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# KETTERING REVIEW

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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

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Fall 2016

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For more than three decades, this journal of democratic thought has been edited by Robert J. Kingston, a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation. Sadly, Bob passed away on August 20 of this year at the age of 87, leaving his wife, Carol Vollet Kingston, his children, colleagues, friends, and neighbors grieving his loss.

Bob left England for America in 1954 to teach Shakespeare; he stayed to work on democracy. He was an extraordinary person, raising the level of conversation wherever he went, curious about everything and everyone he met, and capable of discerning the course of democratic thought as it developed in a forum and in the country.

After teaching English literature at a number of colleges and universities in the United States, Bob joined the National Endowment for the Humanities as director of planning and analysis. He moved up to serve as deputy chairman and acting chairman during the administrations of former Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. In the late 1970s, he left government service to become president of the College Board, then joined the Kettering Foundation's longtime research partner Public Agenda as executive director.

As a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation, in the 1980s Bob became the *Review's* editor and for many years, he also helped produce the tapes for A Public Voice, Kettering's annual meeting in Washington, DC.

In his tenure as editor of the *Kettering Review*, he explored some of the most important issues facing democracy of the past 30-some years. Our next issue of the *Review*, through essays and interviews, will follow and develop the arc of Bob's thought about democracy. With a heavy heart, this issue is dedicated to his memory.

In Memoriam  
Robert J. Kingston  
1929-2016

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# The Art of Presence

By Asef Bayat

*Ordinary people can change their societies through opportunities other than mass protests or revolutions; they can and do resort more widely to “nonmovements”—the collective endeavors of millions of noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, courthouses, and communities.*

**I**n retelling any history of revolutions, the uprisings that spread through the Middle East in 2011 will remain watershed events. These uprisings toppled longstanding dictators, overturned entrenched interests, and unsettled authoritarian regimes in a measure and magnitude that took everyone by surprise. Yet these revolts did not emerge from a vacuum. They had their precursors—in structural changes reflected in urban growth, demographic shifts and growing disparity, the formation of new political actors, and in ongoing everyday struggles that all merged into these revolutionary moments. A new Middle East may now be on the horizon, a Middle East informed not only by the actions of the elites, military men, or foreign intrigues but a region influenced by the ordinary people.

The first edition of *Life as Politics* was published in 2010, a year before the uprisings began. In the preface to that edition, I stated that the central theme of the book was agency and change in the Muslim Middle East. More specifically, the book focused on the configuration of sociopolitical transformation brought about by internal social forces, by collectives and individuals, and by the diverse ways in which the ordinary people—the subaltern, the urban dispossessed, Muslim women, the globalizing youth, and other urban grassroots—could strive to affect change in their societies. In refusing to exit from the social and political stage controlled by authoritarian states, their moral authority, and neoliberal economies, these groups discover and generate new spaces within which they can voice their dissent and assert their presence in pursuit of bettering their lives. Ordinary people



can change their societies through opportunities other than mass protests or revolutions; they can and do resort more widely to “nonmovements”—the collective endeavors of millions of noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, courthouses, and communities.

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For those urban subjects (such as the unemployed, housewives, and the “informal people”) who structurally lack intuitional power of disruption (such as going on strike), the “street” becomes the ultimate arena to communicate discontent. This kind of “street politics” describes a set of conflicts, and the attendant implications, between an individual

or a collective populace and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed in the physical and social space of streets, from the back alleyways to the more visible streets and squares. Here conflict originates from the *active* use of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only *passively*—through walking, driving, watching—or in other ways that the state dictates. Any *active* or *participative* use infuriates officials, who see themselves as the sole authority to establish and control public order. Thus, the street vendors who proactively spread their businesses in the main alleyways; squatters who take over public parks, lands, or sidewalks; youth who control the street-corner spaces; street children who establish street communities; poor housewives who extend their daily household activities into the alleyways; or protestors who march in the streets, all challenge the state prerogatives and thus may encounter reprisal.

**S**treet politics assumes more relevance, particularly in the neoliberal cities, those shaped by the logic of the market. Strolling through the streets of Cairo, Tehran, Dakar, or Jakarta in the midst of a working day, one is astonished by the presence of so many people operating in the streets—working, running around, standing, sitting, negotiating, driving, or riding on buses and trams. These represent the relatively new subaltern of the neoliberal city. For the neoliberal city is the “city inside-out,” where a massive number of inhabitants become compelled by the poverty and dispossession to operate, subsist, socialize, and simply live a life

in the public spaces. Here the outdoor spaces (back alleys, public parks, squares, and the main streets) serve as indispensable assets in the urban population, and consequently, as fertile ground for the expression of street politics.

But street politics has another dimension, in that it is more than just about conflict between authorities and deinstitutionalized or informal groups over the control of public space and order. Streets, as spaces of flow and movement, are not only where people express grievances, but also where they forge identities, enlarge solidarities, and *extend* their protest beyond their immediate circles to include the unknown, the strangers. Here streets serve as a medium through which strangers or casual passersby are able to establish latent communication with one another by recognizing their mutual interests and shared sentiments. This is how a small demonstration may grow into a massive exhibition of solidarity; and that is why almost every contentious politics, major revolution,



and protest movement finds expression in the urban streets. It is this epidemic potential of street politics that provokes authorities' severe surveillance and widespread repression. While a state may be able to shut down colleges or to abolish political parties, it cannot easily stop the

normal flow of life in streets, unless it resorts to normalizing violence, erecting walls and checkpoints as a strategic element of everyday life.

Thus, not only does city space serve as the center stage of sociopolitical contentions, it at the same time conditions the dynamics and

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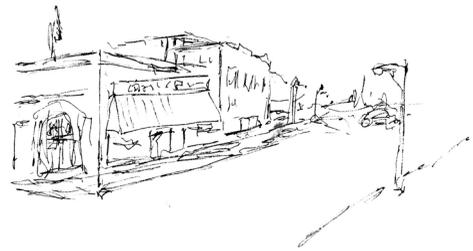
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shapes the patterns of conflicts and their resolution. Cities inescapably leave their spatial imprints on the nature of social struggles and agency; they provoke particular kinds of politics, of both micro and macro nature. For instance, revolutions in the sense of "insurrections" not only result from certain historical trajectories, but are also shaped by certain geographies and are facilitated by certain spatial influences. Thus, beyond asking why and when a given revolution occurred, we should also be asking *where* it was unleashed and why it happened where it did. As sites of the concentration of wealth, power, and privilege, cities are as much the source of epidemic conflicts, social struggles, and mass insurgencies as the source of cooperation, sharing, and what I like to call "everyday cosmopolitanism"—a place where various members of ethnic, racial, and religious groupings are conditioned to mix, mingle,

undertake everyday encounters, and experience trust with one another. Cosmopolitan experiences in cities, in turn, may act as a spatial catalyst to ward off and contain sectarian strife and violence. Urban streets not only serve as a physical space where conflicts are shaped and expressed, where collectives are formed, solidarities are extended, and street politics are displayed. They also signify a crucial symbolic utterance, one that goes beyond the physicality of streets to convey collective sentiments of a nation or a community. This I call “political street,” as exemplified in such terms as *Arab street* or *Muslim street*. *Political street*, then, denotes the collective sentiments, shared feelings, and public opinions of ordinary people in their day-to-day utterances and practices that are expressed broadly in public spaces—in taxis, buses, and shops, on street sidewalks, or in mass street demonstrations.

**T**he types of struggles that characterize the societies of the Middle East are neither unique to this region nor novel in their emergence. Similar processes are well under way in other parts of the world. The integration of the Middle East into the global economic system has created sociopolitical structures and processes in this region that find resemblance in other societies of the global South. Yet the continuing authoritarian rule, the region’s strategic location (in relation to oil and Israel), and the predominance of Islam give the politics of dissent in the Muslim Middle East particular characteristics. Notwithstanding its characterization as “passive and dead” or “rowdy and dangerous,” the Arab street exhibited a fundamental vitality and vigor in the aftermath

of 9/11 events and the occupation of Iraq, despite the Middle East’s regimes’ continuous surveillance of political dissent. However, much mobilizational energy is spent on nationalistic and anti-imperialist concerns at the expense of the struggle for democracy at home. Even though street politics in the Arab world has assumed some innovations in strategy, methods, and constituencies, it remains overwhelmed by the surge of religio-nationalist politics. Yet it is naïve to conclude a priori that the future belongs to Islamist politics. The fact is that Islamism itself is undergoing a dramatic shift in its underlying ideals and strategies. Thus, while Islam continues to play a major mobilizational role, the conditions for the emergence of Iranian-type Islamic revolutions seem to have been exhausted. I suggest that the evolving domestic and global conditions, namely, the tendency toward legalism and reformist politics, individualization of piety, and transnationalization (both the objec-



tives and the actors) among radical trends, tend to favor not Islamic revolutions, but some of kind of “post-Islamist reformations”—a type of indigenous political reform marked by a blend of democratic ideals and, possibly, religious sensibilities. Given the continuous authoritarian rule that curbs organized and legal opposition

movements, the social *nonmovements* of fragmented and inaudible collectives may play a crucial role in instigating such transformation.

What are the “social nonmovements”? In general, *nonmovements* refers to the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations. The term *movement* implies that social nonmovements enjoy significant, consequential elements of social movements; yet they constitute distinct entities.

In the Middle East, the nonmovements have come to represent the mobilization of millions of the subaltern, chiefly the urban poor, Muslim women, and youth. The nonmovement of the urban dispossessed, which I have termed the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” encapsulates the discreet and prolonged ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large. It embodies the protracted mobilization of millions of detached and dispersed individuals and families who strive to enhance their lives in a lifelong collective effort that bears few elements of pivotal leadership, ideology, or structured organization. More specifically, I am referring to the mass movement of rural migrants who, in a quest for a better life-chance, embark on a steady and strenuous campaign that involves unlawful acquisition of lands and shelters, followed by such urban amenities as electricity, running water, phone lines, paved roads, and the like. To secure paid work, these migrants take over street sidewalks and other desirable public



spaces to spread their vending businesses. These masses of largely atomized individuals, by such parallel practices of everyday encroachments, have virtually transformed the large cities of the Middle East and by extension many developing countries, generating a substantial outdoor economy, new communities, and arenas of self-development in the urban landscapes; they inscribe their active presence in the configuration and governance of urban life, asserting their “right to city.”

This kind of spread-out and encroachment reflects in some way the nonmovements of the international illegal migrants. There exist now a massive border check, barriers, fences, walls, and police patrol. And yet they keep flooding—through the air, sea, road, hidden in back of trucks, trains, or simply on foot. They spread, expand, and grow in the cities of global North; they settle, find jobs, acquire homes, form families, and struggle to get legal protection. They build communities, church or mosque groups, cultural collectives, and visibly flood the public spaces. As they feel safe and secure, they assert their physical, social, and cultural presence in the host societies. Indeed, the

anxiety that these both national and international migrants have caused among the elites are remarkably similar. Cairo elite lament about the “invasion of *fellahin*” (peasants) from the dispersed Upper Egyptian countryside, and Istanbul elite warn of the encroachment of the

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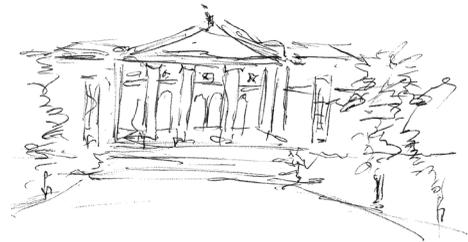
## Political Islam plays little part in the habitus of the urban disenfranchised.

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“black Turks,” meaning poor rural migrants from Anatolia, who, they say, have altogether ruralized and transformed the societal configuration of “our modern cities.” In a strikingly similar tone, white European elites express profound anxiety about the “invasion of foreigners”—Africans, Asians, and in particular Muslims—who they see as having overwhelmed Europe’s social habitat, distorting the European way of life by their physical presence and cultural modes—their hijab, mosques, and minarets. Truth is, rhetoric notwithstanding, the encroachment is real and is likely to continue. The struggles of such migrant poor in the Middle East or those of the international migrants constitute neither an organized and self-conscious social movement nor a coping mechanism, since people’s survival is not at the cost of themselves but of other groups or classes. These practices also move beyond simple acts of everyday resistance, for they engage in surreptitious and incremental encroachments to further their claims. Rather, they exemplify a poor people’s nonmovement.

It is often claimed that radical Islamism in the Middle East voices the interests of the poor as the victim of the urban ecology of overcrowded slums, where poverty, anomie, and lawlessness nurture extremism and violence, of which militant Islamism is a variant. But this view finds less plausibility when it is tested against the general reluctance of the urban poor to lend ideological support to this or that political movement. A pragmatic politics of the poor, one that ensures tackling concrete and immediate concerns, means that political Islam plays little part in the habitus of the urban disenfranchised. The underlying politics of the poor is expressed not in political Islam, but in a poor people’s nonmovement—the type of fluid, flexible, and self-producing strategy that is adopted not only by the urban poor, but also by other subaltern groups, including middle-class women.

Under the authoritarian patriarchal states, whether secular or religious, women’s activism for gender equality is likely to take on the form of nonmovement. Authoritarian regimes and conservative men impose severe restrictions on women making gender claims in a sustained fashion—establishing independent organizations and publications, lobbying, managing public protests, mobilizing ordinary women, acquiring



funding and resources, or establishing links with international solidarity groups. In the Iran of early 2007, for instance, women activists who initiated a “million-signature campaign” —to involve ordinary women nationally against misogynous laws—encountered constant harass-



ment, repression, and detention. Many young activists were beaten up, not only by morals police, but in some cases by their own male guardians. Recognizing such constraints on organized campaigns, women have tended to pursue a different strategy, one that involves intimately the mundane practices of everyday life, such as pursuing education, sports, arts, music, or working outside the home. These women did not refrain from performing the usually male work of civil servants, professionals, and public actors, from carrying out chores such as banking, taking cars to mechanics, or negotiating with builders. They did not stop jogging in public parks, climbing Mount Everest, or contesting (and winning) in male-dominated car racing, despite unsuitable dress codes. So, women established themselves as public actors, subverting the conventional public-private gender divide. Those who did

not wish to wear veils defied the forced hijab (headscarf) in public for more than two decades in a “war of attrition” with the public morals police until they virtually normalized what the authorities had lamented as “bad-hijabi”—showing a few inches of hair beneath the headscarves. In their legal battles, women challenged courthouses and judges’ decisions on child custody, ending marriages, and other personal status provisions.

These mundane doings had perhaps little resemblance to extraordinary acts of defiance, but rather were closely tied to the ordinary practices of everyday life. Yet they were bound to lead to significant social, ideological, and legal imperatives. Not only did such practices challenge the prevailing assumptions about women’s roles, but they were followed by far-reaching structural legal imperatives. Every claim they made became a stepping-stone for a further claim, generating a cycle of opportunities for demands to enhance gender rights. Thus, women’s quest for literacy and a college education enabled them to live alone, away from the control of their guardians, or led to a career that might demand traveling alone, supervising men, or defying male dominance.

The intended or unintended consequences of these disparate but widespread individual practices were bound to question the fundamentals of legal and moral codes, facilitating claims for gender equality. They at times subverted the effective governmentality of the state machinery and ideology, pushing it towards pragmatism, compromise, and discord. Women activists (as well as the authorities) were keenly aware of the incremental consequences of such structural encroachment and tried to take full

advantage of the possibilities it offered both to practical struggles and to conceptual/discursive articulations.

**H**ow do we explain the logic of practice in nonmovements? Social movements, especially those

## Theirs is not a politics of protest but of practice.

operating in the politically open and technologically advanced Western societies, are defined as the “organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities.” Very often, they are embedded in particular organizations and guided by certain ideologies; they pursue certain frames, follow specific leaderships, and adopt particular repertoires or means and methods of claim making. What, then, differentiates the type of nonmovements that I have discussed here so far? What are the distinct features of nonmovements in general?



First, nonmovements, or the collective actions of noncollective actors, tend to be action-oriented, rather than ideologically driven; they are overwhelmingly quiet, rather than audible, since the claims are made largely individually rather than by united groups. Second, whereas in social movements leaders usually mobilize the constituencies to put pressure on authorities to meet their demands, in nonmovements actors directly practice what they claim, despite government sanctions. Thus, theirs is not a politics of protest, but of practice, of redress through direct and disparate actions. Third, unlike social movements, where actors are involved usually in *extraordinary* deeds of mobilization and protestation that go beyond the routine of daily life (e.g., attending meetings, petitioning, lobbying, demonstrating, and so on), the nonmovements are made up of practices that are merged into, indeed are part and parcel of, the *ordinary* practices of everyday life. Thus, the poor people building homes, getting piped water or phone lines, or spreading their merchandise out in the urban sidewalks; the international migrants crossing borders to find new livelihoods; the women striving to go to college, playing sports, working in public, conducting “men’s work,” or choosing their own marriage partners; and the young appearing how they like, listening to what they wish, and hanging out where they prefer—all represent some core practices of nonmovements in the Middle East and similar world areas. The critical and fourth point is that these practices are not carried out by small groups of people acting on the political margins; rather, they are *common* practices of *everyday life* carried out by *millions* of people who albeit remain *fragmented*. In other words, the power

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of nonmovements does not lie in the unity of actors, which may then threaten disruption, uncertainty, and pressure on the adversaries. The power of nonmovements rests on the *power of big numbers*, that is, the consequential effect on norms and rules in society of many people simultaneously doing similar, though contentious, things.

**W**hy are nonmovements the prevalent form of activism in particular social and political settings, such as in the Muslim Middle East? The first factor relates to the fact that authoritarian states do not tolerate any independent and organized dissent. So, they tend either to fragment the subaltern, especially the political class, or to subsume them under their own populist institutions. But the fact is that subaltern classes themselves are also experiencing new dispositions. The growing fragmentation of labor, informalization, the shrinking of public sectors, and “NGOization”—all associated with the neoliberal restructuring—further curtail the popular capacity for organized activism in the form of, say, traditional trade union organizations. Yet such a subaltern is confronted by states that are remarkably incapable of or unwilling to fulfill their social and material needs and expectations—ones that are swelled up by the escalating urbanization, educational growth, media expansion, and citizen awareness—thus pushing the populace to take

matters into their own hands. When the states cannot provide adequate housing or jobs for the poor (and when the possible conventional legal channels, like lobbying, to achieve these goals are not trusted or get frustrated by state bureaucracy), the poor resort to direct squatting on land or shelters, or illegally spreading their street businesses. When the authorities fail to recognize gender rights or youth demands, women and youths may defy the official authority by directly executing their claims in the areas or institutions with least surveillance or otherwise appropriating and overturning those that enjoy official sanction. Such encroachments become possible—and this is the third point—because the authoritarian regimes, despite their omnipresent image, preside over the states—“soft states”—that lack the capacity, consistency, and machinery to impose full control even though they may wish to. Consequently, there exist many escapes, spaces, and uncontrolled holes—zones of relative freedom—that can be filled and appropriated by ordinary actors. The genius of subaltern subjects—nonmovements—lies precisely in discovering or generating such escapes.

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