

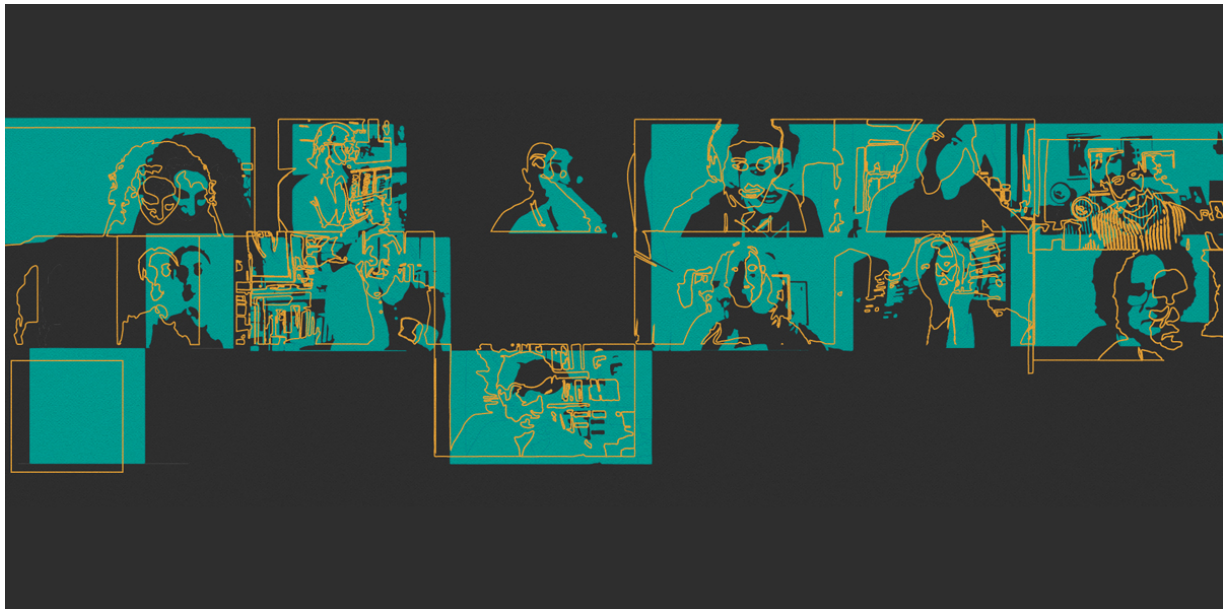


04-02-2021

On revolutionary tradition: From Alaa to Kant

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On the tenth anniversary of the Arab revolutions, Yasmene Daher discusses the mythology of revolutionary hope, defining the revolution as a sheer moral will, and highlighting the power of revolutionary truth and reimagined politics.

[Editor's note: This article is the sixth in a series published in collaboration with **Mada Masr** to mark the tenth

anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. It is also available in [Arabic](#).]

Tradition suggests the sanctification of a certain act, the repetition of it with sincere devotion. Tradition is important in a global human climate obsessed with modernization and the new. Of course, we can't deny the furious contradiction in meaning embedded in the phrase 'revolutionary tradition.' 'Tradition' paired with 'revolutionary' seems an obvious oxymoron, like a contained outburst. Revolution is the spirit of the new, an aversion to the familiar; tradition is repetition and routine.

Perhaps we, revolutionaries by instinct and resolve, need the shelter offered by traditions, a place where old warriors can find refuge from the endless recriminations, doubt, and accusations of failure that have come from various quarters since popular rage first exploded in the streets a decade ago, without dwelling here on their intentions, friendly or hostile. According to their traditions, a revolution must bring measured change—visible and quantifiable—and anything else is catastrophic.

Without dismissing this desire, which in principle is difficult to argue with, we ask a question drawing on our own traditions, those that safeguard the revolution with love and question it responsibly: Do the metrics of democratization and power, the ready-made, fixed standards of success and failure, blind us to other changes, smaller or greater, at the margins or in the core, that are still taking shape? Is there something that can be computed in material but not political terms? Are there human dividends that lay outside politics even as they are wholly enmeshed in it? Dividends that cannot be translated into the language of politics—at

least not as we know it, until we change our understanding of it—because they are all-encompassing, sweeping, touching human beings themselves? Is there something that needs to be unbound from the evaluation of a moment in time, which itself is still being revealed? Though the temptation to understand is overpowering, it unfurls naturally apart from the grandiosity of human action.

To examine the question of tradition, we must go back to a point at which it seems a novel, innovative breakthrough, where nostalgia can offer what imagination cannot. These are both illusions in every sense of the word, but the former is lovelier because it feels like something we lived: the past.

Finality is treason

In an essay written by Alaa Abd El Fattah and Ahmed Douma from prison, Alaa makes no bones about his fear of myth-making, and he examines the myth [of the square/the 18 days] for genuine, plain human experiences. The essay is a foundational text in every sense of the word, even though it was written in a moment of rupture and weakness beset by inertia and retreat. But it is foundational because it confronts the edifice of mythology with an alternative that challenges it “because the myth, in attempting to obscure the weakness, anxiety, violence, absurdity, the agonizing pain, and the fragility of the dream opens the door to those very ambiguities.” The essay lays a foundation for something both less and more than a revolution: less, because it searches for meaning we might find in our everyday lives without need to revolt, lose, and see our blood made cheap in the street; more, because it is impossible to know it without our experiences dissolving into one indistinguishable mass such that we are liberated

from our subjectivity, freely and publicly shedding it.

Writing the text in 2014, Alaa expresses misgivings about the phrase “despair is treason.” He discusses and argues against it even as he understands the fear of and need for it. He writes, “Is there a greater betrayal than hope?” Later in the essay, he avers, “I will not betray the revolution with either despair or hope.” For him, treason is finality, a decisive resolution: “Our only square was built on a dream and love, but people want stability. Stability requires finality, finality requires power, and power kills love and spoils the dream. Finality is treason, for it replaces people power with more mundane things: weapons, organization, the state; finality is treason, for it replaces dreams with the mundane: a roadmap, power arrangements, the crumbs of demands and reforms.”

The interesting and important thing about this passage is the way Alaa separates the inability to bring about a decisive resolution or take power from the lack of a desire to do so. Let’s not take his apprehensions about power lightly. Coming from a political activist and a person who is paying a steep price, we cannot dismiss this critique as romanticism, or as irrational or unjustifiable. The power of the people, their action and movement—which he condenses here as the dream and love—are not manifestations of affective states, but the raw material of another truth, a different community, and a new architecture. All of this may be beyond the workings of politics and might require a revolution in our conceptualization of both politics and power.

From Kant to Alaa

In a text published in 1798, philosopher Immanuel Kant writes in search of an occurrence that could point to humanity's inclination for improvement, our relentless drive for something better. He wonders if it is possible to identify a historical event that demonstrates our constant readiness as moral beings to be a part of project to improve our lives. His unequivocal response is revolution (it is the French revolution on his mind at that moment in time). Speaking of that revolution, he says it "may succeed, or it may fail. It may be so filled with misery and atrocities that no right-thinking man would ever decide to make the same experiment again at such a price, even if he could hope to carry it out successfully at the second attempt. But I maintain that this revolution has aroused in the hearts and desires of all spectators who are not themselves caught up in it a sympathy which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race." In other words, for Kant, neither the trajectory of the revolution, nor its outcome or works is an indication of human advancement; it is the desire for a better life in and of itself that makes revolution a constructive event. It is a common, collective desire for a better life.

That Kant sidelines the political outcome of the revolution makes it possible to consider revolutionary striving as moral striving, and this is a crucial point. Uninterested in describing the political project of the revolution, Kant portrays the masses as enthusiastically joining and sympathizing with the collective action; their zeal is genuine and authentic. Our ability as humans to gesture toward advancement and affirm our desire for it—our passionate engagement in good—is separate from whether

it is within our ability to actually realize this good, or whether this is the best course of action. Revolution is advancement insofar as we are predisposed to want to improve our lives, without guarantees and despite unanticipated costs.

The return to Kant is not a retreat to the past. Nor is it an attempt to underscore the platitude that history repeats itself. The similarities between what Kant said then and what Alaa said yesterday lie in our own relationship to the revolution, every revolution, in its importance, its magic, and its necessity, in our disorientation before it and more importantly in that paramount human lesson. In our individuality we are searching for something greater and more beautiful, and once in a blue moon we understand that when this illusion of individuality is shattered, it cracks open like a hard thing (a fixed identity forged of past experiences, pains, and ideas) and is exposed as immediate agency (dynamic, shifting), making visible to the eye all that we share. Then it seems then that the entire world is us, all of us moving together in lockstep. As Alaa wrote, "In the absence of either despair or hope, there remains only the self."

When we put aside the crude metrics of success and failure, tradition calls on us to be dedicated to the idea—to take it on faith, not with certainty—that beyond despair and hope lies something invincible.