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Egypt and the Failure of Realism

Joe Hoover

Recent upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya have caught many by surprise as the order of things has proven protean in a way that official experts and conventional wisdom were largely blind to – reality, it seems, can be unruly. As revolution unfolded in Egypt there were many pleas for restraint, worries that political instability would spread, and among Western leaders a profound wariness of change that they feared would compromise their strategic interests. There was, in a word, an invocation of ‘realism’, intended to quell the earnestness of fast moving and profound change. The failure of realism as a response to recent events in Egypt is revealed through the policies invoked by state representatives, commentators and academics, which confirmed the given reality of world politics but proved wanting ethically and heuristically, as those willing to support the brutal rule of Hosni Mubarak and unable to comprehend the power of the protesters proved to be on the wrong side of history. These banal appeals to realism, however, do lead to a broader insight, revealing that such appeals in world politics are actually calls to preserve what I term ‘the reality of dominance’, which invokes the inevitability of the existing order of things to discount the reality of resistance to that order – which calls for transformation over preservation.

In early February, before Mubarak’s ouster, the Egyptian revolution was in doubt. It was still only a fragile possibility.¹ The protestors and Mubarak’s goons waited it out in Tahrir Square while the army stood watch. The success of the revolution would be determined by whose will was most resilient. Would the threat of increasing violence discourage the protestors and give Mubarak the space he needed to solidify his power till next year and thus avoid the changes the Egyptian people were demanding? Or would the protestors’ resolve hold, making clear to Mubarak that he could no longer hope to rule Egypt?

As protestors faced violence, exhaustion and deprivation the prospect of compromise must have seemed more desirable as the hardships mounted. The time was ripe for expressions of support from key leaders, which could buttress the resolve of the protestors and pressure the Mubarak regime. It was much easier for Mubarak to play for time from the presidential palace than for protestors in the streets, yet far too many of the men and women able to make a difference did not use their voices to share in

democracy's street-choir – instead their voices echoed in the halls of disreputable power. The Obama administration has the greatest culpability in this, as they not only had the capability to undermine Mubarak, but their failure to do so revealed the hypocrisy of US support for democracy and human rights in the region.

The events in Egypt demonstrated that President Barak Obama has mastered the dark art of evasive support, leaving no doubt that he fully supported Egyptian democracy, as long as it did not change too much, too fast, and, most importantly, as long as US strategic interests were not compromised.

The administration's restraint is also driven by the fact that, for the United States, dealing with an Egypt without Mr. Mubarak would be difficult at best, and downright scary at worst. For 30 years, his government has been a pillar of American foreign policy in a volatile region. (Sanger & Cooper, 2011)

Predictably, Vice President Joe Biden made the point with less tact, but perhaps more truth, when he expressed his insensibility to the crimes of Mubarak against his own people:

Asked if he would characterize Mubarak as a dictator Biden responded: "Mubarak has been an ally of ours in a number of things. And he's been very responsible on, relative to geopolitical interest in the region, the Middle East peace efforts; the actions Egypt has taken relative to normalizing relationship with – with Israel. ... I would not refer to him as a dictator." (Murphy, 2011)

Clearly regional stability is the key rhetorical trope, which justified turning a blind eye to the brutality of Mubarak's regime and the lack of democracy in Egypt.

Perhaps no issue is more important in defining what "regional stability" means for the US than the issue of Israeli security. Binyamin Netanyahu clearly exerted pressure on the US, trying to limit the support they gave to democratic reforms in Egypt.

The prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, reportedly ordered his cabinet to refrain from commenting publicly on the unfolding drama, saying only that the treaty must be maintained. But as Haaretz reported today, the government is seeking to convince the US and EU to curb their criticism of Hosni Mubarak to preserve stability in the region, even as Washington and its allies signal their wish for an "orderly transition" which the incumbent almost certainly cannot ignore. (Black, 2011)

Despite the homilies on human rights and democratic freedom delivered by Mr Obama

to the Egyptians (Wilson and Warrick, 2011), it was a predictable set of concerns that set the agenda for the US response to the revolution taking place in Cairo and throughout Egypt – the imperative was to maintain order, control those changes that proved inevitable and ensure that the political and economic interests of dominant states were preserved. The representative for the US State Department, PJ Crowley, who was interviewed by Al Jazeera (*US urges reform in Egypt*, 2011), performed a practiced dance to the theme of restraint, gradual reform and false equivalencies – as if protesters and the agents of Mubarak’s “coercive apparatus” could be compared² – as he made clear that the suffering of the Egyptian people and their desire for democracy would not undermine US support for the Mubarak regime.

We respect what Egypt contributes to the region. It is a stabilising force; it has made its own peace with Israel and is pursuing normal relations with Israel. We think that’s important; we think that’s a model that the region should adopt broadly speaking. At the same time, we recognise that Egypt, Tunisia, other countries, do need to reform, they do need to respond to the needs of their people and we encourage that reform and we are contributing across the region to that reform. (*US urges reform in Egypt*, 2011)

This routine, we can assume, was an exercise in managing expectations and making US interests clear – democratic revolution should not be allowed to upset regional stability, nor should the suffering of the protestors be allowed to cloud “our” judgment on what really matters – or, more bluntly, if democratic dreams threatened the interests of the US, then so much the worse for those beautiful revolutionary dreams.

As Tony Blair joined the discussion he not only underlined Biden’s scepticism regarding whether Mubarak was a dictator, claiming he was ‘immensely courageous and a force for good’ (McGreal, 2011), but he also clearly articulated the managerial worldview of a man who has learned to think of himself as a member of a privileged group of clear-eyed realists whose responsibility it is to control all the things of world politics.

Blair argued that the region has unique problems that make political change different from the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe. He said the principal issue was the presence of Islamist parties that he fears will use democracy to gain power and then undermine the freedoms people seek... Blair said he did not doubt that change was coming to Egypt. “People want a different system of government. They’re going to get it. The question is what emerges from that. In particular I think the key challenge for us is how do we help partner this process of change and help manage it in such a way that what comes out of it

is open minded, fair, democratic government.” (McGreal, 2011)

Not only does this response implicitly trade in the notion that Arab countries will not be able to handle democracy without Western tutelage, it also trades in a degraded notion of realism, in which serious men act as if their apologia for imperial arrogance is sagacious wisdom gleaned from long experience. The Egyptian protestors will be allowed their democracy, but their democracy will be managed and defined by the powerful, so as not to disturb the order of things or run afoul of the realities of world politics.

Yet this statist and status quo line is actually divorced from reality, or at least the reality of the protesters battling their corrupt leaders in the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and cities throughout Egypt – it reflects the reality of dominance. Realism, as Western leaders express it, is little more than an attempt to limit the happenings of world politics to their own constrained vision, a myopic self-interest that fails to take the measure of the cruelty it justifies or realise its own analytical failings.

There is an obvious danger contained in the argument I have made thus far – it is all too easy to equate the political calculations of state representatives with a realist theory of International Relations. A committed realist may well respond by suggesting that the problem highlighted by the US response to the Egyptian revolution is not realism in foreign policy but the shoddy analysis and muddled thinking of these all too human leaders of women and men. And I need not speculate about this potential realist, as Stephen Walt (2011) has already made the argument for getting rid of Mubarak. Making the case that a consistent realist policy, focused on the strategic self-interest of involved states, should have led the US and Israel to support a democratic Egypt and the ouster of Mr Mubarak – all the while, of course focusing on how such a transition benefits dominant states and must be properly managed to ensure the stability of the international system – Walt says:

Other things being equal, states are better off if they don't have to worry about their allies' internal stability, and if an allied government enjoys considerable support among its population. An ally that is internally divided, whose government is corrupt or illegitimate, or that is disliked by lots of other countries is *ipso facto* less valuable than one whose population is unified, whose government is legitimate, and that enjoys lots of international support. For this reason, even a staunch realist would prefer allies that were neither internally fragile nor international pariahs, while recognizing that sometimes you have to work with what you have.

While there is an admirable consistency and clarity to this argument, it serves to highlight the failure of realism as a theoretical framing. It is not a problem of analysis but a problem

of understanding. Whether we are looking to Walt's sober instrumentalism, or the more mundane realism that the Obama administration embraced while the outcome of rebellion in Egypt was still in doubt, the appeal is only to the reality of dominance, which preserves stability and order ahead of and, if necessary, at the cost of the pains and dreams of the protestors – ignoring the reality of resistance. Despite its pretensions, realism, as an orientation and a theory, does not grant special access to some indisputable or unchanging reality, rather it invokes reality for political ends.

My criticism does not apply only to those writers who self-identify as realists, but to a brand of statist thinking that justifies the narrowness of its analysis, the instrumentalisation of moral concerns, and its principled elevation of order above all other values in the name of the undeniable realities of international politics.³ The fundamental claim shared by those who privilege state interests and the preservation of order is that international politics demands such qualities of us. Historically, this realist position has been contrasted with putatively utopian views (whether internationalist, idealist, socialist, or cosmopolitan) that cannot see the world of international politics for what it is, which fail to see that focusing on state interest and perpetual conflict is not immoral but the only sober response to the imperatives of the world – and because of that the moral policy demanded of states (Cozette, 2008).

What goes unchallenged is exactly which reality realists are better able to grasp. The too-often-unspoken truth is that they embrace the reality of powerful actors, of those seeking to dominate, control, exploit and to render social reality into the means for their various ends. Realism, as the dominant theory in International Relations, requires a denial of this power-fetishism; its historical role as counsel to imperial ambition (Long and Schmidt, 2005) is transformed into an account of the necessary (and at times tragic) responsiveness states must have to the constraints of political reality (Mearsheimer, 2001). This act of elision is most clearly seen in realists' adoption of Niccolò Machiavelli as a patron saint, as the 15th century author is wrenched from the complex context in which he wrote his ironic and complex counsel for the new Prince of renaissance Florence (Strauss, 1978, pp. 54-84), in order to provide insight into the timeless nature of conflict in international politics (Fischer, 1996, pp. 248-279). Without considering the revolutionary account of the virtuous political community articulated by Machiavelli (Berlin, 1997), which celebrated a vigorous republicanism that denied the universal Christian morality of his time and necessitated a space outside of political community that was not constrained by ethical imperatives (Walker, 1993), the realist tradition in International Relations has appropriated this antagonistic and hierarchical vision as a scientific theory.

No account of the inherent struggle for power in international politics is more influential (or ungrounded) than that of Hans Morgenthau, who simply asserted a

psychological drive to justify the inescapable reality of dominance:

The tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations, to the state. On the family level, the typical conflict between the mother-in-law and her child's spouse is in its essence a struggle for power, the defense of an established power position against the attempt to establish a new one. As such it foreshadows the conflict on the international scene between the policies of the status quo and the policies of imperialism. (Morgenthau, 1985, p. 39)

While the reason that states face this imperative to dominate and struggle has become more sophisticated, whether explained psychologically or structurally (Waltz, 1979; Molloy, 2006), it remains a view from a very particular viewpoint, from the perspective of established and conservative power – as it gives its (sometimes ambiguous) blessing to the given reality of dominance – no matter how fervently this politics of preservation is denied.

In politics, the belief that certain facts are unalterable or certain trends irresistible commonly reflects a lack of desire or lack of interest to change or resist them. The impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist is one of the most certain and most curious lessons of political science. Consistent realism excludes four things which appear to be essential ingredients of all effective political thinking: a finite goal, an emotional appeal, a right of moral judgment and a ground for action. (Carr, 1964, p. 89)

Despite the fact that Carr is consistently upheld as a paradigmatic realist (Wilson, 2000), his critique gets to the nub of the matter. When realists claim that utopians refuse to engage with the reality of the world they are themselves tilting at windmills. No one is anti-real; the problem with statist realism is that it takes a particular world as the world that is and, without acknowledging the fact, gives that world its blessing, judging the world of dominance to be a world we should accept.⁴

At its base the utopian impulse is a belief in the necessity of a new reality, not a dreamy idealism that cannot countenance the relations and structures of power that define international politics. This belief in the necessity of a new reality requires identification with a reality other than that of dominance in two ways. First, to endeavour to change the world is to believe that reality can be changed, that the order of things is protean – it is a social ontology that is incompatible with realism's focus on merely cyclical change and the persistence of basic drives and structures. This is what the

standard realist critique rejects in utopian thinking, but utopianism also begins from a different reality. The utopian impulse draws its inspiration from dissatisfaction with the reality of dominance, judging it to be wanting. This leads to the identification of a reality of resistance, which looks to conditions of deprivation, uncertainty, and danger to justify opposition and coordinated efforts for social change. This critical and active approach to world politics is not, however, detached from the world, is not blind to reality – at least not necessarily – it is opposed to the reality of dominance, judges the conditions of the world to be wanting, and rejects the counsel of powerful actors to have patience, to manage transitions and not upset the order of things too much.

The calls for Egyptian protesters or for those expressing solidarity to be realistic were not calls to be prudential, accurate and thorough, but to respect the boundaries of the reality of dominance, to avoid knocking out the walls or pulling up the flooring in the house that power built. Robert Fisk (2011) is no less realistic in his analysis of the US response to Egypt, he just has the good sense to know that the situation in Egypt is disgraceful and the chance to help those women and men who bravely faced down the batons, knives and shields of state-agents should have been embraced because it would help to create a better reality. Commenting on Obama's handling of the situation he says:

Had he rallied to the kind of democracy he preached here in Cairo six months after his investiture, had he called for the departure of this third-rate dictator a few days ago, the crowds would have been carrying US as well as Egyptian flags, and Washington would have done the impossible: it would have transformed the now familiar hatred of America (Afghanistan, Iraq, the "war on terror", etc) into the more benign relationship which the US enjoyed in the balmy 1920s and 1930s and, indeed, despite its support for the creation of Israel, into the warmth that existed between Arab and American into the 1960s. But no. All this was squandered in just seven days of weakness and cowardice in Washington – a gutlessness so at odds with the courage of the millions of Egyptians who tried to do what we in the West always demanded of them: to turn their dust-bowl dictatorships into democracies. They supported democracy. We supported "stability", "moderation", "restraint", "firm" leadership (Saddam Hussein-lite) soft "reform" and obedient Muslims. This failure of moral leadership in the West – under the false fear of "Islamisation" – may prove to be one of the greatest tragedies of the modern Middle East. (Fisk, 2011)

Realists have no exclusive claim to the analysis of power, no special providence over

prudence, and the statist claim to represent reality is never its own justification. Until we study world politics from the perspective of those dominated at least as much as from the perspective of those who dominate, our study will remain a course book for statist and imperial management.

The rebellion in Egypt was an opportunity for the Obama administration to help bring about a momentous change in the dynamics of world politics – not for a political victory, but to make a contribution to the transformation of a problematic reality into a better one. Does anything justify his failure to act? I don't think so. What explains this failure? I would suggest, at least in part, that it stems from the difficulty of escaping the reality of dominance – to see beyond the framing that prioritises state interests, stability and order as bulwarks against the constant threat of international anarchy, and which sanctified indifference to the suffering and aspirations of the Egyptian protestors among US and other western political elites.

The hypocrisy of western liberals is breathtaking: they publicly supported democracy, and now, when the people revolt against the tyrants on behalf of secular freedom and justice, not on behalf of religion, they are all deeply concerned. Why concern, why not joy that freedom is given a chance? Today, more than ever, Mao Zedong's old motto is pertinent: "There is great chaos under heaven – the situation is excellent." (Žižek, 2011)

The Egyptian people were able to face down Mubarak's apparatus of violence and make a start on putting an end to "corruption, injustice, poverty, and unemployment" through their effort to bring about a better reality with more equality and democracy – to support the state or the cause of order over those vulnerable bodies and brave people, even if it is with reticence, is not realism, but moral incompetence.

Notes

¹ For a useful timeline of recent events in the North Africa and the Middle East see Blight & Pulham (2011).

² Crowley repeatedly calls for restraint on both sides, despite the obvious fact that it was Mubarak's various forces – army, police and hired thugs – that were carrying out the most serious violence. Further demonstrating the administration's unwillingness to condemn Mubarak, Crowley indicates that the US state department's key concern was the blocking of Facebook and Twitter, rather than security services firing into the crowds with rubber-coated bullets and the illegal imprisonment of protestors – and of course completely missing the economic hardship and deprivation that were central to instigating the protests.

- ³ In International Relations, those who identify as realists are more accurately described as state-centric, pessimistic, convinced of the necessity of separating political analysis from morality and primarily concerned with conflict. The particular aspect of realism I am critical of here is actually shared by most mainstream figures in International Relations who focus on the reality experienced by political and other social elites; this would include contemporary liberal-institutionalism, classical and neo-realism and the English School, particularly those identified as “pluralists”.
- ⁴ The acceptance of the reality of dominance is, however, complex – as often as not reflecting resignation rather than an embrace of hegemonic or imperial ambition. Morgenthau, in particular, has been singled out in recent years as a realist with a critical streak that who sought to preserve an ethical element to International Relations scholarship – see Williams (2004).

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