

Plebeians of the Arab Spring

by Asef Bayat

How do we explore the relationship between the urban poor and large-scale revolutions? What kind of politics do they espouse in such extraordinary times? In this article I narrate the story of the poor people's struggles for sustenance and citizenship during and after the Arab uprisings, focusing on Egypt and Tunisia. I suggest that while the abject poor and rural migrants avoid direct involvement in large-scale uprisings, the nature of which they do not comprehend, the "middle-class poor," a product of the neoliberal restructuring, tend to engage in and lead others to these broader revolts. But most take advantage of the collapse of state control to extend their everyday struggles to secure life chances in their immediate environs—neighborhoods and work sites. This is also a time when they engage in extraordinary mobilization and organized protests to demand collective consumption and recognition as legitimate citizens of the city. Yet in the aftermath of the revolutions, when the new elites show their inability or unwillingness to respond to the rising demands, the subaltern retreat to their strategy of "quiet encroachment," but with new capability and clout.

How do the urban poor fare in times of revolution? Do they espouse a particular kind of politics? Whereas in the Marxist tradition, the industrial proletariat was privileged as the agent of social transformation, "the poor" are often treated with suspicion. Poverty, deprivation, and ignorance are said to render the poor aloof and uninterested in any meaningful politics, let alone revolutions. In a partially Arendtian view of the political, the poor are seen as preoccupied with the constant struggle for survival and submission to God, or otherwise they would explode in violence and destruction. An image of this *Lumpenproletariat* as violent, unruly, and self-serving remains widespread among the elites, whose actual knowledge of the poor goes little beyond what they see in their servants, housemaids, or drivers. Elite circles in Egypt and Tunisia could not hide their scorn for the poor of *ashwaiyat* (informal settlements), whose engagement, they thought, would spoil the uprisings, turning them into the "revolution of the hungry" (*thawrat al-jia*), and create opportunities for street bums (*baltajiah*, thugs), plebeian fanatics, or the "ignorant" underclass. The passive/fatalist and violent narratives ultimately tie the political destiny of the poor to religious politics. Religiosity, fatalism, and deprivation would make the poor the natural ally of Islamism, whose emphasis on charity, welfare, simple religious language, and divine salvation as well as its clientelist networks in mosques, kin, and community facilitate this happy marriage.¹

This claim has found considerable currency in political and scholarly circles. Thus, whereas the Egyptian elites and the middle classes backed the liberal and secular opposition after Mubarak, it was claimed that the poor brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. El-Bradei could not hide his disdain for the "illiterate and ignorant" poor who supposedly backed the power-hungry Islamists. In Tunisia, frequent references are made to the strong support given to Islamic al-Nahda in the largest slum community, Tadamon. In Iran, a prominent reformist leader attributed the defeat of the Green Movement in the post-2009 elections to its middle-class social basis, "which is not prepared to take risks [fight physically]," whereas the "lower class [poor]," who backed the authoritarian Ahmadinejad, "do take risks" and wage violence against the democratic Green opposition.²

Such perspective underscores the views of a host of observers who regard the expansion of the informal communities and their "marginal poor" as dangerously aiding the authoritarian populist politics in the Middle East.³ This is not new for Latin America and its populist experience. What is striking is the fact that the claim is taken seriously by the authoritarian rulers such as Ahmadinejad, who, following the

1. For an early discussion, see Bayat (2007).

2. Ali Mazroui, "Jonbesh-e Sabz va Aghshar-e Mahroum," *Norouz*, accessed 11/12/1391 (2012), <http://www.kalame.com/1391/02/01/klm-99449/>.

3. An anecdotal indication is reflected in the reception of my book, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran*, in Iran. After a decade of nonattention, the Persian edition of the book had a second printing in 2012 and become a best seller for months. A sudden interest emerged in understanding the "marginal poor" out of a deep fear that their rapid expansion in the informal settlements during the 2000s was deemed to boost the Islamist autocracy and undermine a democratic polity in Iran.

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2009 election crisis in Iran, envisaged a policy to downsize the middle class in Tehran (assumed to be the Green supporters) by repatriation and to expand the rural poor (assumed to support the Islamist regime) by monetary incentives for child-birth (Bayat 2010).

A contrasting view proposed by Hernando De Soto ties the politics of the marginal poor (some 180 million Arabs involved in informal work/life) to their supposedly keen interest in the free market, from which they are excluded. For De Soto, the Arab Spring is nothing but the revolution of the class-conscious underclass, the “aspiring businessmen,” like Bouazizi and 64 other self-immolators, for the free market. They wished to dismantle the bureaucratic constraints that have subdued their capitalist enterprises. When in December 2010 the police in Sidi Bouzid confiscated Bouazizi’s US\$220 scale and fruits, it proved to him that Tunisia did not recognize his property rights. Bouazizi’s response, according to De Soto, reflected the desire of the poor to live in a true market society (De Soto 2011, 2013).

None of these perspectives captures adequately the complexities of the politics of the poor. While the passive/violent perspective remains unwarranted,⁴ De Soto’s claim raises important questions. Was the victimization of the likes of Bouazizi the outcome of the absence of property law, or was it rather the legal (albeit unjust) behavior of the municipality agent who deemed Bouazizi’s operation unlawful? More substantially, did it not have to do with the logic of the capitalist market and the state that violated the moral economy and ethic of fairness within which poor people like Bouazizi usually operate? The expansion of the “underground” economy and its subordinate position is more than simply the outcome of bureaucratic bottlenecks or the “mercantilist state” that De Soto stresses (De Soto 2002). As Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989) have shown, they are part and parcel of the capitalist economy. In fact, the expansion of neoliberal policies that the Arab regimes have adopted brought not only wealth and well-being for some but also deprivation and marginalization for millions like Bouazizi. The 180 million Arabs tried in their working lives and lifeworlds to make the best out of the neoliberal turn—using its benefits (as in technology and education) but recanting its adverse consequences (as in work discipline, rigid rules, cash nexus, and unemployment). They negotiated with the neoliberal order, creating their own informal communities of life and labor through protracted struggles in everyday life. In the end, the neoliberal restructuring generated conditions and actors that came to discard, through remarkable revolutionary movements, the very regimes that oversaw it. The urban poor were such an actor.

The Urban Poor and Revolution

What is the relationship between the urban poor and such revolutions? I take the “urban poor” as an empirical category

to mean those “low-income, low-skill, low-status, and low-security”⁵ working people who largely (but not exclusively) navigate informal life and labor of precarious nature. Of course the boundaries remain fluid. A low-income government employee with a secure job may reside in an insecure shantytown, while a college graduate may have to endure insecure casual work. What is more, poor people are fairly stratified—a fact contributing to their diverse political behavior. Many are rural migrants, some newly arrived and others old-timers; segments remain the “abject poor,” while others experience income mobility. An interesting recent trend is the emergence of what I have called the “middle-class poor,” who exhibit a great propensity for political engagement. This is a class that holds educational capital, college degrees, good knowledge of the world, and high expectations; it has global dreams and longs for a middle-class lifestyle, and yet it is pushed economically to live the life of the poor in the slums and subsist on precarious informal jobs as taxi drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or boss boys. Humble in background but educated, members of this class are acutely aware of what is available in the world and from which they feel they are unjustly deprived. Encountering long-standing corrupt regimes and heavy-handed security apparatuses, they exhibit a profound moral outrage.

What gives a commonality to the differentiated categories of the poor includes a more or less shared experience of precarious life and labor that involves a kind of everyday politics that I have termed “quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” It describes the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and advance their lives by unlawfully acquiring land, building homes, and getting urban services or jobs. They are marked by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology, or structured organization. Quiet encroachment represents an instance of a broader category of “social nonmovements,” or the collective action of noncollective actors, where a discreet but persistent process of claim making in daily life establishes alternative (if extralegal) norms that often come to be articulated in terms of “rights” (Bayat 2013a). Thus, desire to have a shelter may in the process evolve into the right to have shelter.⁶ In a sense these struggles become a moment in the efforts for citizenship *de facto*, or what James Holston (1999) has called “insurgent citizenship.” But such citizenship becomes *de jure* when the gains are backed up by legislations—a process Partha Chatterjee deems to be the “political society” or the “politics of the governed” in most of the world (Chatterjee 2006).

In normal times, these amorphous nonmovements, often operating calmly and quietly in everyday life, serve as a cru-

4. I will elaborate on this later in the article; see also Bayat (2000).

5. I adopt this characterization from Worsley (1984).

6. I am grateful to Harri Englund for bringing to my attention the distinction between desire to have something and the right to have that thing.

cial venue to enhance the actors' life chances—in securing shelters, urban amenities, collective consumption, jobs, security, and dignity. But these desperate struggles may assume organized, audible, and collective form when the gains are threatened or when opportunity for collective resistance and mobilization becomes available—when, for instance, the police control softens, the state slips into crisis, or some large, contentious movements come to fruition. Under such conditions, the dispersed struggles of these nonmovements may coalesce into and become part of broader political struggles—something that seemed to happen in the Arab uprisings of 2011.

But as shown in Cairo, Tehran, or elsewhere, different segments of the poor behave differently. The recently arrived rural migrants and the very poor—those whose knowledge of the events remains limited—often show reluctance to spearhead public protests of such magnitude and nature. Many of them are not clear about the dynamics, the aims, and especially the outcomes of such political upheavals. So, they prefer to wait and see what happens. For most of the illiterate and very poor, revolutions remain events too abstract to be incorporated into their precarious daily lives. They tend to be involved in the more concrete and local struggles—those that are meaningful and manageable for them. But segments do get involved, in particular when activists mobilize the poor in the localities. Here, the “middle-class poor” becomes central in connecting the poor communities to colleges and linking poor families, friends, and kin members to the organization and political imaginary of the insurrectionary movements. However, not everyone gets preoccupied only with insurgent and street politics of this sort. Insurrection episodes are also the times of individualized encroachments. Taking advantage of the collapse of police control, the poor militantly pursue taking over lands for shelter, illegal construction, squatter homes and apartments, and spreading business in streets and squares in off-limits locations and spots. For many poor people, the withdrawal of the police from the streets alone becomes a momentous victory given that police repression carries an undeniable class prejudice.

The immediate “postrevolution,” the day after the ancient regime falls, brings a wholly new dynamic to popular mobilization. It cultivates in the poor new ethics of “ownership of the nation,” a powerful sense of liberation, and an unprecedented feeling of entitlement. Confident of the absence of the oppressors and within the new free space, the urban poor exhibit an unusual interest in organizing and collective protests and in connecting to political and social movements. Organized activism overshadows the usual strategies of individual direct actions. The previously reluctant poor get involved; the marginalized communities become outward looking, breaking the exclusionary legal and spatial barriers to become part of the larger city. And the youth of the dispossessed, those who are shunned as “dangers” to the public, assert their presence in the main streets and squares. Yet alongside building organized movements and collective protests, the

poor continue their encroachment, albeit more extensively and audibly. Land takeover for building shelters; extralegal home building; occupation of state or private apartments, hotels, or government offices; illegal extension of public services; and appropriation of street sidewalks to conduct business all assume a novel momentum. Competition between diverse political groupings—leftists, Islamists, nationalists, and the new regime—to win the support of the poor adds to the subaltern militancy, for it cultivates in the poor a new confidence and self-worth to fight on.

This new mobilization, however, may not last long. It depends on how far the postrevolution regimes tolerate subaltern militancy. Will the police change behavior once revolutionary fever subsides? What kind of social policy will the new regime pursue—populist or neoliberal? Even if social movement activism were tolerated, to what extent will it really deliver? Will social protests necessarily impel the neoliberal state, for instance, to upgrade slum communities or reextend subsidies? Undoubtedly, the work of organizing, mobilizing, and lobbying is costly; it needs skill, energy, dedication, time, and material resources. Will the poor actors undertake them if mobilizing efforts fall on deaf ears? In truth, the urban poor will revert to strategies that (despite their risk and insecurity) can result in tangible outcomes. Consequently, the poor may return to the strategy of quiet encroachment and nonmovement even when political opportunity for organized movements may exist.

From Quiet Encroachment to Collective Protests

Mid-2010 was a turning point in Egyptian politics marked by a cycle of opportunities wherein poor people's quiet and dispersed struggles assumed audible and collective form. This was a long way from the 1990s, when the unimaginative nationalist, Islamist, and party politics dominated the political stage. The disenchanted youth pursued cultural politics and campus activism if they had not been lured by Islamism; otherwise, they mostly remained demobilized. For their part, the urban poor carried on with their nonmovements, quietly and often unlawfully acquiring land, building homes, connecting to the street electricity poles and water pipes, building roads, and organizing garbage collection. They strived to secure work mostly in the vast informal economy while investing heavily in their children's education. In such extralegal fashion, the poor created vast communities of life and labor (60%–65% of Cairo's population and over 61% of Egypt's jobs in 2006) wherein the ethics of self-regulation, trust, reciprocity, negotiation, and kinship ties served their precarious lives better than formal rules, rigid contracts, or the discipline of time and space. Indeed, these very “traditional” ethics ensured their survival and integration into Egyptian modernity. Much of their claim-making efforts remained inaudible and individual, with rare occasions of collective protests, which would invite police repression.

Things, however, began to change when a new way of doing politics in Egypt began to evolve in the early 2000s with the activities of the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian and Iraqi People and later during the Kefaya democracy movement. Overriding ideological lines, Kefaya focused on popular mobilization rather than party politics; it brought the campaign to the streets rather than voicing it in institutions; and it centered on domestic issues instead of nationalist concerns. Professionals, lawyers, judges, journalists, academics, and workers waged new campaigns, using the opportunity of “democracy promotion” that the United States, following its invasion of Iraq, advocated. In this new political climate, secular and religious women formed new collectives; youth got involved in civic activism and social media. The Islamist, leftist, and nationalist groups became more vocal, while some independent press broke the taboo of publicly criticizing the Mubarak family or disclosing the corruption and thuggery of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The taboo of street protest broke following years of emergency law. In this novel environment where street politics and social protests took a new turn, the poor—who were particularly suffering from the neoliberal policies such as privatization, price rises, removal of subsidies, or gentrification—exhibited outrage in a collective fashion.

Thus, unlawful labor protests reached a new height in 2007, when thousands of textile workers in Mahalla staged a strike against privatization. For the first time, police refrained from their usual crackdown when faced with workers’ militancy, thus creating an opportunity for other subaltern groups to join in. In 2009, some 150,000 Zabaleen, self-employed garbage collectors, in Cairo refused to collect 8,000 tons of daily garbage because of the slaughter of their 300,000 swine (allegedly to avoid swine flu) by the government, which made the recycling of the waste (in part accomplished through pigs consuming organic waste) on which the Zabaleen depend impossible (Viney 2012). In the same year, the government’s decision to relocate residents of the demolished homes of Moqattam to a desert township brought them to the streets, where they demanded homes in nearby locations (Abdel-Hamid 2010). Their struggles continued until the revolution. Campaigns against slum demolition followed mass commotion in such neighborhoods as Manshiat Naser, Darb al-Ahmar, and Zeinhoum in Cairo as well as other cities where the police proved unable to contain the protests within enclosed spaces. Thus, when 66 families of the Port Said community of Zerzara demanded compensation from the government for their burned-down homes, they blocked a main road after days of protests in the city center, rejecting the meager £E2,000 compensation from the ruling NDP.⁷

The more widespread “revolution of the thirsty” was yet to come. Through the years, many poor families had illegally connected their shelters to the municipality power poles and

water pipes. The heavy cost of free consumption had often forced the authorities to formalize services in some of these neighborhoods while leaving others to exploit them illegally or resort to alternative sources such as digging deep wells. Yet once connected, any interruption in what immediately became “urban rights” caused collective outrage. Thus, throughout 2007 and 2008, protestors in towns and villages across the Nile Delta poured into the streets to rally over cuts in water flow. Deployment of massive riot police could not stop protestors from cutting off highways or blocking railways. In June 2010, villagers of Kafr el-Sheikh blocked Belqas-Hammoud road, burning car tires to cause disruption,⁸ while Kefaya and other activists went to such poor neighborhoods as Matariya to help mobilize protests over power cuts, water shortage, and rising food prices that had created deep dissent as well. “We had to sell our furniture to buy sugar,” read one of the banners (Semeika 2010).

Whereas the expanding gated communities in Cairo and elsewhere, with vast green lawns and swimming pools, expected an uninterrupted flow of water in a country that fell far below “water poverty,”⁹ some 40% of Cairo’s population, usually poor, had access to drinking water for no more than 3 hours per day, with at least four districts receiving no water at all. Indeed, millions depended on public wells for drinking or washing (El-Dahshan 2010). But for those who did have access, the IMF-initiated transfer in 2004 of water utilities to private corporations had in some areas doubled the cost, leaving many families to fetch water from the Nile River (Amin 2010). It was within this political and economic context that the collective protests of the poor over home demolition, evictions, rising prices, “urban rights,” jobs, and justice merged into the monumental uprising that came to fruition in 2011.

The Poor and the Uprisings

On January 28, 2011 (Day of Anger), just three days after the start of what is called Egypt’s January 25 Revolution, the massive informal community of Imbaba in the heart of Cairo joined the uprising in earnest. A small 50-person march, half of them children, following a Friday prayer, rapidly grew into a mass demonstration of which “one could not see the beginning and the end.” The crowd called for the downfall of the regime, invited others to join, battled with the riot police for hours, and continued their march toward Tahrir Square.¹⁰ Imbaba was known for its “Islamist” past when in the early 1990s hundreds of al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya militants had pen-

8. *Al-Masry al-Youm*, June 3, 2012.

9. Egypt remains well below the “water poverty line” of 1,000 cubic meters per person per year. See Karen Piper, “Egypt’s Arab Spring: A Revolution of the Thirsty,” <https://placesjournal.org/article/revolution-of-the-thirsty/> (accessed August 24, 2012).

10. See a very interesting eyewitness account by an American photojournalist, Mathew Cassel, at Aljazeera.net, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/front-lines-egyptian-uprising/9204>. See also Wanrooij (2011).

7. *Al-Masry al-Youm*, July 16, 2010.

etrated this opaque space—with narrow alleyways without maps and home numbers—creating an “Islamist state within the state.” But by the time of the revolution, things had changed. “The last thing youth are talking about is religion,” said Ahmed Metwalli, a son of an ex-Islamist. “It is the last thing that comes up. They need money, they need to get married, a car. . . . They will elect whoever delivers that” (Shadid 2011). The poor of Imbaba had risen up because of their outrage at their denigration, having to pay bribes for going to the hospital, getting ID cards, pleasing the police. “We don’t need prayers, sheikhs, and beards; we have had enough of the clerics.” On January 25, some 200 activists had managed to mobilize up to 20,000 demonstrators in the slum community of Naheyen over the issues of police brutality and the price of bread.¹¹ In the meantime, artistic youths inscribed the symbolic images of the revolution—murals, slogans, and images of martyrs of the revolution—on the walls of these underdog neighborhoods.

Of course, not everyone joined the revolutionary protests. It is probably true that the rural migrants, older groups, and the very poor preferred to stay away from such overwhelming events. Many of them were not clear about the dynamics, the aims, and especially the outcome of these upheavals. For them, revolution was too abstract to capture its dynamics. They would rather get engaged in the local struggles that they found manageable and meaningful. Yet the very heterogeneity of these neighborhoods where residents held diverse educational backgrounds tended to facilitate the link between the parochial and the cosmopolitan. The *ashwaiyyat* communities such as Imbaba housed not merely the rural, illiterate, and abject poor but also segments of the “middle-class poor”—government employees, newly married and educated couples, as well as professionals such as lawyers and teachers—who could not afford to secure housing in the formal market. The members of this class, traversing between the “middle-class” world and that of the “poor,” critically linked the local struggles of their dispossessed parents, relatives, and neighbors to the world of the universities, journalism, cyberspace, associational activism, and the main streets.

Beyond joining the big revolutions, the poor also conducted their own “minirevolutions” in their localities. In Cairo’s Mashiyat Naser, where hill rocks had demolished several homes, residents attacked and set fire to the Neighborhood Council (Majlis al-Mahaliya) and the police station, which they deemed responsible for corruption and evictions.¹² Indeed, when the police retreated and disappeared from the public arenas on January 28, the “revolution was over for the poor,” as if an overwhelming victory had been achieved.¹³ For not only would the absence of the police di-

minish poor people’s daily anguish and humiliation, it also opened the space for the subaltern’s aggressive encroachments. Thus, hundreds of poor families occupied some 510 apartments in the Wahayed public housing in Duweiq. “These apartments were for us, for the families from the Duweiq slums,” they claimed. To ensure security of tenure, they reported to the municipality and visited the Ministry of Defense, which temporarily permitted them to stay (Carr 2011). However, soon, under the postrevolution military government, the residents had to battle with the police and eviction agents who fired guns and threw their belongings from the balconies. As usual, the government pledged alternative housing. But refusing the offer, the squatters set up temporary tents in the locality until they got what they regarded as “proper homes.” At this juncture, the illegal construction of homes and informal additions went on unheeded throughout the country. Half-built vacant apartments were taken over, and public lands at the periphery of cities were occupied for the purpose of constructing homes. The sudden rise in the price of cement pointed to the widespread illegal construction during the revolution. And street vendors who would otherwise get chased away by the police took over prime spots in city centers to market their merchandise. Struggles of this sort were to assume an unmatched momentum in the immediate postrevolution.

Dictators Abdicate

The fall of the dictators in Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt and the subsequent postrevolution paradoxes dramatically transformed the public sphere in these countries. The revolutions had generated new consciousness, heightened expectations, and free space for mobilization but had ironically disrupted the very institutions—the state administration and economic enterprises—that were to meet those same expectations. This mix of both opportunity for mobilization and dashed expectations enhanced poor people’s dissent and militancy, prompting them to pursue three strategies: aggressive encroachment to grab land and urban services, acquire state housing, and secure informal jobs; building organized movements to consolidate gains or make new claims; and collective protests to offset threats to their gains.

Tunisia saw an upsurge in new informal settlements and consolidation of existing extralegal homes. Communities such as al-Sayeda al-Menoubya and Tadamon in Tunis became the subject of elite stigmatization as the bastions of anarchy, extremism, and social strife not only for the 1982 riots but also for the new fear that poor people would support the Islamic al-Nahda Party.¹⁴ To the dismay of the elites, the poor took over a dozen sidewalks in the central district adjacent to the Medina and turned them into vibrant market places—scenes that reminded me of the central areas of Tehran just after the 1979 Iranian revolution and of Cairo’s

11. Cited in Mason (2012:15).

12. Amnesty International, *We Are Not Dirt*, p. 3.

13. I am grateful to the revolutionary activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah, who brought this point to my attention in Cairo, June 2013.

14. Interview, Rida and Hayat, Tunis, January 2013.

central streets just after Mubarak's downfall. The fact that Bouazizi, the hero of the Tunisian revolution, was a street vendor gave street vending much legitimacy and immunity, which the poor utilized to enhance their lots. In fact, before the Ben Ali's ouster, local activists in Sidi Bouzid had deliberately (mis)represented Bouazizi as an "unemployed university graduate" to associate his spectacular drama with the plight of some 250,000 jobless college graduates—Tunisia's most likely revolutionaries, the "middle-class poor" (Gana 2013). The postrevolution political and economic turmoil, however, left little chance for substantial progress in poor people's lives. If anything, many of these educated youths hung around in the local cafés with the dream of migrating to the West, while the working poor felt that the old order had in essence continued. Their response was stunning. By 2013 Tunisia became the nation with the highest number of labor strikes and social protests—some 45,000, or 90 per day.

In Egypt things were no less intense. Land grabbing and illegal construction went on in earnest. Within the first 6 months, January–June 2011, some 110,000 hectares of mostly agricultural land were taken over illegally for construction, mostly of homes. In June 2013, the Awqaf authorities spoke of 9,335 encroachments, or 2.5 million square meters on Awqaf lands, of which half were in agriculture.¹⁵ Most of these encroachments were carried out by the needy (but also opportunist developers), at times in violent clashes with the security forces. In the coastal town of al-Arish, families seized lands from military property, claiming them to belong to their ancestors for hundreds of years. The claim led to violent scuffles, injuries, and hospitalization.¹⁶ In Quorsaya Island in Giza, hundreds of residents battled with the military over 500-feddan land rights, which the Army had claimed since 2007. Soldiers fired gunshots while residents fought back fiercely, injuring a number of soldiers and succeeding in overturning the eviction. Activists, artists, and intellectuals gathered to celebrate the people's victory.¹⁷

Beyond land acquisition and illegal construction, throughout the country thousands campaigned to obtain state housing, fought gentrification, and contested rent increase. The poor residents of Duweiq, who had been relocated from their unsafe shelters to tents and then to government rental flats in the early postrevolution, joined forces with poor residents from other areas such as Medina Nahda, Ezbet Abu-Qarn, and Estable Antar to demand the ownership of this state housing. Backed by the activist-initiated campaign Upgrading Only in Name (Ehya' Bel-Esm Faqat), they organized angry sit-ins at the Cairo governorate headquarters, chanting, "Oh governor, tell the truth, are we not the priority?" Warning that they would launch the "Revolution of the

Ashwaiyyat," they cut off the main road, causing a noisy traffic disruption, while fighting the security forces that were trying to disperse them.¹⁸ In Alexandria, residents of the Imam Malik neighborhood protested in outrage at the governorate office because the authorities had evicted them for their unsafe shelters. And others in the northern city of Ismailiya staged a hunger strike at the city's housing department, demanding the government grant them apartments because their shelters had been demolished; as a hunger striker got hospitalized, activists got involved in boisterous protests. Tent residents of Cairo's Shubra al-Khaima, whose dwellings had been demolished, threatened an indefinite sit-in and hunger strike at the district court if they were not relocated to government flats. And where the authorities warned that they would evict residents from "unsafe" dwellings (as in Falaki in Alexandria), families refused to relocate in an attempt to get governmental housing.¹⁹

But claiming state housing, a diminishing trend since the 1980s, involved its own set of conflicts—over bureaucracy, ownership claims, and rent. For instance, dozens of Samnoud city residents in southern Egypt attacked the city council and chained its doors in a protest over what they saw as an "unjust" lottery method to allocate government flats for which they had been on the waiting list. Then, in the city of Port Said, in a highly dramatic show of force, some 6,000 people from families eligible for the National Project of Mubarak Housing, angered by the authorities' failure to clarify the conditions of occupancy, descended on the Suez Canal to halt the flow of ships. Ferries ceased operating as hundreds of cars waited on both sides of the canal, while a giant 190-kilometer line of waiting ships revealed the extraordinary effect of the protest.²⁰

Collective Protests

While some segments of the poor were engaged in aggressive encroachment, others collectively resisted the claims made by the authorities on their gains. This became evident immediately with respect to the gentrification policies, in particular Cairo 2050, a massive project from Mubarak times that would overhaul central Cairo and lead to the relocation of hundreds of thousands of poor families into the desert towns (Tarbush 2012:176). Even though the project was temporarily tabled after the revolution, parts of it nevertheless continued. Thus, when the developer Sawiris offered to buy off the dwellings of some 600 families in the Ramlet Boulaq squatter settlement adjacent to the luxurious Cairo

15. *Al-Maal*, June 11, 2013.

16. *Al-Masry al-Youm*, June 20, 2013.

17. *Ahram on line*, <http://english.ahram.org?NewsContentPrint/>, November 18, 2012.

18. *Al-youm Essabe'a*, March 17, 2013.

19. The narratives are based on eyewitness accounts as well as, respectively, from the following print media: *Veto*, May 16, 2013; *Al-youm Essabe'a*, March 1, 2013; *Al-Badil*, May 23, 2013; and *Al-Ahram*, October 5, 2013.

20. Reported in *Al-youm Essabe'a*, May 20, 2013; *Al-Masry al-Youm*, March 14, 2013.

towers, most residents refused to sell, at least not for £E3,000–4,000 per meter when the real value hovered around £E30,000 per meter (Dale 2012). Resisting relocation to the desert town of Medina Nahda, people looked out for one another to form a solidarity network. “We are like fish; this is our water; if you take us out of here, we will die,” an elderly man stated.²¹ The neighborhood exploded when an incident (a fight between a resident and his employer in the towers over pay) led to one death and 22 injuries by the security forces. Residents smashed windows, set fire to cars, and blocked the main Corniche Avenue. Following a number of arrests, activists, notably lawyers, got involved assisting the residents to defend their right to stay (Al-Jaberi 2012a, 2012b). A year later when I visited the area, the case was still in court and the mood tense. Yet life seemed to go on as vibrant as ever in the neighborhood, with people feeling a new sense of empowerment from the revolution and from their own cultural capital. As a colleague and I walked through the narrow alleyways that linked lines of feeble dwellings, residents surrounded us, inviting to their homes. Unlike the shabby and makeshift exteriors, indoors it was a different world, full of life, energy, and hope. Family members navigated between the tiny kitchen and small but clean and orderly rooms decorated with religious symbols and family photos; they brought drinks, talked, cracked jokes, discussed politics, and watched television. Friends and neighbors joined in, and the young showed off their baggy pants, gelled hair, and mobile phones. Yet beneath this hidden world of hope, humor, and humanity, there was also a deep-seated anxiety about the fate of their habitat. But they stood firm in their determination to not let their living space go cheap.

The quiet (and aggressive) encroachment had over the years resulted in major gains in collective provisions (energy, piped water, sewage system, paved roads, garbage collection, and security), which, once formalized, turned into “entitlements.” Thus, when those gains were threatened or taken away, the poor went on a rampage. Postrevolution Egypt saw remarkable social protests when basic urban services such as electricity, water, or the sewage system faced disruption. The daily power cuts, caused by enhanced consumption and mismanagement, brought millions into the streets in the cities and urban villages.²² Even though the government subsidized 22.5 piasters of the 35 piaster cost per kilowatt hour, activists went on, in August 2012, with the We Won’t Pay campaign in Imbaba to combat the power cuts (Halwa 2012a). Residents of villages in Luxor gathered in front of the power stations to express outrage, while dozens in Kafr el-Sheikh warned they would set the power station ablaze. In Alexandria, residents in Sidi Bashir and Syria Street, among others,

assembled around power plants, blocked roads, and caused much traffic disruption. Summer 2013 was a turning point in the scale of the protests when tens of thousands poured into the streets, blocking highways, occupying power stations, and refusing to pay their bills in Cairo, Giza, Doqliyya, Sharqiyya, Tanta, Qina, Qaloubiyya, Kaf al-Sheikh, Minya, and other governorates.²³

Water shortages had continued intermittently since the late 2010s, prompting protests that came to be known as the “thirst revolution.” With the rising demand and disruption in provision, social protests reached a new height in the summer 2013. In July 2012, residents of the poor Giza district of Saft al-Laban staged a sit-in at the governorate building holding signs that read We Are Thirsty. Following their demands for job security, state housing, and compensation for physical damage during the revolution, they now wanted to overturn the daily water cut, sometimes 12 hours per day, which they had endured for the previous 6 years. The poor were outraged by what they saw as discriminatory power cuts against low-income neighborhoods (Halwa 2012b). Thus, residents of a community in Qalyoubiyya got mobilized, chanted slogans, and blocked the railway, objecting that they had not had water for the previous 4 days and had to obtain it from other villages. Security forces were dispatched to end roadblocks, and water authorities promised to attend to the problem. In the village of Faris in Aswan, residents blocked Cairo-Aswan highway because sewage water had disrupted life in their community. Again police and local authorities intervened to end the crisis.²⁴

Protestation of this sort reflected an aspect of broader developmental deficits that had gripped the subaltern life. Indeed, claims for social provisions, a de facto call for the return of the social contract, underlay a widespread dissent that contributed to the fall of President Morsy’s Islamist government in July 2013. Villagers of Meris in Luxor set out to close down the local council to bring attention to the “terrible services,” which ranged from power cuts and water shortages to poor schooling and flawed waste management. Thousands from the Alexandria slums protested in front of the city’s wastewater offices because the authorities had neglected their faulty and flooding sewage system. Joined by activists from the April 6 and Kefaya movements, slum dwellers mocked Morsy’s “el-Nahda project,” which was supposed to tackle such social ills. Similar neglects caused residents of a district to halt traffic in Aswan, while the poor in Minya occupied the defective power station whose sewage had infiltrated their neighborhoods; they went home only when the security forces and authorities pledged to address the prob-

21. This is from a video interview made by the anthropologist-architect Omnia Khalil.

22. For instance, since 2011, Egyptians have been using over three million air conditioners in their homes.

23. The stories were all reported in the mainstream media, including *Al-Youm Assabe’a*, May 22, 2013; *Al-Badil*, May 22, 2013; *Al-Shorouk*, May 23, 2013; *Al-Masry al-Youm*, June 7, 2013 [in Arabic]; *Al-Shorouk*, May 29, 2013.

24. Reported in *Al-Masry al-Youm*, June 20, 2013; *Al-Youm Assabe’a*, February 9, 2013.

lem. Some, such as villagers of al-Shaqib in Aswan, cut off railroads to demand that authorities install proper rail crossings, the lack of which had caused fatal accidents, while others, such as the deaf and mute in Minya, stopped trains from running because city authorities had neglected them. Then came the pensioners who erupted en masse, with some going on hunger strike in Central Cairo to demand an increase (of 25%) on their pension (*alaavah al-ijtimaiyya*). Siding with the Tamarrud movement to impeach President Morsy, one protestor stated how after 37 years of work, he received only £E340. While most protestors blocked roads, caused traffic disruptions, staged sit-ins, and undertook hunger strikes, others resorted to legal means or petitioning and publicity in daily papers.²⁵ But collective outrage, notably cutting off highways and rail tracks, became the order of the day. During 2012, Egyptians held 500 sit-ins, 581 local protests, 414 labor strikes (up from 335 during 2011), and 558 street demonstrations.²⁶ A year later, during Morsy's presidency, local protests reached a staggering 7,709, and street demonstrations and clashes rose to 5,821.²⁷

Most of the unrest took place in the urban areas, but a good number occurred in Upper Egypt and in the "villages." The occurrence of such social protests in "villages" reflects a creeping urbanity in Egyptian rural settings not simply in high-density areas (e.g., with 10,000–20,000 inhabitants) but in a growing infusion of "urban" services—electricity, running water, sewage facilities, means of communication, and nonagricultural occupations—in the rural communities. It is this creeping urbanity that has brought the "villages" into the political orbit of the nation, positing the right to the city as a prime subject of social struggles in these neoliberal times (Bayat and Denis 2000).

Specter of Bouazizi

The specter of Mohammed Bouazizi had haunted the autocratic Arab states, but it empowered the urban poor to test their fortune in the production of livelihood in conditions where the economic hardship and postrevolution disruptions had rendered millions, including college graduates, with diminished livelihoods. Thus, once the uprising erupted, dictators abdicated, and police control collapsed, the cities saw

an extraordinary spread of informal activities, notably street economic livelihood. In Tunisia, where Mohammad Bouazizi ignited the revolution, street vendors rapidly proliferated in the central districts and strategic locations in large cities. In Syria police ignored unlawful street trade, and in Morocco the urban poor aggressively occupied key streets in Rabat and Casablanca as well as in provincial towns such as Nador to spread their business. Instead of outlawing informal street trade, the authorities banned the sale of small-quantity gasoline tanks for fear of self-immolations (McMurray 2013).

Egypt experienced a spectacular expanse of reportedly five million street vendors in the key spots of the large cities and small towns throughout the country. In Cairo, the Tahrir Square, Nile Corniche, downtown streets, and Ramsis Square among others saw the largest concentration of stalls, kiosks, and mobile vendors. The presence of millions of protestors on the streets offered the vendors a lucrative market. Tahrir Square, wherein epic rallies and demonstrations continued for months, became at times a surreal space of contention and commerce. While the revolutionaries battled the police, built barricades, and dodged tear gas canisters, the square vendors carried on with their routine of trading hot tea, cold drinks, food, fruits, and domestic appliances and revolution gadgets. The vendors became an integral element in Tahrir's spatiopolitical fabric, selling watermelons carved with the words "down with military rule" or trading "January 25th Tea" and "Tahrir licorice juice." They catered to visitors and protestors alike who spent months protesting in the square.²⁸

Vendors had their own stories. Nagwa, a female seller, left her abusive husband to come to Tahrir to support her children; many men had lost their previous jobs, and others had just joined the job market. They did not pay tax and enjoyed a good degree of autonomy and flexibility, but they often felt insecure and had to dispense bribes of up to £E70–250 for their unlawful practices (Charbel 2012). Yet as part of a vast informal economy that produced 40% of the GDP, or £E218 billion, they were all seizing these moments to better their lives even though their plebeian livelihood invited the fury of local merchants, the disdain of the elites, and the hostility of the state. Local merchants complained that they could not compete with the cheap offerings of the vendors; the elites whined about a "backward" image, public sanitation, and (for some) "sexual harassment"; and the authorities expressed concern over traffic congestion, illicit trade, and public disorder. For this, both the military rulers and Morsy's government moved to crack down on street trade. In fact, little had changed in the official policy of criminalizing the unauthorized vendors since 1957 (law 33). Under Mubarak, unlawful vendors received a 3-month prison sentence and up to £E1,000 fine. The Islamist Morsy increased the penalties to 6 months in prison and a £E5,000 fine. Meanwhile, ministries joined forces to "cleanse" the central districts of Cairo,

25. The narratives are based on reports, respectively, in *Al-Badil*, March 10, 2013; *Al-Ahram Online*, January 9, 2013; *Al-Ahram*, March 8, 2013; *Al-Balad*, May 29, 2013; *Masr al-Jadid*, April 23, 2012; *Al-Masry al-Youm*, May 19, 2013; *Al-Shorouk*, June 11, 2013; and *Al-Shorouk*, February 15, 2013.

26. Reported by the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights, 2013. The Egyptian Ministry of Manpower reported that during 2011, workers organized 335 strikes (including 135 sit-ins in the public sector and 123 in the private sector) and made 4,460 complaints to the ministry; *Al-Masry al-Youm*, January 17, 2012.

27. Office of President Morsy, published in a poster and distributed officially, June 2013.

28. *Al-Masry al-Youm*, March 14, 2012.

Giza, Daqahliya, Mansoura, and Alexandria from the “parasitic vendors”—a measure that the prerevolution governments had tried but largely failed to achieve.²⁹ Through an everyday war of attrition, street subsistence workers simply resisted—temporarily retreating and then returning and regrouping. It was a war that continued relentlessly thanks to vendors’ persistence, police complicity, and bribing. When in October 2012, a 12-year-old fruit seller working in the heart of Tahrir was shot dead by a sniper, thousands of vendors staged a powerful demonstration from Tahrir to the Supreme Court. The extraordinary scenes of vendors with their pushcarts and mobile stalls marching through the main streets of Cairo remain one of the evocative hallmarks of Egypt’s street politics.

This act of solidarity served as a prelude to serious attempts to organize the street vendors in a national syndicate at a time when unemployment jumped (from the prerevolution 9%) to 31%, or 5.3 million, of whom 72% had lost jobs and one out of three had college degrees.³⁰ Now proliferated and visible, street vendors felt the need to unite to deter eviction threats and insecurity. By December 2012, activist vendors led by Ramadan al-Sawy had collected 4,000 signatures from colleagues to set up a union. Soon they established an office in Cairo and obtained support from counterparts in Helwan, Giza, Suez, Alexandria, and Asyut. Assisted by lawyers from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, they set out to obtain legal recognition. Their struggle for urban citizenship was coming to life. “Just give me a reasonably priced and strategic spot that I can rent—even if it is only one meter—then I will happily pay rent and taxes,” said a vendor (Charbel 2012).

Indeed, building organization had at this juncture become a common feature of poor people’s politics after years of restriction. Thus, following Mubarak’s downfall, a citywide association of *Ashwaiyyat* (informal settlements) was formed in Cairo to work toward securing and upgrading slum communities and calling for the dismissal of corrupt local officials. Numerous popular committees (*Ligan al-Sha’biyya*) formed during the uprisings to protect neighborhoods turned into local associations for development. Industrial workers set up their new independent unions and battled against employers who had violated their traditional entitlements and denied them a decent minimum wage, benefits, and job security. And the Zabaleen demanded the new government to systematize their work, assigning districts to groups of Zabaleen who would then charge a fee (of US\$1 monthly per household) for their service. They also demanded that the government dismiss the multinational company that covered 40% of waste collection (Viney 2012).

29. Report by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “Economic and Social Justice,” December 9, 2012 [in Arabic].

30. According to Abu-Bakr al-Gindi, the head of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, cited in *Al-Shorouk*, March 15, 2013.

Activists played an important part in these collective endeavors. Just as lawyers assisted street vendors and slum dwellers legally, the youth organizers of the campaign Upgrading Only in Name (*Ehya’ Bel-Esm Faqat*) went to slum neighborhoods (Gezira al-Forsaya, Bab al-Nasr, al-Salam, al-Nahda, Ramlet Boulaq, and similar locales in Suhag) to help bring basic services there. Residents understood these attempts as fulfilling their “right to enjoy a minimum standard of living” and the “right to live in a decent housing,” as one articulated (Ali 2013). Other groups organized a We Want to Live campaign to help remedy poor people’s livelihoods at a time when the persistence of neoliberal policies had made public provisions (such as trains, hospitals, or drinking water) more costly. The We Will Not Pay campaign advocated that poor residents not pay their electricity bills unless a clear schedule for power cuts in different districts be supplied and a fair distribution of power supply/cuts with affluent neighborhoods be guaranteed. Beginning first in Giza’s Saft al-Laban, the campaign moved to towns and villages in the Delta and Upper Egypt and was adopted by the leftist Popular Alliance Party (Gamal 2012). Reminiscent of *Masakhane* in postapartheid South Africa and the Chilean slum dwellers refusal to pay campaigns in the 1990s, these reflected a struggle for leveling, that is, equality in what a city can or cannot offer to its citizens.

The Poor and the Revolutions of Neoliberal Times

Poor people’s struggle for (urban) citizenship has been truly remarkable in the Arab revolutions. Reinforced by a strong “entitlement ethics,” it embodied attempts to secure shelter, claim state housing, battle eviction, contest high rents, demand collective provision, and push for leveling. Urban citizenship also meant that the poor wished to be an integral part of the city—not only with their disadvantaged work and habitat but also with their physical presence and habitus. They disdained policies and people that rendered them as “outsiders” or “intruders.” They wished to extend their horizon of the city beyond their backstreet localities by forging access to the larger community. Thus, in Cairo, the informal settlements located around the inaccessible Ring Road (designed to detach and halt the further encroachment of these settlements) took the matter in their own hands just after the revolution to construct access ways to the highway. Microtaxies (*tuk tuks*) could then bring people from the nearby settlements to these “transfer points” from which they could move to the rest of the city. Other settlements built exit ramps to facilitate car access to the highways. In one settlement, the residents paved the road, opened a police station, produced a CD about the initiative, and invited the governor to officially inaugurate their access ramp. In such ways the poor ensured their physical entry into the city at large. Still others, such as the residents of the Ard el-Liwa informal community, mapped their neighborhood; a local tailor drew

an elaborate sketch of streets, alleyways, hills, bridges, and homes, giving their community a life on paper and forging an official recognition that it formerly lacked.³¹ In the meantime, the revolution eased more than ever the poor people's mobility and presence in the cities' public spaces, from which they were usually shunned away. Places such as Bourghiba Boulevard in Tunis and Tahrir Square in Cairo became the spaces of mixing and *mélange* of the people with different class backgrounds, briefly subverting the diktat of the spatial structure and elite attitude about where the poor (and the rich) could or could not go, sit, shop, or loiter. More than anything, the crucial role of the Ultras, Egypt's football fans in the revolutionary streets, pointed to the unusual presence of the poor youths in the city's strategic locations. The public drama and display of the Ultras including mostly lower-class youths reflected not only a form of subaltern male fun but also an enunciation of "I exist" in a public arena in which the underdog felt scorned and castigated.

Such feeling of self-determination is a common feature of immediate postrevolution times when the people, freed from state control, take initiatives to assert their will. Empowered as "free citizens," as "owners of their country," and yet facing a disrupted state and economy, they move to exercise self-rule. The grassroots embark on self-management in farms, factories, universities, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Such radical politics have a long history in most revolutions. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979, workers occupied hundreds of factories to run them through *shuras*, or "factory committees" (Bayat 1987). Farmers took over agribusiness (in Mazandaran and Fars provinces). The urban poor grabbed lands to build homes, occupied apartments and hotels, acquired urban services, and demanded security of tenure; they colonized central street sidewalks to conduct outdoor businesses and formed organizations of squatters, street vendors, and unemployed. Segments of the lower classes dominated the urban streets, squares, and mosques with great confidence and boldness. For a while, spatial hierarchies crumbled, replaced by the scenes of managers and workers dining together in the nation's workplaces. The poor were further empowered by the intense competition between various left and Islamist groups to secure their support. And their radical measures were backed, at least for some time, by the idioms of "equality," "social justice," and "socialism" that held currency in most of the twentieth-century revolutions.

But as I have argued elsewhere (Bayat 2013b), Arab revolutions were different; they occurred in an ideological age when the very idea of "revolution" had been discredited, a time when neoliberal rationality had become "part of our commonsense understanding of life" (Massey 2013). So while the Arab revolutions embodied in practice radical initiatives

on the part of the subaltern, no serious ideological frame or social movement anchored them. If anything, the "commonsense" neoliberal thinking among the political elites, secular and Islamist alike, dismissed such radical practices as "out of place," "extremist," "utopian," and above all "illegal." Thus, in Egypt, factory takeover and workers' control did take place, but only in 12 plants whose owners had left, had given up, or had gone bankrupt. The media, politicians, and even the unions dismissed the practice as "unlawful," violating the principle of property ownership. In the end, only one factory, with 250 workers, remained self-managed, and the rest were settled in some sort of "comanagement."³² The urban poor, as we saw, did engage in remarkable social struggles to enhance and defend life opportunities, yet structural discrimination against them continued. Despite their aversion of the complex bureaucratic institutions, the poor still had to grapple with government agencies, schools, municipalities, ID cards, police stations, and hospitals in which they often received discriminatory treatment. It is true, in the "city inside out," the poor appropriate public spaces to conduct their outdoor subsistence economy and social interaction (Bayat 2012). Yet it is a sad truth that the use of green space, at least in Cairo, remains notoriously class based, where only the rich can afford the private clubs where a semblance of free space and greenery exists. Once again, the fear of the poor as the spoilers of public order, creators of insecurity, and perpetrators of violence and sexual harassment keep rendering them as outsiders. In these neoliberal conditions, the poor had lost their traditional ideological anchor. Except for a few activist groups that did give support to the poor, the urban subaltern was left largely on their own on their social networks and on their cultural capital. Nor did the postrevolution governments concretely address the plight of the poor despite the rhetoric of improving the *ashwaiyyat*. "Social justice" remained the revolution's most unattended slogan. The Muslim Brotherhood government offered plenty of Islam and moralizing, but "these are things for God," as a poor resident of Boulaq lamented; devoid of any progressive vision, it did little to fulfill "our rights" (Fahim 2012). With no radical rethinking in social and economic policies, the poor were poised to continue with their collective contention or else resort to the familiar strategy of quiet encroachment. Obsession with the logic of the market, "the other path," may not serve the liberation of the "aspiring poor," as De Soto would suggest, but be a cause of its despair and the subject of its contention. The specter of Bouazizi may continue to haunt.

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31. Omar Najati, video lecture, "The American University of Beirut," The City Debate lecture series, 2013, http://www.aub.edu.lb/fea/fea_home/Documents/City%20Debates%202013.pdf.

32. Interview with worker activist Fatma Ramadan, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 9, 2013.

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