Response to Howard and Walters

Eva Bellin

Surprise is an intrinsic fact of political life and its elimination, especially with regard to extraordinary moments of protest and revolution, is a vain endeavor. Prediction and explanation are fundamentally different enterprises. While scholars may be well-positioned to trace, retrospectively, the motivation, networks, leadership, and other contextual factors that fueled the events of 2011 and 1989, such analysis will never bestow the sort of predictive power that will eliminate the surprise of mass uprisings. Verstehen-esque studies of mobilization, while crucially enlightening, have limited capacity to augment our powers of foresight due to the fundamental gulf between agency and intention as well as the causal disconnect between precedent and prediction.

Dramatic events, especially unanticipated ones, force us to rethink our assumptions and approaches. Are there empirical realities that we missed? Are there analytic expectations that are misplaced? The constant churn of real world events poses challenges to our pre-conceived models. This is precisely why the study of politics is ever fascinating and enlivening.

In this spirit Howard and Walters find fault with disciplinary trends in political science which, they argue, leave us ill-equipped to explain extraordinary events such as the Arab spring of 2011. In some ways their critique is spot on; but in other ways, to my mind, they are quite wrong.

Howard and Walters are absolutely right that we would all benefit from broadening our research agenda in the Middle East beyond the question of authoritarian persistence and focus more explicitly on the question of mobilization. The uprisings of 2011–12 are indeed "important in and of themselves" (p. 400), irrespective of their impact on regime ouster or democratization. The protests of Bahrain and Syria are no less interesting than those of Tunisia and Egypt just because the former failed to usher in regime change while the latter succeeded. To the contrary, one might argue that the failure of mobilization to lead to regime change in Syria makes that case all the *more* interesting because the persistence of popular insurgence in Syria in 2011, even in the face of consistent, violent repression by a non-failing state, constitutes a direct challenge to conventional wisdom about the likely relationship between state repression and mobilization.[1] Beyond this, Howard and Walter's plea to decouple mobilization from the question of democratic transition finds further validation in the limited impact that mobilization patterns seem to be having on subsequent success at democratization in the Arab world. A paired comparison of the political trajectories of Egypt and Tunisia over the past three years suggests that their differential success regarding democratization has had very little to do with the dynamics of their respective uprisings and everything to do with issues of individual choice, strategy, and conviction—post revolution.[2]

That said, Howard and Walters' critique skitters off the mark due to imprecision in defining appropriate theoretical goals for political science, as well as confusion in identifying the best means to achieve those goals. At times the authors call the field to task for being "taken by surprise" by the events of 2011 (p. 394). This constitutes a failure of foresight. At other points, Howard and Walters acknowledge that prediction (especially of extraordinary events) is an unreasonable expectation. Instead they fault the field for a failure to *explain* the "why and how" of the uprisings (p. 399). But failure to predict and failure to explain are two very different things. Prediction implies the identification of a causal path that can be projected into the future and assumes a certain degree of determinism. Explanation involves a retrospective tracing of a causal path that does not assume determinism and its delineation does not eliminate the element of surprise. By confusing these very different intellectual projects as well as the best means to achieve them Howard and Walter distract us from the identification of true lapses in the study of the region and they encourage scholars to pursue research courses that won't or can't deliver on the objectives they lay out.

The failure to predict episodes of extraordinary popular mobilization is not unique to the Middle East. Hence it is wrong to hang this failure on "theoretical blinders" that distinguish the field (alleged to be an excessive focus on the mechanisms of authoritarian persistence or the marginalization of questions not tied to regime change). Rather, the

Eva Bellin is the Myra and Robert Kraft Professor of Arab Politics at the Brandeis University and the Crown Center for Middle East Studies (ebellin@brandeis.edu).

doi:10.1017/S1537592714000905

failure to predict the uprisings of 2011–12 should be chalked up to the instrinsic unpredictability of the subject at hand. For some analysts, *all* political affairs are immune to prediction (for the usual reasons related to human beings' capacity to learn and to exercise free will). But even analysts who are less skeptical about our capacity to generate predictive hypotheses about political affairs might still agree that there are some social phenomena that are more "predictable" than others. The consensus among leading theorists of social mobilization is that there is something inherently "unknowable" and hence unpredictable about the incidence of protest and revolution—especially in authoritarian contexts.

These theorists trace the inherent unpredictability of social mobilization to any number of factors.[3] Some scholars such as Timur Kuran point to the importance of collective "snowballing" to building the momentum of protest and revolution. In an authoritarian context where people are forced to hide their true political preferences the initiation of snowballing becomes very difficult and hence difficult to predict.[4] Some scholars such as Charles Kurzman point to the fact that, prior to being caught up in the drama of the moment, potential participants are unlikely to be able to predict even their own behavior. The intersubjectivity of decision-making in mobilization accounts for the inability to anticipate the individual's behavior and hence the incidence of mobilization more generally.[5] Other scholars such as Mark Beissinger emphasize the role of radical contingency in incidents of protest and revolution, the fact that very small decisions early on can have huge and unanticipated impact on the final outcome of an uprising due to the strategic interaction of the various factors "in play."[6] But whatever the reason, many leaders in this field, including Doug McAdams, Charles Tilly, Sid Tarrow, and Jeff Goodwin have abandoned the ambition to identify the causal factors behind the incidence of social mobilization, turning instead to the investigation of what people do when they mobilize, that is, their repertoires of collective action.[7]

While prediction of social mobilization may be beyond our reach, explanation (in the sense of retrospective tracing of causal paths) is far more attainable and can deliver leverage on how and why mobilization occurs. In fact, there has been no deficit in the field's accounting for the motivation behind the Arab Spring—one of the few areas where there has been no element of surprise at all. As Howard and Walters acknowledge, a great deal of work has identified the structural factors that motivated the uprisings—high levels of unemployment, high levels of government corruption, pervasive violation of human rights, among other factors. And yet, while these grievances explain the motivation behind insurrection they are not sufficient to explain its incidence. As social mobilization theorists have long pointed out, grievance may be a necessary condition of protest but it is not a sufficient condition. To get true leverage on the when and the how and the who of insurrection, we must look beyond grievance to a host of other factors. Among those suggested by different generations of social mobilization theorists are: the political opportunity structure, effective resource mobilization, "framing," and the availability of repertoires of contention. These analytic tools may help us get purchase on the remaining puzzles of the Arab Spring—not why this happened (because the motivating grievances have been known and bemoaned for decades) but rather, why now? And by whom?

To get purchase on the timing question and specifically why these grievances did not translate into major uprising prior to 2011 there is no place better to begin than with the "persistence of authoritarianism" literature that Howard and Walters so eagerly wish to set aside. In fact, one of the major contributions of this work has been to identify the different tactics embraced by the state to divert grievance from becoming effectively mobilized into regime-challenging opposition. The tactics embraced by the state included ingenious variations of carrots and sticks: repression, cooptation, sponsorship, distraction, and division. Countless studies of social and political forces in the Arab world—Islamist movements, civil society, labor unions, and political parties—elaborate these state stratagems. Thus the field did not show an "inability to satisfactorily account for popular mobilization" (p. 395).[8] To the contrary, it studied a wide array of mobilizational initiatives that emerged from society but which were often still-born or stunted by deliberate state intervention. Participation in collective acts of contestation was enormously costly and dangerous for most citizens in the Arab world. The question raised by the Arab Spring is why that cost (or at least the calculation of cost versus benefit) fell so dramatically and so suddenly for so many people in the region in 2011–2012.

Now what sort of research will best deliver on this question? Howard and Walters recommend a multi-faceted agenda. They call for more research about "forms of everyday political engagement and mobilization" (p. 400), more study of "ordinary citizens' own interpretations of their experience with politics" (p. 397), more inquiry on "how political repression and participation are debated and enacted locally" (p. 395), more research on "how the uprisings unfolded" (p. 398). They applaud interpretivist scholarship, work on domination and resistance, political spectacle, and quotidian forms of political engagement. They argue that such research will make "scholars . . . better prepared to understand future developments" (p. 401) and "better suited to explain political change" (p. 401).

I do not question the intrinsic value of research of this sort. It is all absolutely essential to delivering on the Weberian goal of *verstehen*—to understand the meaning and motivation behind the subjects we study. Such research will also deliver a more textured, accurate, and authentic account of the events on the ground. But will

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714000905 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such work deliver predictive leverage? Would such work have eliminated the surprise of uprising, the very failing Howard and Walters hang on the discipline?

I am doubtful—for two reasons. First, while much as this work will give us purchase on the dynamics of contention that has already occurred in the region, such work does not necessarily give us purchase on what is to come next. To be sure, analyzing patterns of past contention gives us insight into some of the resources available for mounting effective resistance in the future: organizational networks, leaders, ideas, cultural repertoires. These resources may shape the possibility of future resistance. But there is nothing deterministic about this. Paradoxically perhaps, understanding *precedent does not eliminate surprise*.

An excellent example of this can be found in the case of organized labor in Egypt. The mid-2000s witnessed an extraordinary burst of contention, very well documented by Joel Beinin and others.[9] And yet despite this precedent and the development of remarkable repertoires, networks, and leaders of contention, organized labor did not play a vanguard role in the Egyptian uprising of January 2011. Individual labor activists joined the fray as individuals, but the trade union movement held back and only mounted sympathetic strikes very belatedly and with a focus on economic objectives (not regime change).[10] By contrast, many social forces in Egypt that had never significantly participated in protests before (such as educated youth and the urban lower middle class) were central players in the protests. In other words, there was no one-to-one correlation between prior precedents of mobilization and contention and the incidence (not to mention the size or character) of the mobilization and contention witnessed. Identifying precedents of contention in the region did not eliminate the essential surprise of the uprising in Egypt.[11]

But there is a second reason I am doubtful about the predictive utility of "*verstehen*-esque" studies—studies that give us a sense of "ordinary citizen's own interpretations of their experience with politics" (p. 397). To say such work will eliminate the surprise of major incidents of mobilization is to *confuse agency with intention*. This sort of research enables us to get into the minds of the activists who lead contentious mobilization. It gives us insight into their intentions. However, it is utterly clear that the intentions of activisits in no way provides a blueprint for the events that follow. In the case of Egypt, the activists who organized the opening protest on Police Day, January 25, 2011, had no idea that their activism would lead to the fall of the Mubarak regime just 18 days later. And this is by their own admission. Clearly human agency was central to the mobilization of protest and regime change in Egypt. However, the course of events went well beyond the intentions of its instigators and so getting a better grasp on their state of mind, while very worthy of study, will hardly eliminate the surprise of events like the Arab Spring.

Prediction is the summum bonum of the hard sciences but I have long been skeptical about the unqualified embrace of this objective for political science. As I have argued elsewhere, I am persuaded that a more appropriate goal for the field is "portable insight."[12] Studies in the spirit of *verstehen* contribute to this. So does tracing causal pathways. The systematic, comparative exploration of any number of hypothesized relationships, such as that between prior social networks and levels of mobilization or the accessibility of new communication technologies and levels of mobilization, will certainly give us analytic leverage on the incidence of protest in the Arab Spring. But it is unlikely to eliminate the element of surprise in the study of politics. And thankfully so. That, after all, is half the fun.

Notes

1 Lichbach 1987.
2 Bellin 2013.
3 The following paragraph draws on Bellin 2012, 142.
4 Kuran 1989.
5 Kurzman 2004; see especially 335–339.
6 Beissinger n.d. Kurzman 2004 makes a similar point: "It is possible to argue that revolutions . . . are explainable afterward but inherently unpredictable beforehand . . . . Revolutions may be products of tiny initial choices and an infinity of subsequent turning points and interactions that can be narrowed down or identified only in hindsight."
7 Beinin and Vairel 2011; 13; Goodwin 2011.
8 Elsewhere their language is "overlooked questions about grassroots mobilization" (p. 399).
9 See Beinin 2010, 14–15. This paragraph draws on my forthcoming piece, "Pondering the Extraordinary: Description, Explanation and Theorization of the Arab Spring."
10 Bishara, "Authoritarian Institutions as Objects of Contestation: Challenges to State Corporatism in Egypt," 2013. This is not to say that precedents of labor activism played no role in Egypt's uprising. Clearly the April 6 movement played a crucial role in mobilizing protest. Its networks, its repertoire, its solidarity were essential to the building the momentum of protest in Egypt.
11 Nor frankly did studies of "forms of everyday political engagement." Scholars like Assef Bayat and Diane Singerman had done excellent work on "everyday forms of resistance" conducted by ordinary people in the Middle East. To my knowledge, neither scholar anticipated the events of the Arab Spring.
12 Thanks to Grzegorz Ekiert for this term. See Bellin 2012, 142.

References

Bayat, Asef. 2010. *Life As Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Beinin, Joel. 2010. *Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt*, 14–15. https://tavaana.org/en/content/justice-all-struggle-worker-rights-egypt (accessed May 19, 2014).

Beinin, Joel, and Frédéric Vairel. 2011. *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Beissinger, Mark. N.d. "The Action-Reaction Dynamic in Political Upheavals." Unpublished manuscript. Princeton, University.

Bellin, Eva. 2012. "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Arab Spring." *Comparative Politics* 44(2): 127–149.

———. 2013. "Drivers of Democracy: Lessons from Tunisia." Crown Center Middle East Brief No. 75, August. http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb75.html (accessed January 10, 2014).

———. 2014. "Pondering the Extraordinary: Description, Explanation, and Theorization of the Arab Spring." *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 5(1): 44–59.

Bishara, Dina. 2013. "Authoritarian Institutions as Objects of Contestation: Challenges to State Corporatism in Egypt." Ph.D. diss., George Washington University.

Goodwin, Jeff. 2011. "Why We Were Surprised Again by the Arab Spring." *Swiss Political Science Review* 17(4): 452–56.

Kuran, Timur. 1989. "Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution." *Public Choice* 61(1): 41–74.

Kurzman, Charles. 2004. "Can Understanding Undermine Explanation? The Confused Experience of Revolution." *Philosophy of Social Sciences* 34(1): 328–51.

Lichbach, Mark. 1987. "Deterrence or Escalation? The Puzzle of Aggregate Studies of Repression and Dissent." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31(2): 266–97.

Singerman, Diane. 1996. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.