

An "Archive of Counter-Insurgency": Subalternity and the Syrian Uprising

This article is based on a chapter in the author's forthcoming PhD dissertation.

Long considered a "Kingdom of Silence," in the concise formulation of Riad al-Turk and others, Syria and its uprising provide an interesting setting to examine subaltern politics and agency in revolt. Existing networks of exchange and cooperation that operated in marginal, liminal zones – made necessary by the total control the regime exercised in traditional civic space (unions, universities, religious fora, etc.) – served as the basis for contentious action, with smugglers and saboteurs the best equipped and most experienced at undermining the regime's repressive apparatus. The broader ecosystem surrounding these illicit economies – the "marginal" villages and neighborhoods furthest from the loci of power – thus became the incubators of revolt.

To learn about the most recent, or "post-modern" genus of revolt (Carrigan, 1995), it behooves us to study this relatively well-documented experience that exists in living memory, even if it now appears to have been extinguished by repression from the regime and its regional allies, the emergence of new transnational Salafi-jihadist actors, and the militarization of the uprising itself.

The complete closure of Syria's civic space over the course of Hafiz al-Asad's 30-year rule led to a fragmented society and few opportunities for the forging of social ties and solidarity, typically built through unions, universities, religious institutions and the media. Each of these were coopted and brought to heel by Asad's increasingly insular and paranoid autocracy, with ideological obedience further ensured via an extensive network of patronage through a large public sector, subsidies on education and basic foodstuffs, and a massive surveillance state (Wedeen, 1999).

His death in 2000 led to the (controversial, even within loyalist circles) inheritance of the presidency by his son, Bashar, whose first decade of rule engendered several important changes. The most important of these was a program of rampant economic liberalization, severing the social contract between peasants, workers and the state (the backbone of his father's legitimacy) and establishing a new alliance of Alawite officers and Sunni businessmen, with the prototypical figure of this being the formerly all-powerful Rami Makhlouf.

Bashar's reforms, followed by a severe drought in 2006–8, precipitated the uprising in the rural south. The Hauran district and its capital, Dara'a, had until then been known as "the reservoir of the Ba'ath." But fractures were visible from as early as the 1970s, when Hafiz's neo-patrimonial state outsourced "much of its development program to foreign firms and contractors, fueling a growing linkage between the state and private capital" (Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, p. 86).

The Ba'athist Development Drive and the Seeds of Revolution

Joseph Daher points out that "the geography of the centers of revolt – in northwest Idlib and southwest Dara'a, and other medium-sized towns, as well as more rural areas – shows a pattern: all were historical strongholds of the Ba'ath Party, having benefited from the policies of agricultural reforms in the sixties" (Daher, 2018). The Baathist program may have contained the seeds of its own destruction.

Hafez al-Asad's modernization drive "brought rural populations under his control, as entire villages were flooded when dams were built to increase irrigation capabilities, peasants were contracted to farm and given quotas for their yields, and technological innovations replaced traditional agricultural methods" (Manna, 2017). These steps were part of the era's global "Green Revolution," whose architects imagined that a profit-based model of agriculture would stem the rise of communism in the Third World. (James C. Scott also relates the fractious encounter between Malay peasants and Green Revolution-style mechanization in his 1985 *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, pp. 147–64).

The mixed legacy of this modernization drive is embodied in the figure of Syrian cinema's most prominent documentarian, Omar Amiralay. His early work was produced by Syrian state television and sought to (admirably) document government development programs. But his 1977 film *al-Dajaj* highlights the lost promise of state-led agricultural development, where farmers encouraged to raise chickens in a rural area are soon abandoned by the government amidst overproduction and a plague among the animals (Amiralay, 1977).

The Role of the "Marginal Population"

So who were these dispossessed, who sparked a revolution that was almost impossible to conceive of beforehand? The definition of "marginal population" offered by Carlos Vélaz-Ibañez's important study of central urban Mexico relates to how they are "unwanted and 'redundant'" (Vélaz-Ibañez, 1983, p. 92) in the face of government development strategies – much as Syria's rural workers faced the removal of agricultural subsidies in 2005, and urban workers suffered the consequences of neoliberal reforms, including sharp increases in poverty, unemployment, and social inequalities. (The recent protests in Suwayda were also initially a response to the removal of fuel subsidies).

Though it appears clear that the most marginalized workers had the most to gain from a revolution, and the most fervent contentious activity came from peripheral zones like Dara'a, Kurdish areas in the northeast, and the shanty towns around Damascus, the revolt's documentary record is dominated by media activists, intellectuals and the urban middle class.

This incongruity is reflected in the dubious consensus that has formed around the date of the Syrian Revolution's beginning. It is typically given as March 15, 2011, the date of a sparsely-attended "Day of Rage" protest in Damascus that was promoted by Facebook activists, rather than March 18, 2011, the date when thousands of working-class Sunnis marched from Dara'a's 'Omari Mosque following the abduction of 15 teenagers who had scrawled anti-regime graffiti.

Ahmed Abazeid notes how the March 15 protest fit the narrative of tech-savvy youth imitating the "Twitter revolutions" in Tunisia and Egypt. "March 18, on the other hand," he writes, refers to a narrative of the "tough and compassionate fabric" of "local society" facing oppression by treating the regime as though it were "a foreign element," and in turn violently repressed. This narrative further relies upon the "battlefield" ethos attached to an "innate moral ... solidarity" in rural or tribal settings, which were to lead from mass protests to eventual armed insurrection (Abazeid, 2014).

Why does the popular memory of the Syrian revolution tend to reproduce the March 15 narrative? This presumably has something to do with the manner in which Western commentators identify with perspectives they find legible – the "secular, liberal, and (above all) English-speaking opposition in particular," as Aron Lund observes (Lund, 2021). Furthermore, it raises questions as to the choices the

Syrian intellectual class and broader commentariat has made regarding representation of the uprising – emphasizing to domestic and international audiences their own role as stewards and driving forces, with a clear intellectual link drawn between the *mntadayyat* of the earlier Damascus Spring and events of 2011.

In his notes on “spontaneity and conscious leadership,” in Notebook 3 (§48), Gramsci comments that history’s “most spontaneous” movements leave behind no documents, as the most marginal and peripheral elements involved in this “do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance or that it might be of any value to leave documentary evidence of it” (Gramsci, 2021, p. 32).

In many ways, Syria’s modern history is marked by examples of subaltern groups attempting to assert themselves upon domestic politics, only to be thwarted, as with the 1834 “peasant revolt” against Egyptian domination, Saleh al-Ali’s anti-colonial Alawite revolt of 1919, the same year’s revolt in the Aleppo countryside led by the Kurdish Ibrahim Hananu, the largely Druze-led 1925 “Great Syrian Revolt” against the French, and even the original bargain whereby the marginalized Alawite minority and peasant class sought representation in government via support of Hafiz al-Assad’s coup of 1970. It should also be noted that uprisings associated with the majority – the Sunni, religious and working-class population – such as the 1982 Hama revolt and the 2011 Syrian uprising, were likewise revolts of the marginalized, as the Baathist state had blocked all avenues for popular representation or the airing of grievances.

The Elusive Revolution

For Syria then, the majority of political activity that fostered and drove a years-long insurgency is hidden from view, while a minority – the aforementioned “elite” English-speaking, media-literate activist cohort based in the major cities – has served as representative of the Syrian Revolution. (This is not to disparage the vigor, savvy and courage of the latter in the face of the region’s most brutal repression). While this leads to imprecision in analyses of the composition of revolutionary forces, it more importantly has presented political difficulties for the opposition, who have at various stages been represented in international fora by a host foreign-backed diplomatic bodies claiming to speak for the revolution from exile: the Syrian National Council (in Istanbul), the Syrian National Coalition (in Doha, later Istanbul), not to mention the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Council (whose first Chairperson was the Paris-based dissident Haytham Manna).

So do we still fail to identify the “political” activity practiced by those living at the margins of visible/legible society – in shanty towns, places of rural/urban exchange, peripheries – who fostered Syria’s 2011 moment? Emily Apter, in *Unexceptional Politics*, calls this a politics that “eludes conceptual grasp, confronting us with the realization that we really do not know what politics is, where it begins and ends, or how its micro-events should be called” (Apter 2018, p. 1). A further analytic deficiency emerging from our misrecognition relates to the refrain of Western observers since 2011: “Where did the revolution go?” Given that our interlocutors were the media-savvy, urban activists who narrated the uprising upon its outbreak, it is to be expected that the subsequent chapters are both bemusing and disheartening, with the country wrought by civil war, regime revanchism, and an “orgy of ‘militant nihilism,’” in Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s phrase.

Timothy Mitchell has noted that the state is an “effect of power,” constantly porous/elusive, and revolutions/civil wars are simply “state-making in flux.” In this manner, he suggests that all states are

Commented [JV1]: Being fairly familiar with this revolt, I don't recall seeing anything about Kurdish participation, much less leadership. But if you have a source for it, let me know.

Commented [JM2R1]: You're right, I was mixing up Ibrahim Hananu's earlier revolt, have corrected

colonial: an act of imposing power upon those without it. Ranajit Guha, in exhorting us to study peasant resistance previously thought of by Hobsbawm and others as “pre-political,” argued that the records of the colonial state had to be understood as an archive of *counter-insurgency*. It is here, he contends, that we can find traces of Apter’s elusive political activity.

Sites of Activity: Baba Amr, Zabadani, Saraqib

Identifying, even in the absence of clear records, examples of the important sites of anti-state activity and the manner of contention ought to provide material to locate the traces of the revolutionary subject. Furthermore we can, in a manner similar to Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation, look to how most archives of the revolt and worldwide coverage of it, make reference to political oppression and issues of freedom of speech, as compared to the economic oppression primarily experienced (prior to 2011) by the working and rural classes. Here again is the March 15 v March 18 dichotomy.

In these cleavages – and indeed it is in Georges Sorel’s “spirit of cleavage” that Gramsci asserts we can identify the emergence of revolutionary consciousness – it may be possible to better sketch the form of this “impossible revolution.”

The present author’s forthcoming PhD dissertation, of which this article is a part, will take up this task. The sites of activity to be examined are the Baba Amr quarter in Homs, the town of Zabadani near Damascus, and the town of Saraqib in Idlib, all early centers of the revolt. Among the questions that remain to be tackled in further chapters:

- What distinguished the revolutionary subaltern activity of 2011 and afterwards from other forms of “everyday resistance” under authoritarianism preceding the uprising? And what links the two?
- What social movement learning took place in this revolutionary moment, and what record exists of it, as per *Laboratories of Learning* (Mario Novelli, et al.)?
- What comparisons can be drawn to other subaltern movements, such as the Zapatistas?
- What lessons can be drawn for the new ‘wave’ of decentralized revolutionary activity in Syria, especially that of 2019, or the September 2023 protests in Suwayda?

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Commented [JM4R3]: Yes exactly - had left this unsaid as I figured each needed a proper introduction, but for this piece what you’ve put is perfect!

Commented [JV5]: Right?

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