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Benoît Challand. *Violence and Representation in the Arab Uprisings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2023. 462 pp. ISBN: 978-11-0874-826-1. € 30,00.

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Benoît Challand. *Violence and Representation in the Arab Uprisings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2023. 462 pp. ISBN: 978-11-0874-826-1. € 30,00.

Far from merely reconstructing the path leading to or following the 2011 uprisings, Benoît Challand's *Violence and Representation in the Arab Uprisings* offers a profound dissection of the structural dynamics of state-society relations in Tunisia and Yemen. By situating these dynamics at the crossroads of colonial legacies and internal sociopolitical fractures, the book navigates the lights and shadows of post-revolutionary processes a decade after the events. It represents a significant contribution to social movement theory as well as postcolonial political theory, providing a compelling interpretation of state formation both inside and outside the "Arab region". The result is not merely an academic exercise but a convincing book that invites readers to reconsider fundamental assumptions about political change, representation, and the intricate relationships between violence, citizenship, and state structures.

Representation, latent citizenship, and *vis populi* are the three primary concepts anchoring Challand's analysis. These are central to achieving the author's dual objective: to examine «the historically influenced processes of democratic mobilization that generated a connecting and articulating imaginary in the revolutionary moments of 2011» and «the transformation, more or less successful, of a negative or latent form to an active form of citizenship» (p. 37).

Representation emerges at the intersection of cultural practices – such as graffiti, music, and visual symbols – and new (in)formal political processes capable of reshaping citizenship and governance (pp. 28–31). A significant contribution to democratic theory lies in Challand's explanation of how informal politics generated new imaginaries of participation and legitimacy during the 2011 uprisings. However, this legacy soon collided with the need to reorganize institutional life. Large-scale war (in Yemen) and reformism (in Tunisia) paved the way for the return of old male security elites, marginalizing the more radical challenges to latent citizenship.

Central to Challand's argument is the concept of latent citizenship. Drawing on Michel Camau's idea of "negative citizenship" (p. 15), latent citizenship refers to a curtailed or suppressed form of citizenship, marked by limited state-society relationships and reduced civic engagement due to authoritarian repression and systemic exclusion. Expanding the understanding of citizenship beyond its formal components, Challand compellingly demonstrates that the 2011 uprisings did not emerge in a vacuum but were rooted in long-standing, often dormant fractures in state-society relations, driven by both domestic and external factors. For instance, the 2011 overthrow of Ben Ali's autocratic regime in Tunisia is inseparable from the 2008 protests in Tunisia's marginalized mining region of Qafṣa.

Violence is another critical element in Challand's analysis. While it can be a des-

tructive force – state repression pushing populations into latent citizenship – it can also be a creative force mobilized by "the people". Challand introduces the formulation *vis populi*, a neologism from Latin, to describe the people's collective power to decide how violence and coercion ought to be used within a polity. Unlike blind, brute force – typical of state-led violence – *vis populi* articulates a vision for a new polity, demanding democratic representation and confronting past repression (p. 177). This classification helps to clearly distinguish cases of police brutality (violence) from instances where residents of marginalized Tunisian regions burnt down police posts – symbols of the autocratic regime just overthrown (*vis populi*).

Methodologically, Challand's book benefits from a diverse array of qualitative data. One of its strengths is the author's ability to seamlessly navigate between macro-historical events and localized ethnographies, creating a sophisticated portrait of the socio-political landscapes of Tunisia and Yemen. The inclusion of non-textual sources, such as political graffiti and music lyrics, enriches the narrative and substantiates Challand's central claims. Sub-case studies, such as the protests in Tunisia's Ǧamna oasis and the al-Kāmūr sit-ins or Yemen's encampments at Sanaa's Taġayyur Square and the revolutionary hub of Taʿizz, provide concrete illustrations of broader theoretical arguments. This back-and-forth between broad historical trends and localized events ensures the complexity of the 2011 uprisings is neither reduced nor oversimplified – maintaining fluidity without sacrificing depth.

The different themes included in Challand's book deserve a more accurate discussion, with two standing out in particular.

A first remarkable point lies in Challand's rigorous critique of Eurocentric theories of state formation. By revisiting traditional European and North-American theorists such as Elias, Weber, Foucault, and Tilly, Challand systematically reveals the inherent limitations of their conceptual models when applied to Arab political contexts – or, more precisely, their general disregard for non-Western experiences in the initial theorization of state formation (pp. 97-111). His endeavor goes beyond merely rejecting Eurocentrism in social sciences; it involves a thoughtful deconstruction that encourages readers to revisit the conceptual foundations of modern states in traditional political science, shaped by an exclusive focus on the European past. European capitalist, colonial, and imperial encroachments are external factors that must be accounted for when assessing the internal developments of the Tunisian and Yemeni states (pp. 75–80). Indeed, the author demonstrates how the gradual pacification of European states was historically contingent upon colonial violence and the exploitation of populations in the Middle East and North Africa. Using the metaphor of the "Möbius Strip" – a surface with only one side and one edge, symbolizing continuity and the absence of clear distinctions –, Challand illustrates the interconnectedness of seemingly separate forces, such as colonial and metropolitan violence, inclusion and exclusion in citizenship, and internal and

external dynamics of state formation. Challenging orientalist notions of Arab "exceptionalism" and culturalist explanations, the author meaningfully stresses the importance of analyzing the 2011 uprisings and their aftermath as essential for advancing global theories of citizenship and representation within social science (pp. 27, 44).

The second key theme is Challand's analysis of the socio-political geography of the revolution, particularly the interplay between marginalized regions and political centers. Revolutions, Challand argues, are never sudden events but rather the result of deeply rooted historical and structural processes. The French colonial distinction between the coastal *Tunisie utile* – surrounding the capital city and the Sahel region, the geographic origin of all Tunisian elites – and the *Tunisie inutile* – "the interior", i.e. south and west internal areas of the country – persisted long after independence, profoundly shaping the conditions leading to the 2011 uprisings. The protests, originating in peripheral and neglected regions, gradually gained momentum as they spread into urban centers, forging a broader revolutionary movement. Similarly, Yemen's debates over federalism and the significant role of its peripheral regions highlight the geographical underpinnings of both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary dynamics.

Violence and Representation in the Arab Uprisings is a fluid and intellectually rigorous examination of Arab socio-political dynamics rooted in colonial and post-colonial history with a focus on the 2011 uprisings and their aftermath. By navigating between macro-historical events, regional dynamics, and localized processes, Challand connects elements often analyzed in isolation: colonial legacies, post-independence state structures, the 2011 uprisings, and their socio-political consequences, concluding with some thoughtful reflections on the reappearance of the "strong man" in Arab politics (p. 323).

Finally, throughout the book, Challand emphasizes instances of convergence and disharmony between formal and informal politics in revolutionary processes. Informal dynamics and informal actors are driving forces in the breakout of revolutions, making the unthinkable – the emergence of *vis populi*, Castoriadi's «excess of the result over the causes» (p. 215) – thinkable. Yet, informal politics often collapses under the weight of institutional restructuring of the new (old) order. In Yemen, regional rivalries, external interference, and eventually the war crushed informal movements, while in Tunisia, reformism triumphed over radical rupture, relegating informality and revolutionary actors to a marginal role. Despite this sobering analysis, *vis populi* suggests that revolutionary potential remains latent, perpetually ready to reemerge when conditions are conducive.

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