



April 2020

Lessons from the Arab Spring

Forum: *Planetize the Movement!*

Noha Tarek

Thank you, Valentine Moghadam, for this amazing [review](#) of our urgent need to planetize our radical movement for change. Even though so many setbacks have taken place around the world, whether in the form of failing revolutions, increasing militarism and populism, or environmental degradation, the radical juncture of self/collective destruction that we are facing indicates a singularity in our human history that may hopefully lead us into an equally radical transition in our systems and cultures. Radical change may only emerge out of radical deterioration. As someone once told me, it is when the arrow is pulled toward its most backward point through the arc, that the arrow may be thrust forward with the highest speed and greatest force.

What we need the most as revolutionaries is to practice meta-cognition, reflecting on our own ways of perceiving and interacting with the world and then changing ourselves and our organizations and movements in our pursuit to change the system. I have become aware of this need mostly from my personal experiences with other revolutionaries, rather than from reading literature. I used to be a revolutionary at the time of the Arab Spring in Egypt. I began my activism as a hard-core Islamist and ended it as an agnostic feminist. As revolutionaries in Egypt, we were focused on demanding change—but change to what? That was a question we hadn't reflected on. The only group that had an agenda for change were the Islamists. But theirs wasn't much of a change: it was only a pursuit of replacing a nationalist type of capitalist authoritarianism with a religious type.

More so, the non-Islamist revolutionaries themselves exhibited deeply-entrenched patriarchal behaviors while interacting in the streets. I was struck by this during my activism in the streets,

and while doing a field study on the political culture of activists and non-activist youth. Out of this experience, I realized that we strongly need to change ourselves as we seek to change our systems. Our social systems reinforce and are reinforced by our cultures and worldviews as individuals and collectivities.

My experience with revolutionaries in America was not much different, except for substituting patriarchy with individualism. While interacting with a group of anarchists in America, I was shocked to find that they're organizing themselves with a form of hierarchical authority, by the excuse of having the need to protect the group from the censorship and threat of the police. Interacting with another group of vegan activists has struck me with their expressed culture of individualism that is not different from the widespread culture in America, where every individual holds themselves only responsible for their own survival.

Of course, these reflections come only from personal experiences, but they made me intensely aware that change is a process that has to take place within and among ourselves in conjunction with changing the systems that govern us. The radical change that we need to make is not only to break free from the path of Western colonial capitalism, but also to break free from the path of hierarchical-patriarchal capitalism that began with the advent of the Neolithic era over 10,000 years ago.

In a way, our change has to be "glocal"—organizing local independent eco-feminist-socialist communities, while at the same time, establishing a kind of a global network among these communities, to empower and inspire each other, in the fight against the global capitalist-militarist system. Revolutionary change has to be coordinated globally, parallel to the systemic power of militarist capitalism that has evolved to become global as well. I will never forget one depressing night when I was walking along with another revolutionary during our protests against the military council that got hold of the country after overthrowing the president. I was very enthusiastic about the prospects for change across the region, when that revolutionary man told me, whatever we may attempt to do is going to be suppressed by international powers, because they will never allow for free prosperous regimes to come in place of their puppet regimes that maintain the corrupt security of their military and corporations' interests. Indeed, what transpired later proved his pessimistic realism to be more powerful than my idealistic optimism. Unless revolutions erupt on

a global scale for breaking us all free from the stronghold of multinational corporations and their national power elites across world regions, we can only do so much as separate peoples, still limited perceptually by illusive national identity borders.

One of the few points that I want to challenge within the article is its emphasis only on the role of the United States in destroying revolutions across the Middle East. Russia is equally involved, as are Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf countries regionally. The militarist-capitalist competition between Russia (and its Iranian ally) on one hand and the United States (and its European Union, Turkish, Israeli, and Gulf allies) on the other hand, in my opinion, should not cloud us to how both sides are equally involved in suppressing change for the interests of their respective power elites, in the name of whatever “causes” they use as propaganda.

Change can only take place if and when the people demand it. Whatever global coordination and support for local revolutions is needed, it cannot involve military or financial support from the outside, because this risks the involvement of power-elitist interests beyond genuine support for the free aspirations of peoples.

I do not think that there is one issue that can be prioritized now above other issues in terms of focusing for the purpose of change—whether environment, gender, racism, social justice, etc. All issues intersect in a holistic manner, and radical change can only happen by incorporating our “whole” way of living, perceiving, interacting, and organizing on earth as creatures. As Herbert Marcuse had mentioned, this is a civilization built on fear of death, through maintaining the logos of control. To break free from this survivalist path and transform into an earth community based on sacrifice, compassion, and joy, the change that we need to make is immense, radical, and holistic across all aspects, scales, and levels.

To Middle Easterners, environmental issues may seem a luxury to be concerned with while not having our basic human needs met and being constantly threatened with violent force by international powers and their puppet regional and local powers. To Westerners, issues of neocolonialism and social justice may seem irrelevant. But what combines us all is individual and collective pain that emerges from a culture and system that senselessly seeks to compete, control, and dominate for every individual to accumulate “resources” to safeguard their material welfare and societally conditioned survival. Whatever freedom or equality we may fight for will be a continuation of this same path of self and collective destruction if it is a fight for freedom to pursue

self-interests in accumulating “resources” or for equality in competitive control over one another and our environment.

One thing that I think may unify our worldview and passion for change is adopting a unified holistic cosmic story of our past, present, and future, as creatures of this universe. It is truly symbolic and phenomenal that physicists and cosmologists have only discovered our origin cosmic story of evolution right at this singular historical time in which we are facing the threat of collective extinction, whether through nuclear weapons or environmental degradation, and in which we have become connected with boundless information through the global brain of the Internet. As I was floundering in my own nationalist-religious-ethnic identity as a woman raised up in the Middle East and facing the chaos of regional wars and failing revolutions, it was reconnecting with my “universe story” that has helped me through my ongoing process of healing by identifying with my relational and holistic nature that connects me through a billions-of-years-long complexifying consciousness with all other creatures as and within this universe.

Emancipating our self-collective consciousness with a holistic unified identity and worldview that trespasses species, races, gender, religions, etc., is a critical building block in our path toward collective organizing for glocal change into our radically new path as an earth community. Organizing for change while we are being educated with the same divisive nationalist, racist, and religious worldviews, and while we are enculturated to serve our individual needs and compete against one another in various occupational fields to accumulate individualist power, resources, and prestige is a futile attempt toward—yet again—control for survival out of fear of death, which has given birth to this very vicious circle we find ourselves obsessively stuck in, unable to imagine a different way of “being” together with/as our earth.

About the Author



Noha Tarek is a social science researcher studying the interplay of change in political culture and revolution, drawing from her experience as an activist in the Egyptian revolution. Her research reflects Big History perspectives on human cultural evolution and transformation.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Noha Tarek, "Lessons from the Arab Spring," a contribution to the forum Planetize the Movement!, *Great Transition Initiative* (April 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/planetize-movement-tarek>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.