

Art and Social Transformation

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There are many arguments why Art is important. Some of these arguments focus on the utility of Art as a conduit for critiquing social norms and political practices, its value as a carrier of collective memory and history, its ability to conserve national identity, or its useful contribution to the economy. These are all very valid and important arguments, but I would like to talk about another aspect of how artistic expression, production and activity can be essential for social change.

What happens when someone starts to write poetry, or takes up acting, or paints an image which is hanging in her/his mind? Of course many things happen: he/she discovers they need more training, neighbors complain, s/he worries about what people think of the work, friends love what s/he did, etc. But the most important thing that happens is that this person becomes more powerful. They obtain power over things that are beyond their immediate reality. This transformation on the individual level is hardly only a personal matter. Creativity, or the power of imagining things that cannot be immediately perceived by our five senses, is a personal ability but its impact goes far beyond any particular individual. This power is contagious; receiving or interacting with creativity is empowering. Perhaps I use the word “empowering” in a liberal way. What I mean is that participating in an act of creativity enables people to feel and think beyond their immediate reality and outside their usual capacity.

How can this be useful in a process of social change?

I would argue that the creative power is one of the most essential assets during social change. To get a society to change values and norms that hinder its prosperity and wellbeing, you could use the media or you could use force, but change will not happen until this society wants to change. The desire for change is mostly fed by the power of creativity; the ability to think and feel beyond reality. How can people want change if they lack the ability to imagine what it could be like?

Another thought about how art is vital for social change: I think we all agree that the process of changing social values and norms is a long, complicated and demanding one; such a process involves small and big changes on many

levels: political, economic and moral. Often, this process is not a rewarding one on the short term; the changes are hardly visible at the time they happen. The best example of this is Europe over the past two centuries. It is only through art that these changes can be distilled and expressed in forms that people can understand and relate to.

Now that I have shared these remarks about the value of art during social transformation, I will move to the topic that you probably expect me to talk about: the Arab Spring. It is only 13 months ago that a massive popular protest movement started in Tunis and resulted in major political changes in 4 countries in the region: Tunis, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, and an ongoing fight for freedom in Syria and Bahrain. These changes as you all know happen in a region where the word “change” was used only to mean passing power from an aging dictator to his son. It is not surprising then that the whole world is giving these movements such attention and even admiration. I’m not going to attempt to give you any kind of political analysis of the situation in Egypt, my country, or the rest of the region as I am no political analyst; and quite frankly, even the best international political analysts have not been able to explain or predict the ongoing changes, or where they are going.

I want to share with you some preliminary observations on the social aspects of the ongoing political changes. These observations are an attempt to explore the impact of the political changes on the society’s value systems. My first observation is about age. As you have seen on television, these revolutions were, are led by young people. The vast majority of people taking to the streets are young men and women; more than 90% of those killed by the old regimes are under the age of 35, in Egypt 75% of the victims are under the age of 25. Almost all effective activists who are organizing sit-ins and demonstrations, printing and distributing political leaflets, blogging, making videos, etc. are between 20 and 35 years old. This is natural in a region where the majority of the population is under 35 years old and, with the current population growth rates, this ratio is rising. Yet, in the 4 countries where the heads of the old regimes have been overthrown, and some sort of democratic process started, it looks like now the political scene is dominated, in some cases entirely, by people who are over 60 years old. In the recent Egyptian parliamentary elections, out of the 498 members of the new parliament, less than 10% are under the age of 40.

My second observation is about women. Also, as you may have seen on television, women were at the forefront of the political protests, in most cases with men and in a few cases in women only demonstrations. Some of the most outspoken and world known faces of Arab revolutions are women: Nawwara Negm from Egypt, Samar Yazbak from Syria and Tawakol Karaman from Yemen. Many of the most important civic initiatives in Egypt such as “No to Military Trials”, “El Fan Midan” and “We Will Not Forget Them” are initiated and led by women. Again, despite this, only 6 women, all over 40 years, have been elected in the new parliament.

My last observation is about social class. Social justice was right at the very top of protest demands in Tunis, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and, to a lesser extent, Libya. Even though poorer people did not participate in large numbers in the protests in Egypt at the beginning of the revolution, the slogans raised by the revolutionaries were predominantly about removing social injustice. Since February 2011, poorer people, mostly from urban slums have constituted the majority of people protesting against military rule in Egypt. However, in Egypt as well as in Tunis the newly elected representative councils and the political elites are focusing their attention on issues related to the transfer of political power rather than on addressing some of the acute social issues.

It is not clear yet, how and whether the ongoing political changes will lead to major changes in social values and power relations in Arab societies. One would assume that this is something that will happen automatically, but this was not the case in many historical examples (Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Iran). Rarely, incomplete political revolutions result in everlasting social changes (France 1968). Toppling dictatorial and corrupt regimes is a very difficult task that requires courage, sacrifices and perseverance, but changing the social values and structures that produced or sustained these regimes is a very long and often ambiguous process; in the first instance the enemy is identified and can be easily targeted, but in the second instance the enemy could be us. The beliefs that social inequity and gender inequality are “natural” and sometimes even “sacred”, and that old age entails social and political advantages are deeply rooted in our cultures.

The political changes, with the accompanying relative freedom of expression, however make it possible to question such beliefs. This could represent an opportunity for those who advocate social change to initiate some investigation of the impact of these values on our future. It is

unrealistic to expect more than that on the short term, but at the same time is vital to maintain the vision of free, just and open societies in our heads and hearts and to think of every step we take towards achieving this vision as a victory. This requires incredible strength as we will often be defeated and beaten, and will inevitably doubt if the little gains are worth the sacrifices given by our colleagues and friends. When we look around for sources for strength and determination, what is the one source that will make us feel and think beyond our immediate reality? My answer is: Art.

Basma El Hussein, 6 February 2012