days after completing the Declaration of Rights, the National Assembly passed a law liberalizing the grain trade. The text echoed the sentiments found in many of the economic and social rights proposed earlier that month. It began, "The National Assembly, considering that (...) all French people should recognize each other as true brothers, always disposed to reciprocally aid each other, and that this obligation is all the more pressing when it concerns subsistence"⁹ We seem to be entering the proto-socialist utopianism so often criticized by liberal political theorists during the Cold War, notably Hannah Arendt. Suddenly, though, the text veers off into a market economics lesson on "supply and demand". It concludes on a markedly un-fraternal note: anyone found interfering with free-market forces, be they citizens or officials, were to be charged with the high crime of *lèse-nation*. The law, which was widely resisted and repeatedly circumvented, remained a source of contention throughout the Revolution's early years.

Exacerbating matters, the National Assembly also upheld the 1786 quasi free-trade treaty with Britain, whose more advanced manufactures were crushing French ones, generating bankruptcies, destitution, and migration movements. Cries against the treaty and pleas for subsidies to help French industries modernize were widely expressed in 1789, but to no avail, despite promises. Moreover, in 1791, the Assembly abolished the guilds and corporations, banned confraternities, and closed almost every commercial regulatory bureau. It outlawed collective petitions and prohibited the formation of any association based on economic interests, thus forbidding collective bargaining and lobbying. Nor were the interests of elites spared: the Assembly cut the king's budget, thus curtailing Louis XVI's ability to satisfy courtiers, many of whom joined the counterrevolution. In short, these measures dramatically reduced the state's redistributive powers.

No redistribution, no friends; no friends, no legitimacy. Little wonder the National Assembly succumbed to factionalism and street pressure. Abandoned by the center, redistributive dynamics flourished on the local level, in many clubs, sections, and municipal governments. Where there is redistribution, there is power. The fragmentation of sovereignty followed the fragmentation of redistribution. The center sought to regain control, but how?

When states fail to maintain allegiances through redistribution, they tend to resort to ideology, usually of the "self-sacrificing" sort, which give individuals a sense of dignity and meaning in a system operating against their interests. They also

⁹ Jérôme Mavidal et al., *Les archives parlementaires de 1787-1860* (Paris : P. Dupont, 1867), vol. 8, p. 511.

resort to force, quashing not only dissent but also local redistribution mechanisms. Hence, Robespierre's impotent blather about virtue and the revolutionary government's centralization of violence and its suppression of locally initiated redistribution in 1794, before and especially after the "Incorruptible"'s fall on 9 Thermidor.

This brief sketch obviously leaves out many other factors radicalizing the Revolution, most importantly, the war, which began in April 1792. But it is worth noting that some Jacobins saw the shock of war as propitious for liberalizing subsistence. In December, and despite intense opposition, the National Assembly passed a draconian law which imposed the death penalty on anyone found interfering with the free market of grain. On March 10, 1793, the day Danton declared terror the order of the day, deputies were still divided over the issue. "Enforce the 'free circulation' law and markets will be provisioned" insisted one deputy. Another responded "Your law is a circulation of words and not of facts."¹⁰

During the Terror, revolutionaries worked at cross purposes on the issue of the economy: while the Convention included economic and social rights in the Constitution of 1793 (which was immediately suspended due to the war, then replaced in 1795 with a new constitution that omitted them) and sans-culotte armies roamed the countryside terrorizing merchants for bread and war supplies, the minister of the Interior gave his secret itinerant observers copies of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. He instructed them to calibrate their observations according to Smithian perspectives. Some agents were enthralled with the book. Others rejected it as "royalist sophistry" and even dared to tell the minister so.¹¹

Revolutionaries succeeded in declaring a republic but failed to reach a consensus on distributive justice. As political and moral economies clashed, redistribution atrophied at the center. Along with sovereignty, it became fragmented and contested. No wonder denunciations of "brigandage" and "corruption" proliferated; they do in all revolutions, and Arab Spring is no exception: one person's right is another's theft.

Economic and Social Rights as Human Rights

Historians of human rights have paid scant attention to economic and social rights: the right to work, to health services and education, to assistance for the elderly and incapacitated. This blindness is a reflection of our liberal times, which sees only civil and political rights. Despite the profusion of "rights talk" in the past thirty years, economic and social rights are rarely mentioned. In the 1960s, opponents of these rights, who nevertheless took them seriously enough to bother

¹⁰ For the December law, see *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 54, p. 687-688; for March 10, see vol. 60, p. 50.

¹¹ Pierre Caron, ed., *Rapports des Agents du Ministre de l'Intérieur dans les Départements (1793 - an 2)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913), vol. 1, p. 354-355.

refuting them, characterized them as new socialist additions to core civil and political rights stretching back to the eighteenth century. But as we have seen, economic and social rights also stretch back to the eighteenth century. Their marginalization, then and now, seems to have something to do with the conceptual framework of liberalism, which separates “politics” and “the economy.”

Economic and social rights were not promulgated in official declarations in any enduring way until the early twentieth century, when they appeared in some Latin American constitutions before their inclusion in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. With the Cold War, their legitimacy was challenged. Britain insisted on their omission from the European Convention on Human Rights of 1951. The United States began rejecting them as well, despite Eleanor Roosevelt’s prior blessing of them as Chair of the Committee on Human Rights at the UN.

As the Cold War dragged on, political theorists entered the debate. In *On Revolution* (1963), Hannah Arendt eschewed “the rights of the sans-culottes”. In her view, revolutions that go beyond the pursuit of political liberty and attempt to solve the social question end tragically. “The French Revolution committed the original sin of making a politics of necessity.”¹² When Robespierre put the social question at the center of revolutionary politics, he unleashed the rage of “the multitude”, who “rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution”, driving it “to its doom.”¹³ Unlike Polanyi, Arendt did not acknowledge the radical implications of the “self regulating market”. Naturalizing the distinction between politics and the economy, she made revolutionaries, who collapsed it, appear to be the “fools of history”. Rather than see the material demands of the sans-culottes as the second part of a double movement – that is, the return of material demands to politics after their attempted evacuation – she saw them as the assertion of new pathological principles. She drew a straight line from Robespierre, to Marx, to Lenin. The idea that economic and social rights could be compatible with civil and political ones was flatly rejected.

In 1966, three years after the publication of *On Revolution*, the United Nations devised a solution to the Cold War impasse over human rights. Seeking to codify the Universal Declaration into an enforceable convention, the UN split human rights into two sets: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. To this day, the United States has not recognized the latter. So by the time “rights talk” became the lingua franca of international diplomacy and globalization in the 1980s and 1990s (thanks largely to US foreign policy agendas¹⁴), the liberal conception of rights predominated. Economic and social rights were virtually forgotten in public discourse. Even Human Rights Watch forgot about them, or rather, refused to

¹² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [orig. 1963]), p. 57.

¹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 54.

¹⁴ Samuel Moy, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 2010), esp. chps. 5-6.

recognize their legitimacy. Its first director, Aryeh Neier, explained, “Civil and political rights are essential elements of democracy. (...) In contrast, the concept of economic and social rights is profoundly undemocratic. (...) Authoritarian power is probably a prerequisite for giving meaning to economic and social rights.”¹⁵ Neier failed to note that economic liberalization has involved authoritarian governance: Bolivia in the 1980s, Russia in the 1990s, Egypt in the 2000s.

Yet, economic and social rights have remained alive at the UN and even made some institutional advancements in the months following the global financial crisis of September 2008 — a timing that further suggests how the history of these rights has been bound up with the history of economic liberalism for more than two centuries.

Egypt: A Revolution of Redistribution?

How do redistribution, Polanyi’s “double movement”, and a partially amputated human-rights discourse shed light on Arab Spring?

As a precondition for receiving loans from the International Monetary Fund, Egypt embarked on liberal economic reforms — “structural adjustments” — not entirely unlike those of late Old Regime France, and with similar political effects. Privatizations of the commons during the eighteenth century, which one historian has recently characterized as “not harbingers of capitalism” but as “redistribution pure and simple”¹⁶, finds its parallel in the passing of sizeable sectors of the Egyptian economy into private hands (usually regime cronies) since the 1990s. Under Hosni Mubarak’s presidency, taxes were slashed, foreign loans increased, price controls were lifted, and domestic markets were thrown open to global trade. The results? Increased debt, a financial speculation frenzy, and social immiseration. Although Egypt’s gross national product rose in the late 1990s and 2000s (late Old Regime France’s economy also appears to have been growing), so, too, did social inequality (as in late Old Regime France). The percentage of the Egyptian population living on less than \$2 a day went from one in five in 1993 to nearly half the population by 2008.¹⁷

As Polanyi observed, the paradox of economic liberalization is that the state ends up becoming bigger and more repressive, not smaller and more democratic. This clearly happened in Mubarak’s Egypt, where regime cronies, after benefiting from privatization (they paid 10 cents on the dollar for public resources), bribed officials to maintain their privileged control over certain markets, including grain imports. Meanwhile, the regime, with its growing police apparatus, routinely

¹⁵ Aryeh Neier, *Taking Liberties: Four Decades in the Struggle for Human Rights* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), xxviii-xxix.

¹⁶ Philip T. Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450-1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 23.

¹⁷ Jack Shenker, “And the rich get richer,” *The Guardian* (November 8, 2008).

repressed criticism and opposition, which strived to carry material demands into the sphere of politics.

Polanyi's double movement thus appears to have occurred in Egypt: while economic barons colluded with the state to secure their interests, the opposition took to the streets to demand that the state protect theirs. The separation of politics and the economy, so cherished in liberal economic theory, ended in corruption and revolution. Yet, the separation of politics and the economy also proved to be illusory in several liberal democracies in 2008, when "too-big-to-fail" financial institutions passed off the costs of their reckless gambling (facilitated by deregulation) onto public treasuries, themselves prone to cronyism.

What is Egypt's future? A recent interview on Al Jazeera of a secular Egyptian revolutionary, Wael Eskander, and an American expert on Egyptian politics, Hussein Ibish, is suggestive, if unpromising.¹⁸ Eskander's view of the current situation is that the Egyptian army, which holds vast amounts of economic power (even more than the Church in Old Regime France), is buying out (or perhaps bullying?) the Muslim Brotherhood, which came to power through elections in 2012, ironically on a social-justice agenda, which the secular Eskander supports. What is the solution? For this revolutionary, more revolution. (One can hear Arendt saying, "but of course!") Ibish interprets the situation similarly. According to him, 2011 represented "regime decapitation", not revolution, since redistributive dynamics did not change. Asked what the solution might be, this *political* analyst shrugged his shoulders and confessed, "I am not an *economist*." (One can hear Polanyi saying, "but of course!")

So how do economic experts assess the situation? They tend to blame Egyptian politicians, without, however, proposing a politically viable economic solution – one that would reconcile demands coming from within Egyptian society (from elites and the streets) while harmonizing with global economic "realities". Take, for example, a recent article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, a US newspaper well-respected for its coverage of international affairs. It reveals how the conceptual distinction between "politics" and "the economy", so ingrained these days, leads to analytical circles and cul-de-sacs. The article's subtitle reads: "Egypt's economic problems do have a possible solution: politics. But Egypt's politicians are failing."¹⁹ What is the political solution? The article fails to propose one. After reviewing the nation's dire economic situation, the author shows its dire political situation to be so intractable, no solution appears to be imaginable, let alone viable. "An Egyptian government that fails to feed its people is one [that] does not persist very long." True enough, but the author observes that the foreign aid being proposed by the IMF will likely make matters worse, since it comes at the price of austerity, which will further rile the population. The analyst concludes that President Mohamed Morsi "is between a rock and a hard place."

¹⁸ Interview on Al Jazeera, January 26, 2013.

¹⁹ Dan Murphy, "Egypt's economy is collapsing, and no one is stopping it," *The Christian Science Monitor* (February 25, 2013).

It appears that democracy lacks a political economy these days. As communism and capitalism degenerate into cronyism, inequalities and political frustrations are rising. In contemplating the way forward, perhaps the recent past can be helpful. If new utopias are to be avoided, we might revive forgotten or marginalized elements of the last one: economic and social rights. As “human rights” they can carry a great deal of legitimacy. They also have the merit of lending themselves to catchy slogans, unlike Keynesianism, which, although complementary to economic and social rights, is gray and technocratic by comparison. When Wael Ghonim, the Facebook revolutionary, observed that human rights were not inspiring enough to spur people to take to the streets, he unwittingly expressed the insufficiency of a solely *liberal* conception of them. Although there are movements in Egypt fighting for economic and social rights, they tend not to appear in the western media, which prefer to attribute Egypt’s problems to religion rather than redistribution.

In any case, as democracy seeks its political economy in the twenty-first century, one crucial and timeless, if complicated and vexing, truth should be kept in mind: “It’s the redistribution, stupid!”

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