

The Egyptian Uprisings: collective effervescence and its shortcomings

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Performative Revolution in Egypt provides a sociological analysis of competing symbols and narratives in a chronicle of the uprising in Egypt through the lens of media reports and activist-generated accounts. **Ryan Evans** reviews the essay and finds that despite the author's explicit focus on the 'performance' of the revolution itself, it brings the dissonance between this performance and its deliverables to the fore.



Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Bloomsbury Academic. 144 pages. October 2011.

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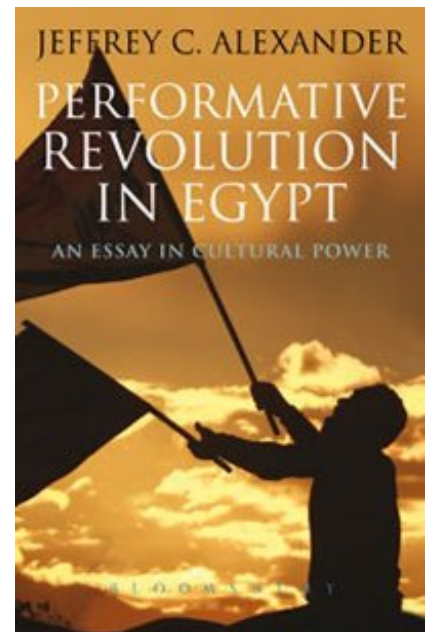
Over one year after the rule of Hosni Mubarak ended, the most striking impression to this observer is how the Egyptian chapter of the 'Arab Spring' has failed to live up to the breathless democracy-and-liberty rhetoric that defined its coverage in the Western and international Arab press. To illustrate this point, one could look askance at a number of scandals from the last year that strike one as something worse than democracy's 'growing pains.'

Perhaps the most arresting, in both senses of the word, is the winter closure of American and European-funded pro-democracy NGOs and the filing of [criminal charges against democracy activists](#), including American citizens (some of whom managed to escape to the safety of the US embassy until a deal was struck that allowed them to leave Egypt).

Despite the fact that he explicitly focuses on the 'performance' of the revolution itself and avoids its effects, Jeffrey C. Alexander's excellent *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power* brings the dissonance between this performance and its deliverables to the fore.

Alexander, author of the monumental *The Meanings of Social Life*, provides a sociological analysis of competing symbols and narratives in a chronicle of the uprising through the lens of media reports and activist-generated accounts. The result is an essay with appeal to students, scholars, and perhaps most unexpectedly – journalists. There are lessons here for how the claims of participants in future episodes of civil discontent, ranging from demonstrations to revolutions, should be interpreted by the media, i.e. critically.

These writers of history's first draft would do well to pay close attention to Alexander's analysis of the protest movement that led to Mubarak's downfall and compare it to the Egypt of today. This movement was not a reactive burst of energy and chaos, but a deliberate and methodical campaign in which tactics, messages, and symbols were carefully coordinated on a day-by-day basis by movement



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leaders. Cultural power and the ownership of the narrative of events was the virtual 'center of gravity' represented in the physical world by Tahrir Square and vice versa. Alexander writes:

"The Egyptian revolution was a living drama whose political success depended on its cultural power: its ability to project powerful symbols and real-time performances, plot-compelling protagonists and despicable antagonists; to stimulate and circulate powerful emotions; to organize exemplary solidarity; to create suspense; and finally to minister ignominious defeat to dark and polluted adversaries while purifying the nation through a stunning victory that lifted citizens to new hope and glory."

He assesses this 'cultural power' through a careful deconstruction of 'collective representations' generated by the experiences of activists were projected onto others. And in turn, this was filtered by the mass media, and 'projected back to participants and audiences.' These participants and audiences included the protestors themselves, different components of the former regime, Egypt's 'silent majority,' the Egyptian Army, regional powers and bodies like the Arab League, domestic and international media, the United Nations, and Western nations – especially the United States, Mubarak's once-patron. And, of course it included the constellation of domestic and foreign journalists and media outlets, both 'new' and 'old'.

A focus on messaging is not a rejection of the salience of *material* 'social facts' per se, but as Alexander notes, these do not in and of themselves have meaning. Rather, representations of these social facts 'do the talking.' It is a sophisticated affirmation of Durkheim who wrote of the power of 'social currents.'

The discourse of liberal democracy pervaded the forums of the uprising, in Tahrir Square and the Facebook group that served as a coordination hub, *We Are All Khaled Said* (WAAKS). WAAKS was run by Google executive Wael Ghonim, author of the new memoir, *Revolution 2.0*.

With a year of distance from the uprising, two deductions are evident: The liberalism of Western and cosmopolitan journalists led to cultural mirror-imaging – something that was carefully cultivated by the all the uprising's protestors, including the illiberal Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood who played a massive role in the uprising that was largely hidden from Western observers. And also, even those activists of Tahrir of a genuine liberal bent have failed to translate their protest movement into successful political party organization and the electoral success that would follow.

The electoral success of Islamic political movements – the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi Al Nour Party, are well-known. Along with the Egyptian military, it appears that these are the actors who will play the largest role in defining Egypt's future. Not the liberals.

The hollowness of the uprising's key slogans is perhaps one indication of how much has changed in the last year. 'The people, the army as one hand,' was one of the most popular chants in Tahrir Square once the Egyptian Army affirmed the legitimacy of the protestors' demands. Within a day, Mubarak resigned. Now, Egyptian activists vilify the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has clumsily overseen the country since Mubarak's ouster, and has been embroiled in political warfare with all factions. The Brotherhood and Egyptian liberals have openly clashed in the theatre of the streets. The Islamist-dominated Egyptian constituent assembly charged with writing a new constitution has been disbanded.

At the close of his essay, Alexander writes, 'To complete the process of purification, Egyptians will have to continue moving forward in a democratic way.' Elections have taken place, but whether or not they will lead to true democracy in Egypt is a tale that has not yet been told. This reviewer is not optimistic.

Ryan Evans is a Research Fellow at the Center for National Policy in Washington, DC. He specializes in the conflict in Afghanistan, civil society and foreign policy in Turkey and Egypt, and Islamist mobilization. From 2010-11, Evans worked for the US Army's Human Terrain System in Afghanistan where he was embedded as a social scientist supporting the British-led Task Force Helmand. For his PhD research at the King's College London War Studies Department, Evans is examining the relationship between Islamic political activism and foreign and security policies in Turkey and Egypt. [Read more reviews by Ryan.](#)

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