

Political Contestation and the Problem of Bordered Thinking

Written by Jonathon Whooley

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JONATHON WHOOLEY, NOV 3 2016

The manner and method of understanding international politics often founders along borders drawn in the political mind. For my recent work on social movements and the ideas embedded in the actions of contestation in politics across and within borders, I have been forced to reflect more and more about the ways in which regionalization and context have blinded us to the larger movements in contemporary politics. Our view on the promotion of international activism breaks down when we view acts of protest as being fundamentally weak, or as simply consensus-building and organizational issues; while terrorism is inevitably seen as a reflexively transnational issue. To my mind, the view one takes represents, respectively, the feminization of consensus and protest politics, and the hyper-masculine promotion of security issues. It seems to me intrinsic that the role of the viewer as actively seeing through a gendered lens is fundamental to our understanding of the nature of protest and terror.

For example, the standard narrative on the Arab Spring beginning roughly with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in December of 2010 through the present devastation in Syria tends to be understood as an Arab movement with (primarily male) Arab actors revolting against (primarily male) Arab leaders. Much of our popular understanding of the issues and actors involved centers around the tumult in 2010 with the creation of political movements in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region.

Zooming out from the Middle East gives us, as viewers, a vantage point that includes not only Arab actors, but also Wisconsin Labor activists in March of 2011; Chilean student protestors from March 2011 to 2013; Muscovite election protestors in December of 2011; Quebecois protestors demonstrating for greater political saliency and education reform in Canada, and, of course, the role of the Occupy movement in cities across America and the world. I would argue then, that the Arab Spring does not stand alone as a specific act of political protest. It is a local manifestation of a series of protests that swept the world in 2010, 2011, and 2012, and, if one includes the current civil conflict in Syria, it continues up until the present. Why, then, if other protests were going on simultaneously to the Arab Spring do we cantonize Arab Spring issues as being important only to Arab actors?

Jane Mansbridge argues that in terms of social movements all politics are inevitably local. This is because of our nation state system; social groups, organizers, protestors, and activists will inevitably look to their own governments to resolve their political issues rather than the support of the international system. Professor Mansbridge makes a good case. For example, Egyptians in the January 25th movement who sought Mubarak's ouster could not ask the international system to depose him in 2011. They had to press upon their own local political authorities to provide systematic redress for their issues of concern. Similarly, the Occupy movement, for all its warts, pressed the U.S. government in the cases of the New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston chapters by working the political levers to address local grievances around personal earnings and bank bailouts, which they felt harmed their economic viability. While all of this supports my point, it should be noted that protestors in Egypt printed some of their most potent placards in English to gain saliency with the international media. And, significantly, 'Occupy' protestors certainly did not think their issue was with one form of governance but rather the capitalist system at large, so, state (e.g., nation-state) borders, as they were, were not the issue.

The subaltern, in this case, are the protest movements themselves. It is troubling to me that the only time we seem to

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take multinational protests seriously is when they turn violent. The terrorism literature in general tends to view transnational violent actors as being uniquely important. For example, the fruits of Iraqi and Syrian discord are by their nature seen through the manifestation of Da'esh and its rampant violence and severe perversion of the tenets of Islam. We reflexively understand, in a post-9/11 context, that actors operate across state borders for the purposes of intimidation and violence. I would argue that it is the feminization of protest movements in our conceptualization of them that drives us to view them as unimportant and weak. The political ends they seek, perhaps ironically, however, are most typically highly achievable precisely at the state (e.g., nation-state) level. By contrast, violent actions on the part of terrorists or terrorist organizations, for whatever purpose, are often given the benefit of the doubt as transnational in nature and thereby warranting of our undivided attention.

About the author:

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