The Uses of Political Imaginaries: Projecting Subjectivity in the Arab Spring

Dr Tim Markham
Birkbeck, University of London

t.markham@bbk.ac.uk
The Uses of Political Imaginaries: Projecting Subjectivity in the Arab Spring

Introduction: There's something about political imaginaries

Not long after the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt scholars and subsequently a fair proportion of journalists and media commentators began to shy away from the phrase 'Arab Spring'. On the face of it this simply reflected a growing awareness that swift and coherent transitions to Western-style democracy across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were unlikely, and that the Spring metaphor with its suggestion of an emergence from darkness was increasingly inappropriate. I argue in this paper that the phrase should be seen in the broader context of a more durable tendency to imbue protest cultures with a misplaced vibrant agency. This isn’t to suggest that reform movements cannot be powerful agents of historic change; simply that there is nothing intrinsically about a protest culture, network or ‘space’ that is fertile or generative of political subjectivity, as many ecological and biological conceptions of protest networks presume. That such a commitment is fairly common suggests that it is at some level functional, and I would argue that the work it does is primarily for audiences and analysts in the West as well as within the region: it fulfils a desire to witness and invest emotionally in political change as something which is sparked, which comes to life, gathers a momentum of its own and eventually becomes unstoppable.

Further, there is a parallel vivifying tendency in the assessment of the instrumental role that social media are said to have played in the recent uprisings in the region. A survey of around 150 journal articles published before July 2012 reveals an academic discourse that is frequently breathless about social media while also mindful of the need to take into account historical, political and economic particularities, and not to second guess where things are heading. And yet, even if social media are seen as insufficient in themselves to topple a regime, they are frequently characterized as necessary. While alternative media and activist networks inevitably depend on mainstream media at some point for economies of scale, there is something about social networks, especially as used through smart phones and other mobile devices, which is teleologically unique. Ascribing a teleology to a media format or social formation arguably says more about the ascriber than the ascribee, but this doesn’t mean it is without interest. In this paper I will set out some of the more normatively loaded claims made of social networks, and compare them to the way that Twitter has been used by both Arab journalists and politically motivated amateurs in the region since late 2009. This isn't meant as a reality check for pious Western champions of social media against what is ‘really’ happening on the ground around the world. I defend the validity of Western media scholars commenting on recent events in the Arab world, conscious of but not hamstrung by the risk of othering its journalists, activists and citizens. This paper thus offers a critical response to those who argue that new political and media subjectivities can only emerge in isolation from the strictures of western journalistic discourse and political models.

Different social media have been favoured by participants in and supporters of different political, social and activist movements: Facebook was particularly popular in the Iranian post-election protests and in the Tunisian uprising, Twitter was the medium of choice in an already well-established culture of blogging in Egypt, while online the still unfolding tumult in Syria is largely being played out on YouTube. But the language used by academics, both Western and Middle Eastern, to describe these forums throws up a set of recurrent terms – including ‘galvanizing’, ‘empowering’, ‘co-ordinating’, ‘evading’ and ‘generating’ – and tellingly the agent of these verbal phrases is frequently social media itself rather than its users. As an agent, social media has a certain intangibility: it is organic in its genesis and development, elusive and fleet-footed. By this conception, the lack of constraint in social media, whether it be narrative or professional, is productive of a distinct kind of online subjectivity. This is similar to but different in significant ways from the new and frequently ‘radically alternative’ political subjectivities.
that are said by many researchers working on the Arab Spring to emerge spontaneously when an authoritarian regime is overthrown – the product of liberated political ‘imaginaries’. There is no suggestion in the literature that there majority of tweets are politically or culturally transformative, but there is a clear theme in academic writing on this topic emphasizing the unchecked flow of communication, notwithstanding the constraints of character limits, bandwidth and literacy, as productive of something – whether it be freer discourse, more creative activism or a different way of inhabiting partly-mediated worlds.

This only makes sense if subjectivity is seen as something which emerges naturally from a vacuum, and without diving headlong into the history of phenomenological thought there is a strong case for arguing that subjectivity exists not in spite of constraint, but because of it. An absence of structure by this view is a fantastic projection: there is no outside of structure, simply different structurings of subjectivity. But this is not intended as philosophical pedantry, nor an attempt to cast as naïve those cheered by the dismantling of restrictive structures and the possibilities this presents. Instead it means looking levelly at the communicative architecture of media old and new: from an absence of which constraints does social media benefit? If online-facilitated or galvanized protest comes to be seen as unstoppable, unstoppable by what? In political terms the simple answer is authoritarian regimes or even authoritarianism tout court. But much of the social media discourse that emerged in the Arab Spring opposed all institutionalized forms of politics, and it has been seen since that the absence of political parties, trades unions and other forms of organisational structures has proven a real hindrance to the establishment of new public spheres and deliberative spaces and thus to political reform. It is important then consider whether the attractiveness of social media to protestors and of popular uprisings to media commentators and academic researchers lies precisely in their amorphousness and lack of institutionalization, and with what consequences.

Social media and the Arab Spring

There is little point in denying the role that social media has played in the Arab Spring and other protest movements such as that in Iran after the 2009 elections. On an organisational level there is ample evidence of its effectiveness, with Tufekci and Wilson (2012) showing for instance that Twitter social media users were more likely to have attended the first day of mass protests in Egypt in January 2011 than non-users. Howard et al. (2011) paint a vivid picture of the subversive uses to which social media can be put, and as valid as it is to point to the harnessing of social media by authoritarian regimes for the purpose of surveillance, practices of sousveillance – uploading video of police brutality, for example – are also enabled by new platforms. The argument set out here, however, is that media scholars and commentators, mainly in the West but to a significant extent on the part of Arab researchers as well, have focussed disproportionally on social media. This is in part simply because they are new, but also because they offer an attractive narrative of shapeless and unstoppable people power, a malleable and adaptable object in which we can invest emotionally and onto which we can project our own subjective ideals. But while it makes sense to criticize the objectification of the Arab Spring, it is important to clarify how scholars, commentators and audiences emerge as subjects in relation to events on the ground. In the case of academics one of the main concerns in the past has been that the reality unfolding in a non-Western setting will come to be dominated by (western) scholarly discourse. And this has consequences for our understanding of developments in the region, overlooking the meaningful but mundane, too keen to project a romanticised politics onto a blank canvas, ingoring the continuities underpinning these times of change. But rather than simply criticizing, we need to understand what is driving that discourse, and what is striking is that the academic subject of this knowledge appears less shaped by scholarly discourse than emotion. This is not to suggest that emotion has no role in academic research – it is inevitably a factor from the selection of topics to research – but the use of emotive language, from couching analyses in terms of aspiration, frustration, tragedy, hope and

© 2013 Markham
so on, and with writers such as Axford (2011) explicitly referring to events as “almost unbearably poignant”, should make us aware of the emotive work being done by the Arab Spring for those investigating it.

This has broader consequences because it is likely, though the evidence is inconclusive at this stage, that a significant proportion of audience members experience a similar emotional engagement. Drawing on the media framing model set out by Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012), it is arguable that where an audience response to Tahrir Square is emotional it may be a response which has been learned by exposure to other climactic political events in recent history: Tiananmen Square and the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, the established narratives of which doubtless draw on earlier precedents. It is important also to take into account the quality of attention paid: the extent to which news consumption is ritualized will have an impact, and for those following events on social media it is likely that information will be registered to some extent as ephemeral. This is not to say that such engagement is necessarily superficial – a degree of serendipity is to be expected given that users exercise a degree of control over the messages to which they are exposed – but users are liable to be distracted by competing messages nonetheless. Papacharissi and Oliveira thus write of ambient news consumption, and of the emergence of new cultures of listening practices: background, reciprocal and delegated listening. Does this mean, then, that there is something fundamentally inauthentic about western engagement with the Arab Spring? Not necessarily, as such a charge would inevitably rest on an insupportable distinction between emotive or distracted attention on one side, and political engagement in the region characterized as somehow more genuine or real. In reality, political engagement is invariably a combination of the rational and emotional, the focussed and distracted.

Rinke (2011) makes the point that while much is made of the Egyptian blogosphere in the five years leading up to the Arab Spring, most of it was decidedly apolitical. What is sometimes referred to as ‘futile chatting’ (Holheinz, 2011) should not be so easily dismissed, with entertainment and building social networks for not exclusively political ends the dominant motivations for engaging with social media. Looking at tweets archived in the Tahrir Data Set, it is clear that even of those referring directly to political developments, many are more socially than politically oriented, explicable by turn-taking or affirmation of group membership rather than expressing political commitments or setting out to convince and mobilize. And amongst journalists’ tweets in ongoing work (Markham, 2013) there are references to sport and poetry and links to music videos on YouTube. The lesson here is that while seriousness may have its uses, its absence should not be interpreted as a sign of disengagement. While there is no shortage of evidence in the tweets from Westerners around the 26 January protests in Egypt of a lack of awareness of context and, perhaps, political naivety, it is an established feature of social media that content and users switch between the weighty and the throwaway. There is nothing about Facebook that is depoliticizing, even though its conception was apolitical, any more than it is argued to be inherently politically transformative by others who point to its horizontal, dynamic networks as generative of a new and more democratic way of doing politics. Lewiński (2012) shows how easily apolitical status updates can be turned political by friends’ comments, while Kuebler (2011) makes an important distinction between campaigners on Facebook with origins in Egypt’s Kefiya reform movement and those who are simply keen to know what others are talking about, political or otherwise. The distinction between the two is inevitably porous, and Rinke (2011) notes that such a deliberative environment will be familiar to anyone who has spent time in cities across the Middle East, with televisions broadcasting news and other content a standard fixture of shops and coffee houses, and conversation and debate ranging from the critical to the comical drawing in regulars and passers-by alike. Social media then is no different from many other kinds of discourse: multifarious, argumentative, wide-ranging, entertaining, contradictory, not uniquely expressive and not exempt from the constraints of culture, convention and language. My analysis of tweets by Arab journalists at key moments in 2012 shows them alternating between high rhetoric, banal statements of support
for democratization and more or less straight reporting of events – though the literature suggests they find this switching between the profound and mundane harder going than amateur tweeters. There is an identifiable epistemological orientation to the world detectable in this social media discourse, and it may indicate a particular kind of political subjectivity. But it isn’t the product of its platform, and can only be understood in the context of the habits, affordances and pleasure of everyday life, in which professional principles are inevitably subsumed to the mechanics of work and the social context in which it is situated.

Talking about a revolution

There are those, though, who argue that nascent Middle Eastern subjectivities need to be protected from the West’s over-determining ways. Newsom (2011), for one, insists that Western researchers start from the assumption that all Arabs are oppressed, but are either unaware of or complicit in their subjugation. This suggests a certain lack of imagination about how academics relate to the subjects of their research: while it is simple enough to speak of authors othering those whom they research, it is more productive to look at the relation between researchers and their work, in the same way that we can investigate the sometimes distanced, sometimes intimate, sometimes conflicted relation that, say, medical doctors have to their patients, but in terms of the routines and regulations by which they become present to the practitioner as work. Likewise, when Newsom goes on to assert that the ‘Western media’ adapts news messages ‘to suit its own agenda’, this reveals a lack of awareness of the complicated and conflicted world of news media work, work which on the everyday level comes to be experienced as complex yet naturalized by way of training, routinization, precarity and competition. Characterizing ‘Western media’ as a discrete subject demonstrates a projection of hardwired preconception similar to the lack of differentiation and open-mindedness to the counterfactual diagnosed in Orientalist narratives. It also suggests an insupportable degree of instrumentalism, as though the media can collectively ‘do something’ to what is assumed originally to have been an authentic message.

For Newsom as for others, the only ethical alternative to misguided assumptions about the Arab world is for Western academics to desist from imposing interpretive or normative frameworks on it. Newsom concedes that Orientalism in its conventional form is now so untenable as to be unthreatening, but casts corporate media as monolithic and therefore antagonistic towards new voices emerging in the Middle East. Volpi (2011) starts from a similar premise to Newsom, offering a critique of the assumption that Islamic communities are incapable of political reform because of the illegitimacy of states’ claim to monopolies on violence, and regional citizens’ intransigent preoccupation with ethnicity, religion and tribalism. While this is entirely valid, Volpi then goes on to argue that not only are academics who continue to hold such reductive beliefs discredited, but so too are the political concepts they deploy. The upshot is that we should content ourselves with describing rather than analysing Arab societies, and dispense with conventional Western ideals: if only we would move on from Montesquieu and Tocqueville we would stop obsessing over deviations from our own abstract models of civil society and look instead at how civil society is constituted and negotiated, without prejudice. It is worth noting that this article is part of a compelling and often provocative special issue of the journal Third World Quarterly devoted to the applicability or otherwise of Norbert Elias’s concept of civility in the post-revolutionary Middle East. Without wanting to reduce Volpi’s contribution to soundbites, he argues that while we, meaning Westerners, possess a clearly developed notion of civility drawing on the history of political thought and the practice of academic theorizing, in the Middle East civility is more about communication and display in everyday rituals, for example rhetorical devices for expressing respect. This seems an appropriately phenomenological response to a genuine dilemma of objectification and subjectification in academic work: putting aside the abstractions of Western metaphysics and focussing instead on what Volpi calls the ‘everyday subjective’.

© 2013 Markham
But there is a subtle yet important elision here. Volpi is right to warn against the imposition of ontological or normative frameworks on cultures and societies that may have distinct and potentially incompatible organizing principles. However, it does not follow that by refusing to explain the constitution and development of Arab civil society in western terms that an alternative local and more authentic political subjectivity will become apparent. This relates to a common fallacy in the literature: that each society has distinct and intrinsic political ideals and ideal mechanisms for achieving them which will spontaneously come to fruition once the constraints of authoritarian government and western overdetermination are eliminated. It makes sense to be open to alternative ways of thinking about and doing politics, including radical ones, but it doesn’t hold that political, or discursive, vacuums are naturally generative of such alternatives. While not put so bluntly, the implication is that Western scholars and commentators should not offer critical perspectives on developments in the Arab world because they should not presume to understand local political subjectives. But although it's reasonable to resist the wholesale importing of Western conceptions of democracy – whether they be liberal, neoliberal, social democrat or socialist – this does not amount to a justification for withholding all academically-informed perspectives. The ‘contingent universals’ of Western metaphysics may lack relevance in local context, but we phenomenologists can offer insight into and critical appraisals of the constitution and development of political subjectivity, rooted as it necessarily is in the often pre-reflexive experience of the everyday – and in our context in the quotidian experience of consuming, producing and living amongst media.

Political subjectivities of the Arab Spring

Let us take a step back, then. Instead of assuming that there is a Western discourse that is Orientalist, condescending or neo-imperialist, or that research conducted by Arab scholars represents a more appropriate or authentic voice, it is important to unpack the terms upon which scholarly understanding of recent events has been built – and with what consequences. In the first instance it appears that while much scholarly writing on the Arab Spring preaches caution and realism about the prospects for radical change across the Middle East and Northern Africa, there is nonetheless a conviction that unique opportunities present themselves at this juncture specifically because of the role played by citizen journalists and non-institutional political activists as well as the affordances of social media. Even more striking than this, however, is the pervasive belief – voiced explicitly by Newsom and Volpi amongst others, but woven more subtly into the bulk of this emerging academic discourse – that professional journalists and western journalists should stand back and reserve comment in order that a more authentically local or regional political imaginary can emerge from the fallout of political upheaval. Looked at in the round, this orientation towards the Arab Spring rests on two claims, both questionable. The first is that there is something about social media that is capable of generating a distinct kind of political subjectivity. It will be seen here that whether that something is its horizontal networks or its inherent spontaneity, there is an additional mystified element whose transformative power has to be accepted on faith. The second is that the removal of the constraints of political authoritarianism as well as those of journalistic and academic discourse is a necessary condition of the authenticity of that subjectivity. Our task here is to examine the evidence for and against these commitments, as well as to ask as the ethos underlying this outlook demands to what extent it is valid for Western academics and journalists to weigh in on such debates. We begin with social media before moving on to protest cultures and popular uprisings more broadly.

Fenton and Barassi (2011) flesh out some of the commonalities and differences of those who argue for the radical transformativity of social media. For Stiegler the key is individuation: it is only through self-expression that the individual is able to shake off the deadening, flattening pressure of market forces. For Castells transformativity stems from autonomy, a more socially situated kind of subjective freedom but one which is nonetheless distinctly individuated. Both
foreground individual creativity and voice, with Castells famously describing social media as enabling a mass communication of the self. Fenton and Barassi, however, argue that this inward-looking, even narcissistic encapsulation of what social media enable is fundamentally counter-productive in relation to political subjectivity, which is necessarily collective in its genesis. This in itself requires pulling apart, because at first glance it is not obvious why a mass communication of self is intrinsically uncollective. The authors are akin to those who look on with sadness at the briefly conspicuous silent flashmob, in which each participant dances while listeni to music only they can hear, through headphones. The distinction is one between actions which are simply common, in this case expressing a voice, and those which amount to a common endeavour. It could be argued that this is simply a romanticized view of collectivity, and that being less constrained by the act of working with others towards a common purpose is conducive to a different kind of creativity, one which more or less naturally emerges when large numbers of people do roughly the same thing, and this appears to be the claim underpinning Stiegler's understanding of transformation, if not Castells.

Yet for Fenton and Barassi it is precisely the constraints of structured deliberation, with agreed or imposed subjects and rules for interacting and acting, that are required in order to sustain political subjectivity as opposed to generic and diverse subjectivities. The efficacy of activist media is said to consist in part in collective rituals, which are conceived as historically constituted cultures of practice. While the same could theoretically be said of social media champions – what is tweeting if not ritualistic? – the difference apparently lies in the effect of those rituals, to subsume the individual to a collective product on the one hand, and to enable individuals to be heard by an at least minimally attentive and comprehending audience on the other. For Stiegler, individuation is made possible by the act of speaking out, and only by speaking for oneself is one able to establish one’s ‘singularity’, though I would argue that his position is not the diametric opposite of Fenton and Barassi’s insofar as recognition of one’s singularity is not entirely achieved through self-actualisation; there has to be at least an abstracted sense of others recognizing oneself. But for Stiegler it appears that abstraction is not only a minimum but imperative to the work of self-creation: it depends on a sense that others are engaged in similar practices, that their practices in no way constrain one’s own self-expression, and that a less coerced kind of collectivity can result, one which does not compromise individual creativity but can be productive of something greater than it. Fenton and Barassi, however, argue that there needs to be collective construction of political messages, not mere co-presence, in order for coherent political subjectivity to be realisable. This affirms the Hegelian conception of subjectivity not only as a collective endeavour but the product of active, if non-instrumental, intention.

This can sound slightly old-fashioned, especially as the authors at one point speak of the importance of physical co-presence as well as mutual engagement in deliberation. But such assertions are backed up by an empirical study of a solidarity movement who found that their embrace of social media undermined their sense of collective symbolic identity. This isn’t couched vaguely in terms of a less tangible imagined community, but as an observed effect of social media: losing the ability to constrain and direct members’ attention, communication and interaction made it impossible for them to achieve one of their principal aims. Their subject was the Cuban Solidarity Council, but they hoped additionally to spark self-reflexiveness on the part of Westerners about the contingent nature of neoliberalism – a tall order to be sure, but one rendered inconceivable by abandoning concentrated, protracted discussion for a forum more suited to brief expressions of sympathy – expressions which, after Stiegler, are more important as acts of individual creativity than as acts engaging with and seeking to transform an external world. It is important that Stiegler does not see this as a dead end: indeed, for him individual participation in the creation and dissemination of symbolic production is the premise upon which all politics is based. Fenton and Barassi criticize this mainly in terms of effectiveness: it is naïve to think that individual yet networked instances of communicative experience will deliver substantive political or social change. But there is a bigger point at stake, the fault line being
between collectively working towards – and struggling over the terms of – political subjectivity, and having faith in a novel and benign political imaginary emerging from, yet remaining subservient to, acts of individuation.

There is a broader debate here between those who see new cultures of practice situated on more private or intimate terrain as empowering, ensuring that politics happens on familiar territory through acts over which one has control, and those who see instead a retreat from necessarily public deliberation without much by way of political substitute. While there is not space here to take on all parameters of the politics of intimacy, it is certainly an interesting possibility that instead of the dissolution or mutual colonisation of the private and public spheres there remains a clear distinction between the two regarding the viability of collective political subjectivity, and that what has changed instead is where individuals’ attention is focussed. But more germane to the present discussion is the fact that emergent academic discourse around the Arab Spring cleaves to the individual, expressive and quotidian as the main loci of politics. So while authors such as Elseewi (2011) write about the implications of satellite television, they are not cast in terms of an emerging pan-Arab public sphere but “a revolution in individual subjectivity”. And for Wall and Zahed (2011) YouTube is creating new political selves and new kinds of citizenships because as a medium it is “visual and intensely intimate”. This revolution is given to unfold in the realm of imagination, not in the sense of what is possible in a symbolic world collectively inhabited and invested in, but in the more traditional sense of individual creativity: a freeing of the mind to think and rethink what is possible. What sounds like a defence of daydreaming is in fact contextualised in terms of the mundane – technology, travel, finance – but the emphasis is very much on what Appadurai terms the ‘prisms of the possible’, where possibility is determined only by the ability of the disconnected, autonomous mind to come up with alternatives. But the idea of pure or unfettered creativity does not stand up against the phenomenology of spontaneity: it is not an absence but a differently determined template for action; freedom of thought is not unstructured cognition but that shaped more by pre-reflexive instincts, learned and internalized over time. There is a sense that for Elseewi and others there should be respect for what individuals imagine in the privacy of their own minds, but this valorisation is based on a misplaced notion of individual ownership of anticipation and meaning-making.

For others it is the spatial rather than simply networked or communicative that is given to be generative of political subjectivity. The notion of places of protest pervade Sassen’s work (2012), for instance, with the supposition that places in which protest can occur (or spaces that can be ‘opened up’) assume a transformative teleology. For Sassen as for others the idea of political parties or movements creating places of protest is suspect, since this implies a normative pre-loading of what that place should resemble. So, as with social media, it is the places themselves that are subjects creating politics, from which the possibility and form of protestor takes shape. As Greene and Kuswa (2012) put it: “as a political subjectivity, the protestor emerges in the crease of a regional fold of protest places as these places make and unmake maps of power”. The disembodied subject of power here is striking, and reflects a real ambivalence about people ‘making maps of power’, in the discourse seen as a complicit act of subjugation. The repeated refrain of emergence is also telling, displaying a commitment to something above the everyday experience of politics, in line with Hegel’s taxonomy of higher and higher manifestations of subjectivity. But whereas Hegel’s Spirit emerges out of a dense and iterative process of repeated objectification, whether by others, the material world or history itself, for these authors the emphasis is on taking a hands-off approach so that, once a space has been deemed transformative, it needs only to be left alone in order for a new political subjectivity to develop.

For others still – many others, in fact, across the discipline of activist studies – properly transformative politics are the product not of ideology or institution, but creativity. Speaking of the post-election protests in Iran, Rahimi (2011a) describes internet activism as a “creative
configuration of complex networks that primarily interact through meaning-laden performances that carve out spaces of dissent". The idea of performance is elevated in this field of research above conventional political practice, and it is interesting again that while the act of individual expression is valorised as a form of engagement, the creativity and presumably the meaning of these performances emanate from networks rather than individuals as such. But as with Stiegler, this does not mean that networks as conceived by Rahimi are collectivist in the sense that the individual is subsumed by a shared endeavour; rather, the meaning generated by 'dynamic' networks remains very much the product of individual expression. While care must be taken not to steer or coopt such expressions, their very expressiveness when situated in an appropriate space, and done not collectively but multiply, will reliably produce political change. For Rahimi, interaction is not about common cause but the mutual display of emotion and 'narratives of protestation', and the 'contentious' nature of performances of protest consists in the intensity of its emotion. This is very much in line with the characterisation of relations between individuals in networks as affinities, conceived minimally as what people have in common, their individuality and the right to express it safely intact.

While widespread in the literature, notions of dissent as artform and performance (see also Lim, 2012) and as situated in networked places of protest are narrow in their applicability. Certainly it seems that the emphasis on mass individual self-expression producing a new politics which does not threaten individuality but, as organic or vivified, has a life of its own, is not something uniformly detectable across MENA over the past few years. And yet for Rahimi hacktivism, use of social media and organizing street protests are all regarded as performances of an affective nature that are generative of 'vibrant' and informal public spheres. Much is made of affect here, with the belligerent or offensive character of expression enough to create new political realities, viable in the longer term because they combine through self-sustaining networks characterized as organisms. In another article Rahimi (2011b) refers to dissent as dynamic and porous, and that "such ephemeral processes carry the element of spontaneous creative interaction in the ways individuals can carve out new domains of communication through which dissent can be articulated and enacted in diverse ways." What is interesting is the way dissent is described as a fragile kind of life, one that cannot or should not be moulded but that must be nurtured until it develops its own sustainability and resilience. And it is this insistence on vibrancy that suggests wishful projection onto the Arab Spring more than anything else, evident in the richly normative language used to describe its inception in contestation and conflict, the possibilities that are then 'opened up' or spaces 'carved out', and the sacred, vulnerable but eventually irresistible new political subjectivity that 'emerges'.

This view, however, is built upon a romanticization of protest cultures in which there is frequently a sizeable gap between specific practices of dissent and what they are given to represent. In the most general terms this stems from an extrapolation from practices which have to be adaptable, quick and often furtive, to an ideal of political subjectivity as something which is innately fleet-footed and elusive, unable to be pinned down by authoritarian regimes or academic discourse. This in turn rests on a reduction of complex political realities to a game of cat and mouse, where the lumbering yet lethal force of the state is pitted against the williness not just of dissenters, but of dissent. Much is made of agonism (Mouffe, 2000), which is seen here not in the sense of incessant contestation of the way different and unequal groups vie for power and authority, but again as something creative: "newer forms of social media have complicated the agonistics of political life in the articulation and staging of new contentious performances in the public sphere". Where agonism could otherwise be defended as a commitment to struggle as well as dogged reflexivity, here it is cast as something more limiting in its conventional form, ripe to be transformed by the introduction of the contentious. While it is easy to delight in the sheer cheek as well as bravery of many actions of dissent and protest in the Middle East, to celebrate contentiousness itself as something politically productive, and apparently productive in a good, which is to say empowering or democratizing sense, is to subscribe to the reification of transgression as a pure act, much as critics of Foucault's earlier
work allege, denuded of the reality of the unvivified, relentless slog that comprises the work of protest.

Rahimi’s thesis is part of a broader trend, by no means invalid, that reinterprets Judith Butler’s conception of performativity in a way that is both more voluntarist and more instrumentalist than she allowed for in earlier texts such as *Excitable Speech* (1997). Indeed, it could be argued that Butler herself has in the past decade written more agency into performativity, where previously performance, while not entirely predictable and always with real world effects, was nonetheless an unwilled incitement of discourse. The upshot is that the illocutionary is prioritized over the perlocutionary, where the latter refers to an act performed as a consequence of something said or done, and the former actively enacts new realities in being said or done (“I promise” is a classic example of an illocutionary act, one which is made real by its utterance). In order for activist performativity to be illocutionary, it is implied, it simply needs to be resistant, creative or counter-intuitive: once voices or truths that are other than the dominant or official are expressed, they take on their own reality and continue to create effects as they build momentum. But while this is consistent with Butler’s argument that performativity can, under certain circumstances, produce radically different subjectivities, it neglects the fact that, due to the overwhelming given-ness of most everyday experience, radical alterity is rarely a viable or even thinkable outcome, and it assumes a generativeness that ignores all the other generative structures enabling and shaping emergent subjectivities. And the basis of this appears to be, at base, normative: these acts of resistance have a special ontological status because they are right.

The idea that radical political imaginaries can emerge out of certain types of practice because those practices are contentious or transgressive, in isolation from the myriad other generators of subjectivity embedded in any phenomenal experience, is a common trope in the literature. It is especially evident in the pervasive characterisation of domination – whether it be political or discursive – as extrinsic. Talking about both authoritarian regimes and official cultures of politics (in the media, for example) as external forces acting against authentic expressions of democratic fervour, enables a kind of othering that simultaneously denies the generative power of official discourse – constitutive rather than constraining, to use Foucault’s distinction – and allows that which is unofficial, alter or simply populist to be accorded a special teleological status that is defined by its lack of structuredness. The result is an elision of observations of laudable acts of ingeniousness and determination on the part of dissenters and activists, and theorisations of the nature of protest itself that necessitate its efficacy – not in the sense of achieving tangible outcomes, but in opening spaces for political alterity whose eventual forms cannot and should not be predicted, but whose scope for positive transformation is irresistible. This is evident in the kinds of metaphors that are used to describe both protest and that which would seek to silence or control it – whether that be outright oppression or conventional thinking. Tagma (2011), for instance, talks of protest movements being ‘tamed’, which makes two significant commitments. First, it suggests that protest is somehow wild in its natural state. And second, it implies that protest has as natural state, a kind of protean fecundity that exists in idealized form in isolation from politics as it is usually lived. This form of extra-discursiveness does not sit well with Foucauldian models of power, and it cleaves to a conception of the political defined only by its unconventionality. Deeply pessimistic about procedural or institutionalized politics, its optimism for change is rooted squarely in its refusal to describe what form a newly imagined politics might take.

In a corrective to this abstracted political imaginary, Ismail (2011) in the same special issue of *Third World Quarterly* enlists the concept of civility in order to understand how political subjectivities are constituted in authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies. Like Volpi, she insists that intersubjectivity can only be observed, and not interpreted through Western notions of civilisation or good governance, though this warning against applying political norms is itself normative in the sense that it rests on assumptions about the organic development of collective
consciousness. But what is interesting is her focus on politics as it is lived at the level of the everyday, through nuanced, unacknowledged negotiations of appropriateness in social situations. For Ismail, conventional politics is not seen as the other of lived experience, and she explicitly affirms that the state cannot be understood as an abstraction opposed to society, for the simple reason that subjects’ understanding of the state is not imagined but based on actual interactions with its agents and institutions. However, while this account seeks to demystify the state, it does so in a way which again characterizes it as an extrinsic force that demands particular subjectivities, neoliberal as much as authoritarian. It is not that Ismail oversimplifies the idea of ‘regimes of subjectivities’, based on Butler’s line that one subjects to power in order to become a subject. But to say that subjectivity is the product of state practices of governance clearly imagines a relationship of interiority and exteriority between the two, as opposed to one of mutual constitution. The result is that while in theory open to the complexity of subjectification, in practice it becomes instrumental and in places mechanistic.

In particular, Ismail investigates the policy of ishtibah wa tahari, the suspicion and investigation policies carried out in Cairo in the form of stop and search procedures targeting suspicious individuals. Although initially prefaced by a Foucauldian elucidation of power, this research is much less interested in the dispersed and undetectable manifestations of power as its most visible and literal forms, such as ID cards and military uniforms. It is reasonable to assert that the experience of ishtibah wa tahari “informs subjects’ understandings of an feeling about state power as exercised by its agents”, but this is quite distinct from the question of political subjectivity. The latter rests on all the contingencies that underpin our experience of the world, most of which are ritualized to the point of insensibility, and the totality of which is complex, conflicted and always to a degree indeterminate. Her functionalist interpretation in evidence here suggests that stop and search procedures exist primarily in order to shape subjectivities, where in reality these subjectivities are at most imperfect translations of an official political template, if not through conscious resistance then simply through the vicissitudes of practices and their structuring effects. The partial and mistranslated determination of subjectivity is something which can be analysed and challenged, but this is not the same as suggesting that it can be opposed, implying as this assertion does that the individual and the state are mutually discrete entities. This allows Ismail effectively to other the state itself, becoming as with Rahimi’s use of villainous metaphors a coherent agent, a subject in its own right, that will single out a youth for his posture and demeanour.

As with the wilful projection of democratizing subjectivity it helps to give form to, the subjectification of the state as essentially nefarious can be seen in functionalist terms: by being not just corrupt and sclerotic but actively motivated by evil-doing it allows for a more straightforward articulation of the alternatives. But it rests on assumptions which are questionable. The first is that official agents unproblematically and without slippage embody the state. Second, there is a kind of one-to-one correspondence between the actions of a state executed by its agents, and the determining influence this will have on citizens’ sense not only of the state but themselves. Third, and most significantly, she argues that forced subjectification can be resisted by the simple act of refusal. Counter to Foucault’s will to power and Butler’s notion of incitement, Ismail describes the slouching and scruffily dressed youth as refusing to perform a docile subjectivity, whereas in the literature of power in which this research is situated, docility is not something that can be chosen or rejected: it would instead be an unremarkable part of existing in society, the most natural thing in the world. As it is, acting uncivilly is elevated here to the status of a resistant political act, and though Ismail is at pains to point out that this in itself does not constitute coherent resistance, as an expression of disgust at the state it is certainly though to open the way for an emergent culture of resistance. This is in line with historical arguments that the only way to effect real political change is to break the social contract, in that challenging the very nature of social relations compels a society subsequently to reassess the kind of political culture it wants in place to nurture and protect those relations. And yet it is also politically infantilizing, suggesting that when faced with an
uncivil state it is not only rational but right to act uncivilly. There is certainly a case for upsetting the rules of appropriateness that govern social interactions. Ismail convincingly argues against the faintly condescending line seen in the literature that the richness of social capital in the Middle East forms a natural basis for collective action; it remains an open question, however, whether the uncivil can form the basis of alternate political imaginaries.

Conclusion

This paper doesn’t offer a definitive framework through which we should view recent events in the Arab world. But it has sought to set out some of the limitations of our often well-meaning efforts so far. The refusal of docility valorised in Ismail’s work suggests a commitment to stubbornness or belligerence – a precious commodity in the face of seemingly intractable inequality and injustice, though as expressed through the actions of individuals here it is perhaps less suited to the compromise and sublimation of individuality that characterize collectivist politics. For Khondker the state is personified first as sneaky, and then as an agent which does things inadvertently. A conception of the state as something to be outwitted is certainly evocative, and potentially an effective means of mobilizing opposition to it, but it also risks conflating acts of guilefulness with the idea that protest and dissent are inherently guileful. This in turn can lead to self-satisfaction or gleefulness in performing and observing acts that appear clever or wily, acts which perhaps invite a more emotional response, at best one of camaraderie and at least one of cheerleading, but which may not be more effective than resistance played out in less captivating ways. It is this centrality of captivation in the discourse of political imaginaries that begs the question: captivating for whom? It is amply evident in El-Khamis et al’s (2012) work on creative resistance, where when confronted with tales of audacity and evocative expression – from altering Google maps to dyeing a fountain’s water red – it is difficult not to feel compassionately invested in the protester’s plight. It is natural enough to feel gleeful at the breaking of political and social taboos, or at the mocking of authority figures through satire. But it is important to understand what is being recognized in such moments, and on what grounds: delight in the small victories of an underdog that chime with genuinely-felt humanitarian compassion and commitment to democracy, a readiness to recognize political transformation met all too easily through symbolic forms familiar to us from popular culture, half-remembered history and our own experience of watching the world, made more real if not more engaged through years of practice. But if western projections of idealized political subjectivity are naïve, so too are nativist perspectives that assume the spontaneous emergence of freer, more creative subjectivities once the constraints of authoritarian regimes, as well as those of western discourse, have been removed. Conceptual models for understanding political subjectivity need not be projected or imposed from without, and the means exist to work with the evidence we have and methodically analyse how politics is experienced as social as well as serious, laborious as well as creative, logistical as well as imaginary.
References


