

## IS THIS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?

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From its inception in September 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement has been linked to the revolutions and popular uprisings throughout North Africa and the Middle East that have gone under the name of the Arab Spring. This connection reflected in the official OWS website, which declares: “We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants.” While the rich and complex set of popular struggles across North African and the Middle East cannot be reduced to a single “tactic,” this acknowledgement of the Arab Spring as an inspiration for the Occupy movement represents my point of departure for considering OWS within current conversations about global solidarity. More specifically, the claims and practices of Occupy highlight an important distinction between the movement’s self-understanding of being *inspired* by the Arab Spring versus the even more important question of how a U.S.-based movement can stand *in solidarity with* popular movements throughout North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the less publicized popular movements throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. [1](#)

This distinction indicates how Occupy’s engagement with the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring has the potential to transform political consciousness in the U.S. when it comes to the Middle East. Yet the relationship of Occupy to the Arab Spring also serves as a reminder of the ongoing political work that still needs to be done. This work is particularly crucial given the hugely powerful role of U.S. money, weaponry, and political influence throughout the region, and the role played directly and indirectly by the U.S. in quashing recent popular uprisings (for example, in Bahrain). [2](#) What follows should be considered preliminary notes on some forms of solidarity that have arisen (and also those that have not shown up) in the conjunction between OWS and the Arab Spring, with the understanding that our analysis needs to keep pace with movements on the ground while still allowing us to look back and analyze the ground already covered—especially given some of the suggestive and important connections that flickered into being between these sets of popular uprisings.

This is precisely where the need to make the transformation of political consciousness represented by Occupy’s engagements with the Arab Spring concrete and permanent comes into play. In this context, a moment from the opening chapter of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* is worth remembering today. Fanon’s telling of the story of the decolonization movement proceeds towards a point at which the anti-colonial movement has begun to gain momentum; at that moment, he pauses to note the comments of Western observers, even sympathetic ones, in response to the pace of these movements. It is a statement marked by Fanon’s trademark irony, but it also partakes of some of the fearless jubilation of 2011: “So they say the colonized want to move too fast. Let us never forget that it wasn’t such a long time ago that the colonized were accused of being too slow, lazy, and fatalistic.” [3](#)

Adapting Fanon to our current moment, and to, say, the context of Egypt, which has come to be considered as the paradigmatic example of the Arab Spring, we might re-translate him this way: Today they say that the Egyptian people want to move too fast towards true democracy (thus the need to oversee an “orderly” transition, expressed by Western observers and financial institutions). Let us never forget that it was only yesterday Egyptians were accused of being too slow, too lazy, and too fatalistic for true democracy. The racist truisms, remnants of colonialism and Orientalism, that have informed Western thinking about so-called “Arab (and African) fatalism,” “Arab (and African) passivity,” “Arab (and African) backwardness” as explanations for autocratic regimes in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt have now burned to the ground. Their remains lie next to the ashes of the NDP headquarters in Cairo, and they have been laid to rest equally effectively alongside the dismantled offices of the CDR in Tunisia. [4](#) OWS provides an important measure for what it might mean to wake up from our orientalist nightmares in order to stand in solidarity with the ongoing revolutions of the Arab Spring and build a context for a deep and lasting solidarity.

A number of questions and discussions that had been circulating through the Occupy movement around the issue of

solidarity with the Arab Spring came to a head in November 2011, around two particular situations: a Twitter message seemingly (but, it turned out, unofficially) sent by OWS in support of the Freedom Waves flotilla launched to challenge the siege of Gaza, a message that was later retracted (due, by all accounts, to questions of process rather than specific political motivations); and, at about the same time, a decision reached by OWS to send a delegation to Egypt, apparently to “observe” the elections that were scheduled to take place beginning in January 2012. <sup>5</sup>

Both of these decisions touched off debates within the Occupy movement about solidarity with popular liberation movements in the Middle East. As some critics asked, how could a movement that declares itself to be inspired by the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring not take an unambiguous position in support of breaking the blockade of Gaza? Why would a movement that has “taken to the streets and occupied parks and cities out of a dissatisfaction with the false promises of the game of electoral politics” send a delegation whose presence plays into the hands of a process that many Egyptian activists considered to be “just a means of legitimating the ruling junta’s seizure of the revolutionary process,” a much-read and circulated open letter to OWS from the Egyptian organization Comrades from Cairo so justly articulates <sup>6</sup> These are hugely important questions, and not just for the Occupy movement. The struggle for justice in Israel-Palestine has always been a source of controversy in U.S. politics, including (perhaps especially) among the left. And the question how to best support and work in solidarity with the ongoing struggles in Egypt, and throughout the region, is one that is just beginning to be raised in the U.S. context. These controversial and complicated moments in the recent history of OWS offer us an opportunity to recognize what it might mean to think about solidarity as something that happens slowly, over time and space, and only through hard and often agonizing work.

This notion of solidarity is clear in the statement by Comrades from Cairo, which is one of the reasons it remains such a moving, energizing, and profoundly ethical document. The group’s criticism of the position taken up by OWS in deciding to send a delegation with the specific task of “observing” the Egyptian elections is clear and unsparing:

we recently received news that your General Assembly passed a proposal authorizing \$29,000 to send twenty of your number to Egypt as election monitors. Truth be told, the news rather shocked us; we spent the better part of the day simply trying to figure out who could have asked for such assistance on our behalf.

Given the life and death urgency of the issues involved, Comrades from Cairo offer an impressively calm and gently stated critique that nevertheless reveals OWS as *failing* to act in solidarity with the call to defend the revolution sent out by the Military Trials for Civilians Movement and other Egyptian popular organizations. Insofar as the elections have been part of the military junta’s attempts to legitimize the seizure of the revolution, sending a delegation to observe these elections was viewed by Comrades from Cairo as doing precisely the opposite of defending the revolution.

These points need to be made, and reiterated (and also argued over—none of them are self-evident), since they indicate failure on the part of whatever decision-making bodies at OWS designed the particular rationale for this proposed delegation. Also worth noting is the tone taken up by the Comrades letter. The sentence quoted above, expressing a sense of shock, is followed by this statement: “We have some concerns with the idea, and we wanted to join your conversation. The tone is, in many ways, that of a conversation *within* a movement rather than *between* agonistic forces. There is of course a “you” and “us” here—in both cases, one separated spatially, among many other ways—but it is interesting to see where the emergence of a “we” also shows itself in the Comrades from Cairo statement:

We have, all of us around the world, been learning new ways to represent ourselves, to speak, to live our politics directly and immediately, and in Egypt we did not set out to the streets in revolution simply to gain a parliament. Our struggle—which we think we share with you—is greater and grander than a neatly functioning parliamentary democracy. . . . But even though the idea of election monitoring doesn’t really do it for us, we want your solidarity, we want your support and your visits. We want to know you, talk with you, learn one another’s lessons, compare strategies and share plans for the future. . . . Let us deepen our lines of communication and process and discover what these new ways of working together

and supporting one another could be.

The critique is there, and it is a necessarily sharp one. But — to use a definition of solidarity once proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak — it also enacts critique as a form of love. [7](#)

I note this because it is worth comparing the tone of the actual critique made by the Comrades from Cairo letter with much of the commentary that it engendered as it became an online meme of sorts. The informal commentary generally took up the Comrades' statement as a way to make a larger criticism of the privilege, arrogance, and imperialist tendencies of OWS, and of Western political movements more generally. In any popular democratic movement, it is good that such things be said; one of Edward Said's great lessons, a lesson to be found in Fanon as well, is that there is no true solidarity without criticism. And certainly privilege, arrogance, and imperialist tendencies have, sadly, been all too present in the way the U.S. left has dealt with popular movements in the rest of the world, especially movements in the Middle East, North Africa, and indeed throughout the global south. But I think we also have to insist upon the opposite point: that, politically and ethically speaking, criticism without solidarity is not necessarily any more helpful.

It strikes me (and I can only speak anecdotally here) that many of the more dismissive critiques of OWS around these particular issues came from fellow activists in the U.S., especially activists who have been engaged with Palestine solidarity and other issues related to the region. There are, I think, some very good reasons for the skepticism revealed in these responses. Palestine solidarity activists in particular have all too often been asked to check our politics at the door of various political coalitions in the U.S., in the interest of not "alienating" the mainstream (this was a major issue in organizing against the Iraq war during the past decade, for example). The controversy over support for the Freedom Waves flotilla, well as the subsequent response of Daniel Sieradski, a driving force behind the movement Occupy Judaism and a prominent organizer of OWS, highlight how this problematic logic of addressing mainstream audiences remains a part of the Occupy movement:

The ramifications I imagine begin with a mountain of press attacking OWS as being anti-Israel and pro-terrorism. Where beating back false charges of anti-Semitism was easy because the movement is not anti-Semitic, were the movement to embrace an explicitly pro-Palestinian agenda, it would be impossible to counter charges that the movement is anti-Israel. No matter how much we as individuals may reject such a framing, supporting the breaking of the Gaza blockade will surely be labeled as enabling the flow of arms into Gaza that will be turned on Israeli civilians. No matter how one might rebut those claims, we all know that mainstream media does not handle nuance well when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [8](#)

This sort of "don't alienate the mainstream" mentality is unworthy of a movement with the transformational energy that OWS has shown. This relates to the question raised by Comrades from Cairo about why a movement with such transformative aspirations would be interested in simply observing elections in the first place. Indeed, this may be the important point: to attribute such a position to some stable entity called "Occupy Wall Street" is to fundamentally misunderstand the energy of the Occupy movement, which is that of a movement that seizes certain spaces in order to, in a sense, slow down time long enough to have extended, horizontal, consensus-based conversations about issues both large and small (indeed, anyone who has attended or participated in a General Assembly knows that the experience is alternately exhilarating and exasperating). Both the decision to retract the Freedom Waves tweet (made explicitly on the grounds that no consensus on the issue had yet been reached) and the preliminary and perhaps badly-formulated nature of the attempt to reach out to activists in Egypt have a great deal to do with the necessarily somewhat clumsy nature of such a process. It is not designed to come up with neat, streamlined solutions to key issues. As a friend, who is both a veteran of movements related to Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of the region and also a sometime participant in OWS discussions, put it on an online exchange, "a week ago, OWS was criticized for *not* hastily endorsing a specific Palestine solidarity thing; and

now, OWS is criticized *for* hastily endorsing a specific Egypt solidarity thing.” [9](#)

Obviously, the issues here are complicated, and it may be that the specific decision in each case is open to criticism; but equally important is to recognize that what we are talking about here are not fully-worked-out positions of some united political front, but the ongoing work of trying to work *towards* these positions. This work is envisioned as the opposite of “hasty”; it needs time, and part of what the Occupy movement has attempted to seize is precisely the time (and, equally necessarily, the space) to have these sorts of important political conversations. Solidarity is, if things work as they should, what emerges from this work; it’s not something that can be determined in advance, with only the details then to be filled in. This is true even in terms of the proposed OWS delegation to Egypt: while the statement released by OWS was clear about constituting a delegation specifically to observe elections, the actual deliberations regarding the nature of the delegation held in Zuccotti Park indicated that there is hardly a consensus about the sort of solidarity work that such a delegation might best do. Indeed, it is not clear that the participants in such discussions have a fully worked out position on the role of elections versus revolutionary change in the U.S., never mind in Egypt.

This confusion, and the lack of a fully-formed political position (as well as Occupy’s avoidance of concrete demands or proposals) has sometimes struck activists as frustrating. This frustration that might cause those of us committed to the struggles of the Arab Spring to throw up our hands and simply conclude that this is not a group with whom we can work. I think this would be a grave mistake. I think our impatience is motivated by our sense of the urgency of these struggles, and we would be wrong to give up this sense of urgency. But such urgency must be balanced by the temporality of the Occupy movement, which reminds us that life and death struggles sometimes unfold slowly and need to be sustained over a long period of time. It is in these sustained, slow, and often frustrating but sometimes exhilarating periods of working together that solidarity is created. Moreover, such lasting solidarities can stand in powerful contrast to the fleeting temporality of tweets, press releases, and or other sound bites of our current political culture.

For all the missteps that the Occupy movement has made, and will no doubt continue to make, the very fact that OWS founded itself on a claim to be inspired by the Arab Spring is a hugely hopeful fact that must not be overlooked. In their work towards building solidarity with those engaged in the struggles of the Arab Spring, the young occupiers who make up the heart of the movement challenge their own history as the generation that came of age under the shadow of 9/11. Forceful the notion of America as the bringer of democracy to the world—specifically, to the Middle East — it seems fitting that OWS began less than a week after the much-hyped tenth anniversary of 9/11, in a space directly adjacent to “Ground Zero.” The United States has been living the aftermath of “9/11” for the past decade. It may be that 9/17, the date on which Occupy Wall Street began, marks the beginning of something completely different. A generation that has been told that the greatest dream of the rest of the world is to be like “us” (so much so that this dream sometimes turns into its nightmarish, jealous, fairy-tale-villain opposite: “they hate us for our freedom”) has pointed to the place in the world presented to them the most backwards, the most “undemocratic,” the place in most dire need of being saved (by force, if necessary)—OWS looks to Cairo and says: we want to do what they have done. We want to make Tahrir in New York. We want to fight the way they fight. It is possible today, in a way it was not possible before the inception of Occupy, to imagine the next step to be made from downtown Manhattan: the declaration that their fight is our fight.

“Their fight is our fight” is another way of saying “solidarity,” and it represents the vision towards which our politics should lead today. OWS declares itself to be inspired by the Arab Spring. Many of those who have made OWS may not necessarily even know what they mean by this, and as recent events show, many of the participants have a lot to learn before a real solidarity can be built. But if we can keep our patience, we can maybe learn together, as Beckett might have put it, if not to succeed once and for all, at least to fail better each time. The one thing that is certain is that the Occupy movement isn’t going anywhere; it’s going to take its sweet time, and those who have created it have made it clear that they are planning to stay, and to fight. And it’s certainly true that those who are struggling in Egypt, in Palestine, and throughout the world aren’t going anywhere either. Time, as always, to get back to work, and while committing ourselves

patience, also let the urgency of our task inspire us to move faster each day.

[An earlier version of some of these formulations was published as “Back to Work: OWS and the Arab Spring” in *Jadaliyya* (16 November 2011). My thanks to Tejasvi Nagaraja, Anjali Kamat, Allison Brown, and my colleagues in the “Solidarities” seminar at the **Committee on Globalization and Social Change-CUNY Graduate Center** for the many conversations that have informed this piece, to Manijeh Moradian and A. J. Bauer for encouraging me to revise it for the volume, and to Cristina Beltran for her assiduous editing work.]

#### Footnotes:

1. I have written elsewhere about tweaking this notion of “The Arab Spring” into “The African Spring,” as a way of bridging the gap between the uprisings in North Africa (including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) and those in Sub-Saharan Africa. See “‘Toute décolonisation est une réussite’: *Les damnés de la terre* Fifty Years On,” in *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 21 (2011). ↩
2. See, for example, Tahiyya Lulu, “Saudi Hegemony vs. the Arab Spring,” *Jadaliyya* (10 April 2011). ↩
3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004), 35. ↩
4. The NDP (National Democratic Party) and CDR (Constitutional Democratic Rally) were the corrupt single parties of the dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively. Both were dissolved after the revolutions of 2011. ↩
5. For the former, see Marc Tracy, “Stray Flotilla Tweet Raises Questions about OWS,” *Tablet Magazine* (4 November 2011); for the latter, see Nada Hussein Rashwan, “Occupy Wall Street to Send Observers for Egypt’s Elections,” *Ahram Online* (12 November 2011). ↩
6. See “Statement by Comrades from Cairo in Response to OWS Proposal to Send Election Monitors,” *Jadaliyya* (13 November 2012). ↩
7. Gayatri Chakravory Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, trans. Spivak (New York: Routledge, 1993), xxvii. ↩
8. Adam Horowitz, “Occupy Wall Street and the Struggle Over Israel/Palestine,” *Mondoweiss* (9 November 2011). ↩
9. Many thanks to Tejasvi Nagaraja for this and other important conversations on these questions of solidarity. ↩