

Terrorism, Neo-Liberalism and Political Rhetoric

Critical Sociology
37(4) 379–382
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920511403860
crs.sagepub.com


David Fasenfest

Wayne State University

It would seem that 2011 is going to be a pivotal year. Conservative Republicans, many under the banner of the Tea Party, have captured the US House of Representatives and promise to correct the course this country has taken. Echoing the actions of the coalition government in the UK, these members of Congress announced an intention to cut \$100 billion from the annual budget (the actual proposal was less than a third of that amount), mostly in areas we have come to call the social safety net. We need not repeat the oft stated refrain that capitalism is doing just fine, profits are back to pre-debacle level in many sectors, and unemployment remains high (figures showing a small drop at the start of this decade has more to do with discouraged workers leaving the workforce rather than any meaningful job creation). Our ‘weak’ economy, so the argument being promoted goes, is because of a burdensome government supporting all the largesse and entitlements bestowed on the undeserving masses. In truth, we are witnessing a wholesale assault on the cost of social reproduction, and facts have little to do with reality or rhetoric (the endlessly repeated mantra that taxes are too high is not given pause by the fact that personal income taxes are the lowest they have been in half a century!).

But 2011 also opens with a very interesting phenomenon spreading across North Africa and into the Middle East. High unemployment, few economic prospects for young people and the outrageous disparity in wealth finally fueled mass protests in Tunisia calling for not just the ouster of the leader of the country, but of the entire ruling party. The intensity and speed of the unrest and sudden departure of the leadership caught Western analysts by surprise. With rapid succession demonstrations in Egypt and Yemen made clear that the status quo was no longer acceptable, leading to concessions by the government in Yemen and the end of several decades of rule in Egypt. And in Jordan, the monarchy pre-empted popular unrest by removing all the ministers and indicating the new government was going to be more sensitive to popular complaints. Suddenly (it would seem) so-called stable regimes, propped up by repressive and undemocratic leadership and supported by US foreign aid and military assistance, began to topple. Few in the Western media noted the irony that we rail against the seemingly permanent rule by Fidel Castro in Cuba yet openly support and endorse (perhaps now more reluctantly) similar tenures in countries more friendly to the interests of the USA. In the face of the intensity of opposition in Egypt both Obama and Cameron issued calls for ‘reason’ and ‘restraint’ on the part of Hosni Mubarak, urging him to transition out of government quickly – though stopping short of a demand he step down immediately. (In yet another time shift, by the time this issue is in press we will have witnessed either the successful replacement of Mubarak in response to this public outcry by Egyptians or, as is increasingly likely in the early days of February, a weathering of that political storm as Mubarak reasserts a kinder and gentler but no less autocratic rule.)

Two (at least) interesting observations flow from the events in North Africa and the Middle East, centering around Egypt. First, there is lots of chatter on lists devoted to understanding social change and popular protests as scholars try to understand whether this is a revolution or rebellion, where it will go and how it will develop, and how we identify and understand the participants (after all, until now this Egyptian protest seems somewhat leaderless; Pastor and LoPresti (2007) explore the issue of leadership in community movements). Some see the absence of a structure as symptomatic of a failed effort to create a new society; others see the growing coalition of workers, students, professionals, middle-class shop keepers and increasingly a neutral military as signs that this is becoming a successful revolution. Dreyfuss (2011) begins to detail the panoply of actors and elements driving this resistance. Comparisons are made with Iran (see Goldstone, 2009) to delve into how seemingly spontaneous protests can become eruptions of popular unrest that might well topple authoritarian regimes. Throughout these discussions run threads that point to how increasing poverty, corruption, a sense of hopelessness and outrage over how the government deals with its people contribute to a willingness of the population to overcome their fear of the repressive regime (early impressions and assessments of the Egyptian opposition can be found in Bamyeh, 2011).

The second observation is over the ambivalence shown by Western governments and political parties in the USA. Democracy is good, the mantra goes, but we also desire stability and so we are concerned about succession and chaos that may accompany the deposition of Mubarak in Egypt. Conservatives, long the champions of 'freedom' and 'democracy' around the world (but perhaps not in Florida!), find themselves critical of Obama's stance calling for change and respect for the wishes of 'the people' of Egypt. Even these calls for change by the Administration are tempered by concerns over the transition. After all, Mubarak was a valued ally (translate: a willing instrument of our foreign policy) and Egypt a recipient of our foreign aid (translate: we fund their military) – they should not be abandoned so quickly. Other absolute rulers in the region are watching us to see how we respond to this 'democratic' threat. Similar themes emerge: what is this movement for change and who will assume the mantle of leadership. After all, we cannot just legitimize the aspirations of the dispossessed and the claims against tyrants we have put into place and propped up for many years, even decades – that would describe so many countries around the world and potentially herald a Jacobin moment in each. We only wish to demonize and overthrow our enemies, not our allies. How best to do that if not to invoke images of Taliban-like governments in waiting eager to seize control, thereby worrying about the rising role of what we call Islamists in the region. Images of another Iran are offered us to caution for calm and patience regarding Egypt. Nationalist forces and national liberation movements during the period from the end of World War II through the Vietnam War era and beyond were either supported by the USA if that movement called for deposing a government unfriendly to US interests – for example, funding the Contra war against Sandinista Nicaragua, or were vilified as 'communist' or worse if they opposed dictators friendly towards the USA – fostering rebellion in the Congo and the overthrow and assassination of Lumumba, and the overthrow of Mosaddeq in Iran followed by the installation of Mohammad Reza Shah come to mind (see Berberoglu, 2000 on the politics of national liberation struggles).

The case of the successful coup in Iran in 1953, which served as a blueprint for a successful coup in Guatemala in 1954 and the failed Bay of Pigs intervention in Cuba in 1961, is instructive in the current situation for two reasons. First, the harsh rule of the USA-supported Shah left an animosity among the Iranian people that culminated in an Islamic revolution in 1979 steeped in the hatred of the USA. So long as we were pre-occupied by our Cold War against the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries, and so long as Iran was kept in check by our ally Saddam Hussein in Iraq, that country was not a primary concern of the USA. Second, our memory of the

Iranian situation and hostage taking after the overthrow of the Shah informs our political response and assessment of any post-Mubarak Egypt. Our government fails to see how this popular anti-American rhetoric is born out of an association with a hated regime propped up by American guns and money. The image of a group like the Moslem Brotherhood taking part in discussions of a post-Mubarak Egypt and visions of the Ayatollah led revolution in Iran and the unenlightened rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan (Langman, 2005) fuel our fears.

Since the events of 9/11 the West in general and the USA in particular have used the specter of Islam as our excuse and justification for our foreign (and domestic) policies. That cataclysmic event vaulted a neo-conservative world view front and center, which lead to a willingness to use military power unilaterally and without regard to international norms in order to rectify and restore American and European interests as the US Government has defined them. Our official understanding of anti-western terrorism is that it is a direct result of Islam's rejection of western liberalism and a rejection of the freedom and conspicuous consumption of non-Islamic nations. By framing the response as a 'war on terrorism' the US Government obscures the anti-communal nature of its position. By anti-communal, I mean that neo-liberalism rejects the rights of those who embody difference even as it purports to defend a system of democracy rooted in difference. Clearly, there is no uniform definition of Arab (David, 2007) but it is clear that there has been an attempt to both create a singular Muslim identity and then strip it of its symbols (Byng, 2010) in the creation and embodiment of this external threat. Only by raising the specter of an Islamic regime, with all its implied hostility to the West, can our current political leaders rationalize a measured and hesitant response to the opposition movement in Egypt, and in so doing urge that the transition from Mubarak does not leave a power vacuum.

Once again we fail to recognize or choose to ignore the fact that legitimate grievances against despotic regimes will lead, in turn, to legitimate grievances against states and governments that support and maintain those regimes in power. The anger of the Iranian people amid the memory of US involvement in installing and supporting the Shah is ignored, and in its place we identify the Islamic nature of the revolution as the root cause of the animosity against this country. We now seem to ignore the poverty and repression sustained by US aid for a leader whose main value was to be a powerful instrument of our foreign policy and a proxy in an important region (not to mention a willing partner through rendition and the application of torture illegal in the USA). The signals are clear. The overthrow of the government in Tunisia, the responses to popular protest in Jordan and Yemen, and current events in Egypt all point to a growing willingness by citizens to challenge the existing order that ensures widespread poverty, aggregates wealth and power among a very few, and in this way to resist the forces of social control in demonstrating and demanding real change. By labeling this opposition as 'Islamist' and demonizing its goals western governments can ignore legitimate claims and dismiss popular protest.

And so we return to the situation in the USA. We face persistent unemployment that promises to be devastating for a generation of workers too old to retrain and too young to partake of years of retirement – especially as the conservatives in Congress mean to strip bear the underpinning of the social supports making that retirement possible. On some level the willingness and eagerness of these same conservative forces to advocate for the continuation of the Mubarak regime reveals the true nature of their domestic social political agenda. There are no appeals to poverty alleviation, no sense that there is a social responsibility of society to all citizens, and no compassion for those dealt a harsh blow by the policies of its government and the working of its economy. This is true in their response to events in Egypt, and apparently true as these politicians contemplate policies and budget cuts to social spending in the USA.

The articles in this issue of the journal reflect on global politics, neo-liberal policies, oppositional movements and the ecological crisis. Robert Hassan reflects on the speed of the financial collapse, and posits that the response is more of an indication of how the system is out of control rather than a corrective mechanism. The article by De Graaff and van Apeldoorn explores the dialectics of the changing geopolitical imperialist strategies in light of changing networks of actors. Both articles speak to how the changing global political economy is forcing changes in both our understanding of capitalism and the role of hegemonic power.

Erick Bonds takes off from this power analysis to explore how corporate and military interests shape and influence environmental politics and policies in the USA. It is an interplay of power elites and their influence on knowledge formation that subverts effective efforts to improve the environment. The analysis presented by Matthew Clement follows this logic, and through an analysis of long-term sustainability argues that we must no longer follow a path laid out by what he calls ecological modernization theory. His is a call for a renewed emphasis on the relationship between class structure and ecological crises of capitalism in order to arrive at an effective social and environmental justice movement. The final article, by Kristin Lozanski, shows that even well-meaning actions – in this case through alternative travel and tourism – will depend upon and thereby reinforce structural inequalities born out of a colonial history.

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