



ASEF BAYAT, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021). Pp. 336.

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Critical reflections on the Arab Spring reveal a second epistemic shift in the analysis of revolutions and their relationship to political elites and ordinary people. This shift has developed a critique of the analytical paradigms of failure and success that were initially used to understand the revolutionary processes of the Arab Spring. It presents an attempt to analyse these historical moments from different perspectives and using different methods.

Here emerges Asef Bayat's trilogy: *Life as Politics*,¹ which examines ordinary people in their everyday life; *Revolution without Revolutionaries*,² which elaborates on

large-scale uprisings; and *Revolutionary Life*,³ which connects these two contributions, seeking to understand the Arab Spring from the perspective of the popular grassroots' action. Bayat's intellectual project claims that the everyday, the social movements, and the subaltern should be the main domain of analysis while studying what he calls the "refolutions". In the last book of his trilogy, Bayat shifts his approach from the analysis of revolution within the realm of high politics, which entails looking through the paradigm of failure or success, to the scrutinization of "what happened in the social realm, in the everyday life, and among the grassroots" (p. 1).

The first chapter, "Everyday Life and Revolution", articulates the major shifts of both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions while focusing on their leaderless, ideology-less, and, consequently, surprising nature. Bayat furthermore reveals the consequences of both revolutions, asserting that they failed to cause a rupture from the old regime (p. 12). Consequently, he defends the originality of the Arab Spring cases compared to previous world revolutions, arguing that they "were not revolutions in the sense of the societal changes that begin with the rapid and radical transformation of the state pushed by popular movements from below. Rather, they were 'refolutions', that is, revolutionary movements that emerged to compel the incumbent states to reform themselves" (Ibid.).

Further, Bayat suggests looking at the revolutions from a down-top perspective, meaning at the level of the everyday shifts and changes, not just at the level of institutions of power. He advocates for the analysis of revolution as an "event"; that is, "a condition of rupture in the routine of life that may give rise to open-ended possibilities" (p. 14).

In this chapter, Bayat specifies his use of the concept "subaltern" or "ordinary" people, explaining that he refers to "groups such as the urban poor, marginalized youth, women, and social minorities who

¹ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

² Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

³ Asef Bayat, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2021).

stand at the margins of the socioeconomic, cultural, and patriarchal structures" (p. 20). In addition to marginalization, Bayat attributes the quality of non-activist engagement to ordinary people, as a category of "nonelite subalterns but also 'nonactivist' individuals to distinguish them from the 'activists'" (p. 21).

Relationships in the undersocieties, "the subaltern, informal, and opaque sphere, hidden from the average observer or otherwise seen as aloof and abnormal" (p. 23), are characterized, according to Bayat, by reliance on family ties, community relations, and friendships within the space of neighbourhoods. These friendships are the building blocks of social "trust, loyalty, and solidarity; [friendship] is nourished by affective and reciprocal bonding forged in everyday life and enacted in the homes, schools, cafés, or street corners". This rational sense of friendship is presented by Bayat as "the basis of future democracy" (p. 24).

Additionally, another social group emerges from the undersociety: the *shillas*, defined by Bayat as "mostly altruistic [groups] that centre on sociality and support from which local leaders may emerge. [They are] those innumerable small (ten to fifteen members) and informal private or semipublic cliques and collectives within which ordinary people connect, socialize, deliberate, develop trust, and often generate alternative norms and narratives" (p. 25).

The behaviours of these groups and collectivities are based on what Bayat calls nonmovement, which refers to "the dispersed but contentious practices of individuals and families in everyday life who struggle to enhance their life chances often in a quiet and discreet fashion" (p. 27). Consequently, these acts are not contentions in nature and do not imply the subversion of authority. Nonmovement is, moreover, understood as a space for resonance or connectivity between individuals belonging to different communities and groups.

The second chapter, titled "The Subaltern under Atrocities", articulates the history of authoritarianism and oppression in the Middle East. Bayat goes through the pre-2011 history of both Tunisia and Egypt to reveal the survival and subversion techniques and strategies of subalterns facing oppression and "social death". Common traits of the experiences of oppression and precarity in both the Tunisian and Egyptian cases in Bayat's analysis include urban poverty, slums, unemployment, exclusion from formal jobs, reliance on informal economies, a heightened security apparatus, and a precarious relationship with the police. These daily experiences of humiliation and indignity pushed the subalterns "further into their closed cliques and collectives in the underside of these societies" (p. 50).

The contradiction between elevated levels of education and high unemployment and poverty rates among young university graduates created what Bayat called a middle-class poor: highly educated youth from traditionally poor families, urban or rural, with middle class aspirations. This contradiction generated a "paradoxical class", which "not only [...] complicate[d] the status of the 'poor' and 'middle classes', but [also] brought the village and slum lives in contact with college, consumer ethos, and urban culture" (pp. 54-55).

The "youth" are another group to which Bayat attends. Although he grants that they are a large category with many internal differences and divisions, he argues that major common traits include their youthfulness and their relation to political power. Hence, this group's individuals and subgroups share similar anxieties and claims associated with the sociological fact of being young. They were "concerned with claiming youthfulness[...]; thus, political dictatorship rendered them unsafe, [and] economic hardship worried them about their present and future" (p. 57). Subsequently, the youth developed a sense of shared mistrust towards formal political institutions and thus attempt to create their own spaces of political activism.

Regarding the question of women and gender, Bayat depicts the specific issues and struggles women in the Middle East faced during the uprisings including "additional challenges rooted in patriarchal attitudes and institutions that targeted the female citizens in general" (p. 63).

The question of state feminism features prominently in Bayat's investigation of the relation between women and the political regimes of the Middle East. Slipping through the cracks of this discursive, political expression of feminism, many women felt unseen and unheard, especially rural and poor women. Alongside state feminism and women's institutional activism, another type of gender activism arose from the daily presence and struggle of Middle Eastern women through public defiance, household management, everyday decision making, working outside the home, legal struggles for divorce and child custody, and so on. Here, a new meaning of subversion emerges.

The final subgroup that Bayat focuses on in this chapter is "Social Minorities", especially the queer community. He observes that despite police oppression and legal biases against homosexuality, "same-sex lifestyle went on discreetly in the opaque spaces of their subsociety under the shadow of police surveillance" (p. 72). Within their own spaces, and supported by friendships and *shilla* relationships, queer groups used opacity and ambiguity to survive state oppression and popular prejudices. The uprising offered the queer community a chance to move beyond this strategy of survival to claim their "identity" and seek visibility and acknowledgment.

In chapter 3, "The Subaltern in the Uprising", Bayat constructs the "story of how the subaltern groups got involved in the uprisings – how their individual practices in the nonmovements assumed collective form, and how their close-knit *shillas* served as vehicles for collective thinking, planning, and acting" (p. 81). Here, Bayat follows the daily events of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and dissects the role of *shillas*, brotherhoods, friendships, and kinship relations in igniting and sustaining revolutionary action. At the extraordinary moment of the revolution, these usually silent, peripheral relationalities of the everyday transformed into sites of subversion and mobilization. In doing so, Bayat attempts to put the subaltern at the centre of the struggle for freedom and dignity, and to acknowledge his or her presence and role in its events.

In chapter 4, "The Poor and Plebeian", Bayat follows the moment after the revolution and the abdication of the dictators: a moment marked by a regression in unity and equality, when the sacrifices that subalterns made during the revolution transformed into ill-fated hopes and dreams for a better outcome that would not arrive. Hence, in this chapter Bayat articulates the subalterns' structures of emotion and thought after the revolution. The reason for this transformation, Bayat suggests, is that subalterns "moved to create a new order of things as a way both to respond to their immediate needs and to reorganize local life. In the process, they placed the 'social question' on the political agenda and strived to realize the revolutionary demand for 'social justice' on their own terms" (p. 116). Encroachments, popular committees (*al-lijān al-sha'biyya*), the expansion of street trades, cross-border smuggling, refusal to pay tax, clashes with the police, among others are all examples according to Bayat of the subaltern's fight against "the neoliberal policies that had brought them debt and precarity" (p. 121).

The response of institutions and elites to the struggles of the poor was tainted by the former's position towards the latter, where Bayat observes a sense of disdain and neglect towards subalterns. In between the legal jargon of the elite and assertions of legitimacy by the poor, a new source of legitimacy and legality arose: the revolution itself.

Chapter 5, "Mothers, Daughters, and the Gender Paradox", articulates the question of gender in the Arab revolutions, as well as the major shifts and inquiries that emerged and shaped women's issues after the revolutions. Hence, the chapter starts from the premise that "women's presence in the Arab Spring protests was so strong that few could deny the key part they played in the uprisings" (p. 149). According to Bayat, the importance of this presence lay in its capacity "to 'feminize' and 'civilize' – that is, to turn the otherwise narrow, masculine, and potentially violent protests into a broad-based societal upheaval" (Ibid.). Bayat addresses two paradoxes that emerged from this presence. The first he calls the "gender paradox",

represented by women's presence in the revolutions despite the lack of "any explicit demands for women's rights; the language of gender was simply absent in these spectacular political happenings" (pp. 149-150). The second, the "democracy dilemma", refers to the fact that "despite their crucial role in the success of the uprisings, women's rights experienced a serious setback on the morrow of the revolutions – [...] ironically at the time when the dictators had fallen and space had been cleared for a pluralist democracy" (p. 150).

In both the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, a new female subjectivity emerged during and after the revolution. Therefore, Bayat stresses, "the revolutions had fashioned a wholly new experience of both selfhood and publicness. Women were becoming more self-reflexive, more vocal, and more entitled. It was as though a 'new woman' was emerging from the terror and triumph of the uprisings" (p. 158). Additionally, a new "bottom-up feminism", according to Bayat, arose with the creation of new independent feminist groups and the involvement of new agents in the discussion (e.g., rural women).

In chapter 6, "Children of the Revolution", Bayat explores the youth as major agents during the revolution, then as problematic after the uprisings by focusing on their "thoughts, feelings, and actions in everyday life" (p. 181). In this chapter, Bayat calls for a different framework to deal with the concept of youth, suggesting a shift from studying youth in politics to analysing "youth politics". Based on the premise that the youth are "young individuals [who] may not constitute collective agents unless they assume a youth habitus and an awareness about themselves as 'young'" (p. 182), Bayat associates youth politics with "claiming or reclaiming youthfulness; it expresses the collective challenge whose central goal consists of defending and extending the youth habitus – a set of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself" (p. 183).

Chapter 7, "The Social World", traces the changes and shifts happening at the level of "farms, families, communities, schools, art scenes, and popular media" (p. 210) after the Arab revolutions. Subalterns' participation, actions, and activism changed both their subjectivities and their relation to the social realm, and these shifts are expressed in Bayat's research as a rupture or an event. The first shift that Bayat focuses on is the effect of the revolution on people's emotional structures. He claims that freedom from fear is the least tangible yet clearest effect of the subaltern's participation in the revolution. The spontaneous presence of ordinary people on the streets, in squares, at sit-ins, and so on generated what Bayat calls a "new public sphere" (p. 216) characterized by self-governance, altruism, inclusion, common-sense initiatives, and free debate. These spaces presented new possibilities for imagining a different future: one that derives from the pathos, desires, and strategies of the social bottom.

Finally, in chapter 8, "Whatever Happened to the Revolution?", Bayat reiterates the need to move beyond the top-down analysis of revolution, in favour of placing the everyday in the centre of analysis (p. 235). He also reflects on the multitude of factors that led subalterns to assume a decisive position on the aftermath of the revolution, when they were driven back to the realm of the everyday and the ordinary. However, he insists that this return is enriched by the revolutionary assets that these subalterns gained from their new experiences and ventures in the public sphere. He also – optimistically, and despite all the challenges mentioned – perceives these experiences and shifts in the pathos, emotional structure, and imagination of subalterns as a possible "ideational basis for a different organization of social life when the opportunity arises and new possibilities open up" (p. 242).

Multiple questions and challenges surround this conclusion, especially in light of the Egyptian and Tunisian cases today. In Tunisia, for example, the subalterns returned to their initial positions and rejected the possibility of revolting once again against the political coup of Kais Saied. Tired and disappointed, the subalterns cursed the revolution and its effects on their lives, their economic and social difficulties having worsened substantially with the rise of prices and shortages of essential food supplies like wheat, sugar,

milk, and oil. The subalterns' general mistrust of the political and economic elite, hence, finds its rationale in the successive failure of the latter to understand and realize their revolutionary dreams and demands. In turn, this facilitated a popular resignation from the political realm. The possibility of popular unrest in the near future seems minimal in Tunisia, which is a direct consequence of the shattering of the subaltern's political imaginary: rendering the revolution a nightmare instead of an emancipatory utopia.

Additionally, while the focus on grassroots social subgroups in understanding the revolution is highly important, how this subaltern category ought to be defined raises many questions. Although Bayat recognizes the convoluted, individualized character of the moment of social unrest, he chooses to exclude this disposition from his definition of the subaltern, which in turn raises the following question: how can we identify the subaltern category in the heated, messy moment of the revolution? During the 2010-2011 moment, the crowds assumed a fluid, moving nature that rendered attempts to describe them highly unsatisfactory. Indeed, the category of the subaltern loses all its analytical potential when faced with the crowd.