

## Editorial: the return of politics

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Since January 14<sup>th</sup>, when Ben Ali “scarpered”, since February 10<sup>th</sup>, when Mubarak resigned, a feeling of joy and a powerful raising up of hope has animated the struggles of Tunisians, the Egyptians, Arab intellectuals and militants – and all those who have, for a long time, stood by them – for dignity, freedom, justice, democracy in their countries, at great cost.

There are mixed feelings in the rejoicing. Gaddafi’s regime is massacring Libyan people in revolt, whilst organizing a hysterical counter-revolution around the iconic<sup>1</sup> figure of the chief. Violence in Yemen has been confirmed and other uprisings could be bloodily repressed. There is concern also that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions have not actually been confirmed in reality. But let’s not dismiss the joy and the exceptional density of the moment.

To savour the strength of the event is to render homage, without hesitation, to those who – through their mobilization – have carried out these symbolic and political reversals. It is to give oneself the time to hear, to see, to feel, to understand what the event was, how it is developing today. It is to get as close to it as possible, without unifying anything, without hastening or concluding anything, without prejudging anything. The joy stems from the re-conquering of dignity, collectively affirmed emancipation, sites for the work of democratisation, re-founding. The joy stems also from the radical re-definition of modes of representation, lines of interpretation and principles of relation that have prevailed for decades in the world, when it is a matter of the Arab world, Europe and the West.

Some well-known patterns of representation have been brusquely displaced: an ‘Arabic world’ festering in an a-historical immobility characterized by some as ‘cultural’, in contrast with a ‘West’ that has got to grips with the world. An essentially imperialist West, blocking – by means of its hegemony – the emancipation of those who were colonised and Arabic regimes who, in the name of anti-colonial struggles, have been definitively exonerated from being accountable to their peoples.

Arabic-Muslim populations for whom every revolt would only find a theologico-political translation: a democratic Turkey the foundations of which would [apparently] be indefinitely questionable; European revolutions in 1989 which one delighted in taking for the “end of history”; and the general suspicion that bore on the idea of a common future.

Suddenly, populations in revolt have become the people. Suddenly, the chiefs have been pushed out. Suddenly, the young, long kept under the yoke of patriarchy, have freed themselves – men and women freeing alongside them older generations, tired of political battles cruelly lost. Suddenly, combining virtual communication, a feel for the operations of networks, and the peaceful physical occupation of streets and public places, liberating

speech and gesture, the subjugated have become political subjects, and they mean to invent their own form of democracy. Everything has shifted. Everything is moving. More precisely, everything is moved. We are only just beginning to apprehend these displacements and to draw all their consequences.

An immense site for political work is opening up. It is firstly one of democratic invention and experimentation for the Egyptians and Tunisians and for every Arab country and the one of questioning for Europe and the 'West'. A new "politics of relations"<sup>2</sup> has to be imagined, which operates via a resetting of historical models of interpretation, but also by the elaboration of new political frameworks. Thus the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership must be rethought - simple adaptations here will not be enough.

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On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2011, in a statement reported by *Euronews* following the fall of President Mubarak, Catherine Ashton, head of European diplomacy, declared "We have a long history and a good deal of knowledge and experience in the construction of a democracy, and we are offering it to the Egyptian people".<sup>3</sup> At the very least, the institutional position of centralization and oversight proper to the European Neighbourhood Policy is no longer tenable. Contrary to what Baroness Ashton believes, it is not the time for exporting the European model, as if democracy was a model to be constructed - a kit that comes with its norms for transition inherited from the end of the Cold War, its measures of support, the strands of its budget, its technical support - with its background of a reinforced, obsessional struggle against clandestine immigration. Thus, even before serving up the "reinforcement of civil society and NGOs", an old dish reheated, perhaps one ought to make a link with the reality of the peoples in these uprisings and try to posit on that basis the modalities of support.

The events also signal the defeat of the initiative for a Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Mocking the political failures of the Barcelona Process<sup>4</sup>, the French initiators of the project betted on the economic and financial aspect alone in the construction of a "shared prosperity" and comforting the general *status quo*, in the name of "stability" - a *status quo* guaranteed by a "new" two-headed form of governance, with two chiefs, President Sarkozy and President Mubarak. The innumerable links between non-governmental actors, patiently woven together over the last fifteen years - despite the situations of crisis and conflict - were written off, leaving the cumbersome management and encouraging of timid legal or political reforms in Arab partner countries in the hands of the European Commission and its European Neighbourhood Policy. As to the political role of the European Union and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the UfM project ratified its passing. But events are a harsh critic. The war on Gaza, the siege of Gaza and the Israeli pursuit of colonisation have entailed a total blockage of political mechanisms, proving that one cannot skip over politics. The uprisings and revolutions in the Arab world have done the rest.

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Because everything has already moved, everything is to be invented. But to translate politics *together*, to figure the new fields of interpretation *together*, it is necessary to

sense that all are collectively involved in the banquet to which the uprisings of Arab peoples have invited the world. Enthusiasm and desire are needed, rather than stupor and trembling – a sensible, aesthetic and ethical curiosity. “Contemporary cultures are only worth something through their degree of concentration of the cultural fervours of the world”, again wrote Patrick Chamoiseau and the very much missed Edouard Glissant.<sup>5</sup>

The immense joy is that of possibilities. The first texts that we are publishing here manifest this, whilst seeking to home in on what happened, to try to understand it as closely as possible, without necessarily making conjectures about the future. Several authors have written for *Transeuropeennes* in the force of the moment, and others are currently doing the same. Some of the texts have been published on sites we like, we are taking them up and translating them. A set of links to other contributions that seem to use to be relevant has been given. The time will come in future weeks, to engage here in a collective labour of reflection on the fundamental constitutional stakes, the necessary institutional make up, the modes of organization of actors, and on the processes of internal negotiation. The time will also come to analyse the ways in which existing frameworks of interpretation have been disrupted.

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<sup>1</sup>A reference borrowed from the Italian journalist Fabrizio Caccia in his article ‘Skirmishes in Tripoli as Gaddafi’s friends and foes square up’ at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/gaddafi-tripoli-skirmishes> [accessed February 26th 2011]

<sup>2</sup>A term borrowed from Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau in their ‘Lettre ouverte au ministre de l’Intérieur’ on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2005 – a declension of the “poetics of relation”

<sup>3</sup>This quotation has not been published in the official statements available online on Baroness Ashton’s official website.

<sup>4</sup>Created in 1995 and renewed in part with new undertakings during the Barcelona Summit in 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Glissant and Chamoiseau, op. cit.