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(doi: 10.2383/36420)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, dicembre 2011

Ente di afferenza:

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New Media and Collective Action in the Middle East

Can Sociological Research Help Avoiding Orientalist Traps?

by Armando Salvatore

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Sociological Orientalisms

Since after Max Weber, sociology has not been immune from orientalist bias concerning the normative irreducibility of Western modern experience and achievements [Salvatore 1996]. Yet practitioners of sociology in particular and social sciences in general have continuously struggled to avoid reproducing stereotyped images of the Orient and particularly of the Muslim world, like those inherited from philologically oriented Islamic Studies. However, the presupposition itself that sociology deals primarily with modern societies and that the Islamic Orient falls outside the purview of modernization processes makes any “sociology of Islam” appear as dangerously tributary to the images, if not the categories, of old-style Orientalism [Turner 1974; Turner 1978; Stauth 1993; Salvatore 1997]. Sociology strives to transcend Orientalism but in this effort risks to produce distinctively “sociological orientalisms,” i.e. biased images of the Islamic Orient, constructed this time with genuinely sociological categories, whose use even risk to aggravate the distance from the object of study, as well as the power relations inherent in the cognitive tension between “subject” and “object.”

This problem becomes even more acute with regard to the role of media in the public sphere. Not by chance the immediate follow-up to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was a book he dedicated to *Covering Islam* [Said 1978; Said 1981]. In this work Said indicted Western media’s distorted coverage of the Islamic world, usually depicted as

a heap of deficits and lacks of conditions for producing modern societies and polities. Interestingly and as if responding to Said's call for a less biased coverage, after the rise of the web 2.0 and within the emerging blogosphere, the role of so-called bridge bloggers from the Middle East, writing mostly in English, started a few years ago to help redressing orientalist stereotypes while talking about the problems of the region from an "insider" perspective to a largely Western public. Yet the fact that such bloggers were mostly young, educated, secular, middle class, Western-looking and ultimately "liberal" paradoxically worked to reinforce Western bias at a deeper level about who are the exclusive actors of a potentially radical change in the supposedly "closed societies" of the Middle East.¹ In other words, they reinforced Western ignorance or indifference towards the plurality of social actors in the region, including those active on the emerging platforms of the web 2.0. Although the work of such bridge bloggers oriented to a Western public has been without doubt highly meritorious, they hardly represented the hub of the emergent and increasingly effervescent local and regional blogospheres [Siapera 2011, 47].

However, first with the protests in Iran that followed the contested presidential elections of 2009 and then with the "Arab Spring" of 2011 came a major test of the resilience of orientalist preconceptions within the Western public at large, and also within Western academia. Mass demonstrations raising the banners of rights and democracy against violent and authoritarian regimes cannot be easily explained on the basis of inherited stereotypes about the Islamic Orient. It is here that the role of the blogosphere and of social networks as factors of mobilization comes more fully into play [Salvatore 2011a]. And it is here once more that the focus on "new media," instead of helping break up orientalist bias, might provide them a new nest, this time located right at the core of the latest discussions within the sociology of media and communication. This development is reflected in the idea itself of a "Facebook revolution" that has been coined and propagated to define the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, as much as the Iranian protests of 2009 were celebrated as a "Twitter revolution."

According to Greg Burris, this type of interpretation has configured what he acidly dubbed the new coming of "[Lawrence of E-rabia](#)." While the Oxford educated British archaeologist, poet and army officer T. E. Lawrence became the key character to explain to the Western public the abrupt "Great Arab Revolt" against alleged Ottoman despotism during World War I, now the celebrations of the cathartic role of

¹ In this symposium I am using the familiar geopolitical label "Middle East" instead of the more technically correct "MENA region," designating the wider area stretching from the Middle East proper to North Africa, and therefore including Tunisia and Egypt.

new media in denouncing the abuses of authoritarian rule and mobilizing wide sectors of the populations of North Africa and the Middle East denies social movements and protesting crowds an autonomous collective agency and political subjectivity. Ergo, modernity comes once more to the Middle East from the outside, from the West. With the only difference that, according to Burris' provocation, this time Lawrence "came armed not with a camel and a keffiyeh, but with Facebook friend requests" [Burris 2011].

This is why, while the occidental management of media narrations on the Middle East was certainly impacted, if not disrupted, by the revolutionary events [Chambers 2011], a resilient capacity to reconstruct old orientalist bias, this time elegantly clothed in fashionable sociological garbs, has been also at play. While the wave of obsession with Islam in connection with terrorism that precedes 9/11 had not surprisingly bolstered the bluntest orientalist visions (as witnessed by the success of the book *What Went Wrong?* by Bernard Lewis, one of the masters of Twentieth century's orientalist narratives), it is more astonishing that the events of 2009-2011, instead of contributing to sharply reverse this narrative, as it should have been expected, have created a new fertile terrain for sociological orientalisms.

Perhaps the fact itself that it has been in coincidence with these events and with a workshop that I had organized long before the "Arab Spring" (but that took place when the revolution was just starting to gain momentum [Salvatore 2011b]) that Sociologica manifested an interest for a symposium on the topic, shows the specific conditions under which events in the so-called Islamic Orient might attract the attention of the scholarly community of sociologists. These conditions include, first, that global media steadily focus, over a longer period of time, on momentous events in this region. Second, perhaps, that in the eye of mainstream sociologists such events unfolding in the Middle East stop to appear as simply typical of "Islamic oriental societies" and so sinking in familiar orientalist sands because sociologically uninteresting, and start to look as, at the very least, intriguingly twisted manifestations of wider, perhaps even global entanglements within late modernity, and as such of genuine sociological interest.

Ultimately, therefore, the best confutation of the fears of a kind of neo-orientalism supported by the "new media" hype which have been aired by Burris and others has to start with the hard research on the ground conducted by those scholars, like the ones who contribute to this symposium, who have been analyzing the impact of a variety of new media and particularly of the blogosphere and social networks over several years. In this way they have shunned the temptation of neo-orientalist shortcuts, have navigated through the ebbs and flows of sociological attention to the

Middle East, and have finally brought to fruition both their training as social scientists and their deep knowledge of the region's complex social fabric.

Yet even in-depth sociological analyses have to cope with wider interpretive schemes that the actors themselves incorporate in their own identity and that are certainly at least in part a reflection of the Western gaze. It cannot be doubted that online activism has been accompanied over the last decade if not earlier by a deep fascination, by actors and observers alike, with "innovation" as a key to develop new spaces for social connectedness. The meaning of this connectedness and its political but also economic potentials, have remained largely undetermined, so that "innovation" has been largely left representing an empty eye-catcher [Della Ratta and Valeriani 2011]. With regard to the Middle East, this development occurred in the context of permanently rising expectations in the West about the democratizing and modernizing role of new media and web 2.0 platforms. In light of what appeared to be the rustproof coating of authoritarian regimes in the region, the risk of overestimating the power of new media was higher there than elsewhere [Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Armbrust 2007], in spite of the fact that upbeat readings of their role have been sometimes followed by moments of sober reassessments, not untypically by the same authors [Anderson 2009].

More specifically, several rather journalistic reports on the sudden emergence of local blogospheres in the Middle East which have appeared since 2005 in the regional press, often contrasted blogs to mainstream media, considered at the service of states and authoritarian governments. Blogs were instead seen to provide the spaces and avenues through which the culturally and politically hegemonic patterns of conservative social life could be challenged on a number of levels, from claiming freedom in shaping life forms to attempts to make the authoritarian regimes more responsive especially towards the problems and aspirations of the "youth" of the region [Taki 2011, 91]. The problem here was, and is, that Western parameters of "open" vs. "closed societies," which part of sociology has contributed to legitimize if not to build, have been to some extent inhaled (though not always uncritically played out) by the local actors and observers themselves.

Such simplifying and dichotomous views have not been of much help in the necessary task of dissolving the ideological curtain about the purportedly "inherent" democratizing power of media innovations. Since after the 1960s with the "New Communalists" of the San Francisco Bay Area – who collapsed their seminal cyberculture into the rampant counterculture of the decade – automatically equating new media with youth, innovation and democratization has been a dubious move, if not politically at least sociologically. This is due to the fact that the working of decentralized networks since after that time did not necessarily challenge, but actually of-

ten mimic the configuration of the strongest power nodes of economic and military systems, notably with regard to the way these have been repositioning themselves after World War II both at national levels and on the global stage [Dean 2010, 19-22].

Such an easy temptation of entering rather self-referential and self-complacent interpretive short-circuits is also reflected in the way one of the most acute observers of countercultural movements in the region, [Mark LeVine, wrote in October 2011](#) on the website of Al-Jazeera English on the occasion of the death of Steve Jobs that the “creative DNA” of the “Apple aura” has prompted countercultural work everywhere in the world and especially among the young artists and activists in the Middle East with whom he has engaged for almost a decade now: “If Macs gave the illusion of making a difference in New York or Los Angeles, my own experience of them in the Middle East hewed more authentically to the narrative Jobs scripted” [LeVine 2011]. Lawrence of E-rabia takes here, not surprisingly, the face of the quasi-martyr Steve Jobs. My remark here is not intended to ridicule gifted observers like LeVine (a close friend of mine, by the way, who candidly and boldly doubles his scholarly competences with a global activist profile), but just to evidence the ineffable resilience of unilateral ideas of innovation and creativity and their capacity to trivialize complex sociological issues concerning the relation between new media and collective action in the Middle East.

This neo-orientalist backlash is even more perplexing in the case just quoted since LeVine is known for having stressed ever and again during 2011 the multiplicity of actors and motivations intervening in the revolution, and the latter’s irreducibility to the makings of young, educated, Westernized, middle class liberals or leftists. Yet this is also the interpretative blind alley that pushed other actors and observers, like e.g. Tariq Ramadan, to radically question the intentions and authenticity of the young revolutionaries and so build a caricature-like counternarrative. In several public and media appearances during 2011 and also at the beginning of his latest book [Ramadan 2011], the leading speaker for “European Islam,” otherwise known for laying a stress on the civic engagement and participatory politics of Muslim actors, has pointed the finger towards how social media and the tech-savvy youth might have been maneuvered from outside. While we might acknowledge that Ramadan’s intent has been to frame a broader picture of the conditions for the revolutions (which he insistently dubbed mere “uprisings”) within complex societies in continual upheaval, the most tangible and striking outcome of his discourse is an upside-down travesty of just the image of Lawrence of E-rabia.

Touching the Ground Beneath the “New Media” Hype

Of course stressing all this is not intended to diminish the importance of the continual work of the proliferating cohorts of social scientists dealing with new media in the societies of the Middle East. They have been showing the growing importance of such media and analyzing their working, while many if not most among them have been keeping vigilant against falling into orientalist traps. Yet as emphasized by Albrecht Hofheinz in a recent essay commenting on the events of 2011, cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics have stubbornly argued about social media's effectiveness while too often less than systematic research was being conducted, over the last decade or so, as we might add here, in the shadow of the ideological conditioning of the mutual gaze between the West and the Middle East [Hofheinz 2011, 11]. This is why the launch of the most serious, comprehensive yet often complex research projects on the subject like those included in a recently published collection [Salvatore 2011b] and in this Sociologica symposium goes back at least to the mid-2000s or slightly later and witnesses a variety of rising forms of online activity and activism related both to everyday life and to resistance to authoritarian and violent regimes, while they also take into account and discount the risk of the both global and regional new media hype.

Not by chance the pieces collected in this symposium, which by necessity are, at large, works in progress, provide a much needed anthropological and socio-political depth in exploring the various degree of success and failure of the revolutions attempted or ongoing in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iran. Research on which these studies are based started well before the “Facebook revolution” of 2011, for the simple reason that they represent longer term scholarly engagements with the social reality and the social media of these countries and have been conducted by scholars with a double competence, i.e. both disciplinary and cultural-linguistic, with regard to the societies investigated. Predictably, if extended or completed in the future such research projects might be best positioned to refute the global hype that has so obliquely facilitated the resurgence of reductionist short-cuts and orientalist bias in reading events in the region.

The symposium starts with a piece by [Augusto Valeriani](#) which immediately clarifies that the networks that mattered most in the revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt were neither Facebook nor Twitter but more “traditional”, offline ones, from universities through mosques to trade unions, and that satellite TV stations like Al-Jazeera played the most important role among all media at work. He argues, however, that the web 2.0 had a profound impact on how all networks and media functioned, not just singularly but in their mutual relations, during the weeks of

mobilization and upheaval. This impact was built over time and did not just magically emerge in the shortest term as a Lawrence of E-rabia suddenly turning apathy and acquiescence into effervescence and collective action.

As reminded by the guru of the power of networks [Manuel Castells in an interview](#) he gave just after the start of the uprisings, the key issue in facilitating the turning of mere connectedness into mobilization might be the density and speed of the latter, which allows the network actors using social media to resist repressive measures and strike back [Castells 2011]. Yet in order to avoid making this a theoretical tautology (i.e., networks win if they perform effectively and fast enough as networks), the analyst needs to look more carefully into the milieus that have the potential to generate this density and speed as something more than a merely technically winning situation. In his article Valeriani is very outspoken in showing on the basis of a multiyear field research conducted in Tunisia and Egypt which he started well before the events of the “Arab Spring” how the practices and skills of linking, sharing and remixing – the vectors of the web 2.0 as an overarching network of social relationships – characterize not just a specific milieu culture, but empower a distinctive, emerging elite of “tech-savvies.” While these actors acquired their ITC competencies either in the profit or in the non-profit sector, a common identity was formed that Valeriani sees, in spite potentially diverging socio-economic interests, as basically typical of how “activists” are defined in social movement theory. Their specific skills, which ultimately coincide with their legitimacy, consist in facilitating an effective connection among the above mentioned “traditional,” offline networks and so in preventing repressive regimes from keeping them isolated from each other and therefore condemned to political impotence.

The outcome is a fast process of wedding a “cyberculture” oriented to “remixing” to a strategy for street politics, a potential (civic) war machine. Clearly there must be more at work than simply “brokering” connectedness. Valeriani elaborates on the notion of “bridge leadership” drawn from social movement studies and stresses the underexplored “horizontal” dimension of the networks, “where weak ties and strong ties coexist.” No doubt, he maintains, the fact of being exposed to common repressive policies enhances both the mutual trust among network actors and their capacity to organize horizontally. Paradoxically perhaps, it was the repressive strategies themselves of the authoritarian regimes that made the tech-savvy activists utterly democratic, not just ideologically, but in practice. The repressive techniques consisting in trying to isolate these emerging elite from each other did not work as expected. Actually, the opposite became possible, namely mobilization occurred, horizontally and transversally, even if only isolated parts of the strong networks (like unions, universities and mosques) were able to respond to calls and participate in protests

– thanks to the quasi-professional brokers of connectedness. In other words, it is not that most of these activists were not isolated, as insistently (and quite correctly) stressed in that part of the scholarly literature that has emphasized over the last few years the shortcomings of online means for political mobilization. Yet a merely communicative (or even just “narrative”) type of bridging was able to offset sociological isolation and become an asset in critical situations. Online “community managers” learned over time (indeed in just a few years, but certainly not in a few weeks) how to best leverage on this asset. No doubt the support of mass media like satellite TV Al-Jazeera enormously magnified both the narrative and its mobilizing potential.

Yet as highlighted by [Henri Onodera](#) in the second piece of this symposium (an ethnography of a group of young Egyptian bloggers who have been publicly active since after the mid-2000s), this dynamics promoted the chances for collective deliberation by starting exactly from witnessing and publishing street protests and the violent repression perpetrated by the security apparatuses [see also Hirschkind 2011]. Deliberation went decidedly offline also through simple devices, like printing key blogposts and their visual documentations and distributing them on the street as leaflets. No doubt effectiveness was doubled by an emerging shared consciousness among the young activists that social media reflected a new common political identity in spite of a variety of class backgrounds and degrees of instruction. The effectiveness of deliberation was therefore supported by an agential capacity largely bereft of ideological articulations and so of complications and occasions for rifts and operational impairment. Paradoxically, politicization in terms of effectiveness worked through a sort of de-politicization measured in terms of a conscious distance from ideological sophistication.

Yet the prevalence of immediacy and efficacy was also a reflection of a mutation, if compared to militancy in more “traditional” networks and organizations, of the power-knowledge equation. Action now represented, more than a form of resistance, an alternative way to construct a radically participative and knowledge-based citizenship in an increasingly violent authoritarian framework. As shown by Onodera, the labeling of such activities as “citizen journalism” is not rejected by the actors, yet in the Egyptian context it defies conventional definitions and becomes the key nexus that brings to fruition earlier breakthroughs against the monopoly of state mass media which became effective since after the 1970s thanks to a variety of “small” new media: most importantly, the cassette-tapes produced and sold in mosque circles. In many ways, this original yet elusive articulation of citizen journalism is as more powerful as it successfully resists being hijacked by the international circuits of NGOs along with

their singular “civilizing” vocabulary, intended to educate the citizens to universal principles of liberal democracy.

Overall, social media have had exactly the merit of facilitating and amplifying highly mobile patterns of connectedness among people on a much higher scale than allowed by previously available platforms. It was everyday connectedness that allowed them to rapidly mobilize a variety of actors and networks if the need arose: up to ignite veritable revolutions, or at least regime changes. The opportunity for entertainment and “chatting,” the idle side of connectedness, have proved to be, within contingent situations saturated with legitimate rage, a more powerful potential for mobilization than the traditional means of organized political groups and parties. The divide between the private and public spheres was not subverted, but substantially redesigned. The idea that the private is at least potentially public and political became true beyond the limited reach of tiny intellectual vanguards eager to politicize, since after the 1960s, their life forms.

[Enrico De Angelis’ article](#), the third in this symposium, whose arduous topic is to explore what is different in Syria compared to Tunisia and Egypt, points straightly to the key question: what is the type of new social connectedness that can alter the modes of social mobilization and facilitate deep changes like those that occurred in the two North African countries but do not seem to come to maturation in Syria? He identifies the key factor in a “cyber-cascades governance” of street action and media coverage initiated and to some extent managed by the bloggers. The most ambivalent element in the analysis remains the identification of a “communal ethos” among the activists, which inevitably reminds us of their just mentioned ancestors in the 1960s’ San Francisco Bay Area. The novelty in the present developments is the fact that now activists are clearly identified as producers-consumers, and therefore are not disconnected but integrated, in one way or another, into the corporate world of internet. The ambivalence has now shifted from a distorted self-perception to a more reflexive sociological profile that many actors would themselves accept and acknowledge. Also the stress on the importance of street activism and face-to-face meetings as schools for turning the virtual networking into potentially political and insurrectional avenues contributes to dissolving the myth of a self-entrenched countercultural activism. Time-honored sociological categories like group organization and even mutual trust resurface here and are helpful in the analysis.

Yet according to De Angelis this is exactly what makes the Syrian case different from the other ones. In the middle of political upheavals bordering on a civil war increasingly resembling the one that took place in Libya in 2011, internet activists are yet too isolated, their networks are too fragile and amorphous, and they can become the easy targets of the repressive measures of the regime. Nonetheless,

the communicative effectiveness of highly motivated individual activists in spreading information also to satellite TVs like Al-Jazeera just by going out with a laptop and a camera at a high personal risk, should not be underestimated. Here the counterpart to fragmentation is also in the fact that there are no virtuous mechanisms of selection of the overabundance of information circulated, no emerging internet elites acting as managers, brokers and filters. In Syria, unlike elsewhere, the “Babel objection” to the capacity of social media to turn connectedness into mobilization becomes tangible: what we get according to De Angelis is “a flawed networked public sphere where deliberation becomes very difficult to attain” and whose most visible phenomenon is “a war of videos.”

Unsettling Key Sociological Categories: Collective Action, Political Subjectivity, Public Sphere

In the fourth piece in this symposium on the politics of Facebook in Iran by [Babak Rahimi](#), the author delves deeper into such paradoxes of passivism/activism and fragmentation/cohesion and provides an even more complex view on the formation of common identities facilitated by social networks. He examines a dynamics of communication which radically transcends conventional ideas of collective action and leadership. Rahimi shows that the specific power of social networks lies in a type of virtuality that seems to create a permanent state of exception both vis-à-vis everyday life and with regard to the structures and chains of transmission of authority. Yet he does not see in his online observations a proof of the dissolution of the conventional workings of a public sphere along with its forms of empowerment against arbitrary rule. This is a first important insight that subverts dominant narrations of the political rise of social media in Iran which have been laying a stress on an almost one-to-one mirroring relation between collective action on the ground (both before and after the presidential elections of 2009) and a global spectatorship promoting democratic solidarity [see Hofheinz 2011]. Rahimi depicts instead a slower moving, even circular, actually carnivalesque machine of radical dissent that does not need to pass through conventional forms of mobilization and media wars and is not only largely local but almost joyously unresponsive to global gazes and expectations.

National traditions of political opposition and radical transgression are neither rejected nor bypassed but eagerly restaged in a Bakhtinian realm of parody and inversion which works as a power-defacing machine. Its immediate political effects are, by definition, impossible to measure. It is a semi-insulated, self-sufficient world

which is inevitably post-revolutionary, yet not quietist or resigned. What survives the transgression and is not deconstructed but reconstructed is connectedness itself, which stands out against the background of the emptied-out officialdom of the Islamic Republic. For sure, the Iranian state has been dosing up its opening of the social networks in general, and of Facebook in particular, based on its own priorities of reaching an optimal though shifting balance between the opposite goals of policing the web vs. showing a more liberal face. Yet the type of subtle and ineffable power game played on the social network undermines authority itself and reenacts a social dialogue that, the more it nests in virtual spaces, the more intensely it relies on elementary anthropological fundamentals: from constructing the autonomous social bond via gift-giving, ritualized exchange, and even collective ecstasy, up to virtualizing the matching “offline” sphere of social relationships, which is then liable to be folded into the inherent liminality of the former.

Liminality here, i.e. acting in the interstices between reality and fiction and walking on the thin edge between a radical privateness and an extreme publicness, teases officialdom and generates a new type of space, drawing from its subliminal presuppositions that radically bypass the public theater of sterile, yet power-saturated conventions. Understanding the alternative power potential of this as yet public space requires a radical distancing from conventional Western views of collective action and the public sphere which are too little sensitive to underlying anthropological dynamics. Based on such views, and in contrast to the world of activist bloggers and citizen journalists, no doubt the politics of Facebook described by Rahimi could appear to a distracted reader as quintessentially disengaged and as such playing into the hands of a cynical regime.

The problem was also felt in Egypt in the years preceding the revolution. As noted by Albrecht Hofheinz, by 2008, when Facebook entered the Egyptian digital public sphere thus far plagued by an excess of blogging and the dominance of a few elite activists, the new social network was first singled out as the epitome of disengaged talk and networking [*ibidem*, 24-25]. The previously mentioned “obsession with the new” in internet evidenced by Hofheinz was no longer matched by an as strong obsession with the political. Clearly Facebook, while promising to open new horizons of participation by providing a wider networking to fragmented bonds of private friendship, did not represent an exact reflection of what political activism in the public sphere was assumed to be. While the blogosphere proper seemed to be afflicted by a gulf between a large majority of unknown personal bloggers and a minority of prominent activists who also drew the attention of international media and were rapidly gaining the status of new media stars, Facebook promised to fill exactly that gulf. The global social network represented, in that context, a possible way out of

the impasse, the technological innovation suitable to the “next generation” of citizen activists, not only because more “community-oriented,” but for being able to further reducing the costs for building potentially efficient networks.

Therefore a simultaneous reading of several pieces in this symposium should allow us to hypothesize that the everydayness of communication not only in Facebook but in all social networks, including its ritualized or even carnivalesque forms, often carries with it a subversive potential irrespective of the intention of the network actors. Nonetheless the dialectics of hope for change and disappointment for an insufficient innovative capacity which has punctually resurfaced with the emergence of every “new medium” is there to stay. After all, as also shown by this symposium, various authoritarian regimes in the region decided quite early to attempt to discretely control and manipulate such social media rather than adopting outright policing measures. The mixed results of this approach are themselves proofs of the high unpredictability that surrounds the use and impact of any new medium, especially when the exchange combines a dimension of openness and one of wild asymmetry among potential and actual participants, and a continual and unresolved tension between display and loss of subjectivity, narcissism and sociability, random excess and targeted strategy: the main casualty being the notion itself of “everydayness,” that is absorbed into a much more plastic, yet often elusive notion of collective action.

This is less surprising if one looks more deeply at the prevalence of the immanent intensity of media over well-profiled subjectivities. This imbalance has affected the perception itself of reality, as shown by [Setrag Manoukian](#) both in the piece that concludes this symposium and in an earlier study [Manoukian 2010]. In his analysis of the Iranian protests of June 2009, which followed claims by the opposition of a stolen electoral win by Ahmadinejad, Manoukian suggests how recent events should be linked to the revolution in Iran of 1978-1979, when the crowds “marked the definitive crisis of the people as the referent of the secularist and authoritarian monarchy” and “oppositional forms of identification took different configurations,” whereby Islam and secularized form of modern politics could finally engage a new mutual relationship [*ibidem*, 244]. In his piece in this symposium, Manoukian further argues that the revolution was important for translating Shii practices, discourses and messianic expectations into a secularized nation-state project. Yet it was the failure itself, quite predictably, of meeting such expectations which conjured up a mutation of the political space underlying the rhetoric of “the people” and the overlaying nation-state form. New media have played an increasing important role in Iran ever since because this mutation has generated a flourishing market of images, largely produced and exchanged on internet, which are like the living (and therefore con-

sumable) ghosts of those expectations, ultimately condensing into a distinctive type of political temporality.

Here collective action, in its increasing complexity, seems to dissolve into an ongoing mutation of political temporality aided by new media platforms like Youtube and the entire chain of production of footage, videos and their underlying (or overlaying) texts. Manoukian reminds us that the famous Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf saw crowds on the street as being at the same time “commanders, defenders, martyrs and journalists” [*ibidem*, 247]. Multitasking is neither empowering nor distracting. It just extends across virtual and real spaces in a mutual mimesis of gestures and movements. The passage from connectedness to mobilization is not just a question of time, as Castells seems to purport, but a question of often unpredictable mutations of what we mean by “media:” whereby it cannot be determined if the web and the blogosphere anticipate the crowd movements or the crowds imitate the web.

Clearly while the protests of 2009 against the official results of the presidential elections evidenced the potential political impact of internet and social media, the piece of Manoukian is precious in helping shifting our analysis radically away from a sterile debate about the pros and cons of these media within processes of democratic mobilization. With it we are released from the state of ambivalent suspension as to the effectiveness of social media within collective action in which we got somewhat trapped after reading the complex and partly surprising pieces of De Angelis and Rahimi, which followed the decidedly more upbeat diagnoses released by Valeriani and Onodera. Yet, as Manoukian astutely demonstrates, we are released from suspension only by normalizing it into a permanent deadlock, a “zone of indistinction” (a concept he borrows from Giorgio Agamben). Within this state, words, images and gestures are processed by the social media machine just to be consumed (in all senses of the word) and so being able to reconstitute a diaphanous political subjectivity and a self-recurring collective action. The resulting, disfigured type of “agency” bypasses conventional notions of either democratization or authoritarian repression, which if kept intact as categories in the processes and events here examined risk to provide yet another benchmark of sociological orientalism.

While there is no ready-made recipe to avoid the trap represented by proliferating such sociological orientalisms, this symposium is an attempt to zigzag around the trap with a variety of maps in progress at a crucial time juncture when falling into the trap once more would probably mean to aggravate the bias of Western conceits. The dire consequence would be an irreversible dissipation of the conceptual value of Western-originated, sociological categories themselves (including collective action, political subjectivity, the public sphere, and, last and really not least, “media”) and the ultimate consecration of the orientalist question as a pure issue of power, bereft

of any knowledge map whatsoever. The scholars who contributed to this symposium and who observed and analyzed the revolutionary events in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Iran through a variety of means and methods, have not only helped us to avoid falling in the trap but are also educating us to being open to ever new surprises, not just empirically but also conceptually. E.g., the “citizen journalism,” which Henri Onodera in his piece characterizes, in the Egyptian case, as a locally appropriated form of a global genre, and therefore as journalism by “the people” exposing “real” sovereign power and its abuses, appears according to Manoukian as the result of an unprecedented fusion of reporting and protesting which can only be understood by observing the inherent multiplicity and evanescence of subject positions. Therefore, and quite paradoxically, the practice of citizen journalism in Egypt and Iran inherently deconstructs the notion itself of citizenship, with consequences that stretch well beyond the two countries or the region. This outcome should not be equated to a loss of political subjectivity in a Western, Foucauldian sense but rather to its permanent, kaleidoscopic refraction: not a big surprise if, as suggested by Rahimi, the virtual is, potentially, the reflection itself of the Real after traditional and modern symbolizations have imploded [see Dean 2010]; almost its (this time, Spinozian) *potentia*, which is simultaneously behind and beyond any politics.

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New Media and Collective Action in the Middle East

Can Sociological Research Help Avoiding Orientalist Traps?

Abstract: Since Max Weber, sociology has not been immune from orientalist bias concerning the normative irreducibility of Western modern achievements. This problem becomes more acute with regard to the role of media in the public sphere. The article first looks at Western perceptions of the protests in Iran that followed the contested presidential elections of 2009 and at the “Arab Spring” of 2011 (and particularly at the role of the blogosphere and of social networks as factors of mobilization) as a major test of the resilience of orientalist preconceptions. The author further argues how the focus on “new media” within collective action and revolutions, instead of helping break up orientalist bias, might have provided them a new ground, located right at the core of the sociology of media and communication, and resulting in trivializing the much more complex types of agency at work in the uprisings. The article concludes by showing how the studies collected in this symposium not only help us avoiding this neo-orientalist trap but go one step further in problematizing taken for granted, sociological notions of collective action, the public sphere and even “media.”

Keywords: Orientalism, collective action, new media, public sphere, revolution.

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