

Issue 53, 30 January, 2018

What is Missing from the Arab Spring?

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Abstract:

In his new monograph, sociologist Asef Bayat ethnographically and historically analyzes the challenges that came with the 'revolutionary' phenomenon of the last three decades. Beginning from the Iranian revolution in 1979 till the recent uprisings that hit many Arab countries in 2011, *Making Sense of the Arab Spring* embraces not only a regional but also a global comparative approach. The book illustrates what a radical change means (or does not mean) for the people, who initiate such uprising in confrontation with the respective regimes and authorities in charge. Although Bayat traces the unfortunate absence of any sign of revolutionaries and revolutionary ideas shortly after their emergence in the streets, he closes on a hopeful note, inviting the readers to think about new horizons that can lead to "imagining and working for alternative futures" (p. 223).

How to cite:

Ibrahim, Mina: "What is Missing from the Arab Spring? [Review on: Bayat, Asef: Revolution without Revolutionaries. *Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.]". In: KULT_online 53 (2018).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2018.182>



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Bayat, Asef: *Revolution without Revolutionaries. Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 312 pages, 24.95 USD. ISBN: 9781503602588.

Abstract:

In his new monograph, sociologist Asef Bayat ethnographically and historically analyzes the challenges that came with the ‘revolutionary’ phenomenon of the last three decades. Beginning from the Iranian revolution in 1979 till the recent uprisings that hit many Arab countries in 2011, *Making Sense of the Arab Spring* embraces not only a regional but also a global comparative approach. The book illustrates what a radical change means (or does not mean) for the people, who initiate such uprising in confrontation with the respective regimes and authorities in charge. Although Bayat traces the unfortunate absence of any sign of revolutionaries and revolutionary ideas shortly after their emergence in the streets, he closes on a hopeful note, inviting the readers to think about new horizons that can lead to “imagining and working for alternative futures” (p. 223).

“Indeed, the long revolution may have to begin even when the shorter revolution ends” (p. 227). This is the hopeful note on which the sociologist Asef Bayat closes his new book where he investigates the unfortunately brutal crackdown on and the demise of the revolutionary wave that briefly emerged in certain Arab countries some seven years ago. This hope notwithstanding, and as Bayat earlier noted in his *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, 2009, 2013), there should always be a room for people’s everyday non-revolutionary yet significant actions and interactions in the streets to contest and question the ‘failure’ of what is known as the Arab Spring.

To begin with, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* generally argues that researching a revolutionary moment is not a simple mission, especially if the somehow dramatic effects are still present. In doing so, Bayat attempts to offer “a new comparative vantage point from which to observe and examine the meaning of the 2011 political upheavals” (p. 2). The author relies

primarily on historical research to suss out, sociologically, what happened to the promising uprisings that toppled the political regimes in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen and threatened neighboring states in the Gulf region. Beginning with the introductory chapter, “Revolution of Wrong Times,” Bayat compares the Arab Spring uprisings with previous regional and global social movements. Unlike the case of the 1979 revolution in Iran, specifically, and the concurrent ones in Latin America, Central America, Africa, and Asia in general, the Arab Spring and its counterparts in the 21st century fall amid what Bayat calls a “Neo-liberal Climate,” that is, “when the decline of the key oppositional ideologies – anticolonial nationalism, Marxist-Leninism, and Islamism – had delegitimized the very idea of revolution and its radical components so that activists and the political class in general ceases to entertain change in terms of revolution” (p. 173).

In this regard, the absence of a guiding ideology is an important factor that led to the ‘failure’ of the Arab Spring or that made it a ‘half revolution’, as chapter eight claims. This was coupled with a mutual absence of leadership, which would have been able to take revolutionary ideas to other places and uncompromised organs or institutions. It is true that the main squares and streets of the Arab countries reflected what anthropologist Amira Mittermaier (“Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma.” *Cultural Anthropology* 29(1), 2014, 54-79) referred to as the “exceptional spatiotemporal articulations” where far-reaching political and social ambitions were surprisingly acquired “here and now.” “The egalitarian communities of those in the square,” in Bayat’s words, “may be cradles for a democratic movement, but...one cannot live in a cradle forever” (p. 119).

Within this context, hence, *Revolution without Revolutionaries* extensively highlights how revolutionary ideals should have been further integrated into the everyday lives of the people and become part of their daily interactions in the factories, the markets, the universities, and the schools. The book makes it clear that establishing revolutionary structures like the Shura Councils, which empowered the people and contributed to the rise of grassroots/subaltern democratic movements following the Iranian revolution were missing from the Arab Spring scene. Instead, and in addition to media and public discussions on foreign/local policies, Bayat emphasizes the ‘reforming’ and ‘conservative’ efforts of the civil society organizations and state institutions that promote fragmented identity politics and limit the actions of the people to what is conditioned by existing power relations. As chapter ten adequately summarizes, the currently absent revolutionaries were duped by “an orgy of national chauvinism, misinformation, and self-indulgence [of] the old guard – the security captains, intelligence agents, big businessmen, and media chiefs” (p. 205).

Consequently, a ‘successful’ revolution, as Bayat suggests, should construct a wider platform or an inclusive base, one that considers the needs and the demands of the people despite of their multiple

religious, ideological, and cultural orientations and backgrounds. Again in chapter two, Bayat borrows the example of the Iranian revolution's short-lived yet influential "third way" (p. 29) strategies of Ali Shariati and his followers who were intellectually and politically positioned between Islamist and Marxist camps. At this point, I was looking forward to reading more about Bayat's imagination(s) of what can shape a 'third way' in an Arab country like Egypt, for example, where the largest Christian minority in the Middle East lives. Furthermore, how can this 'third way' work in a tribal society like Libya or another like Yemen where people are also divided across complex tribal and religious lines?

However, Bayat remarkably insists that despite the aforementioned absences of the Arab Spring, this should not be considered a dead-end. Taking the "negativities" as points of departure from which alternative "positivities" can be negotiated (Trinh T. Minh-Ha: *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York & London, 1991, p. 187), Bayat dialectically reminds the reader of the "non-movements" (p. 103), the 'non-visible', hidden lifeworlds through which people try to repossess the city and claim ownership of what happens in its streets. Thus, because ordinary 'subalterns' can still refuse orders and dissent from urban rules, what seems missing from the Arab Spring can still be found somewhere else. In this regard, Bayat understands that these "daily tensions, if not physical confrontations with the authorities, mark the social world of the urban subalterns, keeping them in a constant state of insecurity and mobilization" (p. 105). While reflecting the precarious situations of the people, these frictions and disruptions constantly point to the unfinished oppression of the Arab Spring – and to what might be cultivated from its ruins.

In short, *Revolution without Revolutionaries* does not promise to offer absolute answers to the problematic 'failure' of the Arab Spring uprisings. However, given the challenge of making sense of the Arab Spring, Asef Bayat uses accessible language and style that engages the reader and asks her/him to actively participate and respond to the sensitive inquiries raised. Therefore, this book is highly recommended for students of sociology, anthropology, political science, and history, but also for a wider audience interested in Middle Eastern/Arab contemporary political affairs.

German Abstract:

Was fehlt(e) dem Arabischen Frühling?

In seiner neuen Monographie analysiert der Soziologe Asef Bayat ethnographisch und historisch die Herausforderungen, mit denen sich die „revolutionären“ Phänomene in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten konfrontiert sehen. Von der iranischen Revolution 1979 bis zu den jüngsten Aufständen, die 2011 in vielen arabischen Ländern stattfanden, verfolgt *Making Sense of the Arab Spring* nicht nur einen regionalen, sondern auch einen global vergleichenden Ansatz; er zeigt damit, was eine radikale Veränderung für jene Menschen (nicht) bedeutet, die die Aufstände gegen das Regime und seine Institutionen initiiert haben. Obwohl Bayat auf das bedauerliche Verschwinden der ‚Revolutionären‘ und ihrer revolutionären Ideen hinweist, schließt er in der Hoffnung, seine Leser_innen zum Nachdenken über neue Horizonte anregen zu können – was ein „imagining and working for alternative futures.“ (S. 223) mit einschließt.

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