

BOOK REVIEW

L’Egitto tra rivoluzione e controrivoluzione. Da piazza Tahrir al colpo di stato di una borghesia in armi

By Gianni Del Panta. Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019. 284 pp. 24,70 €.

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The rapid trajectory of the Egyptian revolution, from the resignation of Hosni Mubarak in early 2011 to the military coup in 2013, is without any doubt the event that has most contributed to changing the perception of the Arab uprising, from a spring full of hopes to a winter of disillusionment, violence, and instability. Due to their scale, complexity, and influence, in recent years, Egyptian events have been the subject of numerous studies that have examined the various aspects of the failed revolution of 2011, through different theoretical and methodological approaches. However, few authors have attempted to put together the pieces of the puzzle providing a single and consistent explanation. This book does just that. This ambitious goal is made explicit since the introduction and, despite the difficulties of dealing with such a vast subject, the outcome is undoubtedly more than satisfactory.

The book is mainly based on secondary sources. The author’s choice is well explained because of his willingness to treat the topic in a comprehensive way, covering several decades of Egyptian history: from the 1952 Nasser coup to recent post-2013 coup developments. This choice must not be misleading: this book is not about a historical analysis of the 2011 revolution. On the contrary, the analytical approach foresees a funnel of causality that searches for the distant causes of recent events in Egyptian history of the 20th century, being able to mobilize these together with more proximate factors. This is also reflected in the choice to divide the volume into three main parts: the pre-2011 historical section, which lays the foundations for understanding recent events; the short period of the revolution between January and February 2011, which ends with the overthrow of Mubarak; and finally the tumultuous period of political instability that ends with the *de facto* end of the revolution with the military coup in 2013.

The main thesis of the book is that the revolution, defined both as a revolutionary process and as a revolutionary outcome with its radical ‘political, social, and ideological’ transformation, has failed due to the inability of the revolutionary movement to create an alternative power center. Inherent in this perspective, the author provides a true social analysis of the Egyptian revolution, by focusing on the constantly evolving dynamics between social classes. The ability to anchor the analysis of political events to the underlying social structure is certainly one of the merits of this book, which distinguishes it from most of the mainstream institutionalist literature.

The perspective on Egyptian society also allows clearing the field of the hypothesis about a potential democratic development of the revolution. Here the message of the book is crystal clear: among all possible outcomes, and given the starting conditions, the democratic transition was the least likely conclusion. In the face of the January 2011 street protests and the progressive but relentless expansion of the revolutionary coalition in those days, the Egyptian army finally took note of Mubarak’s inability to solve the problem through a compromise. From that moment on, a complex game began between the army and the most organized opposition party (the

Muslim Brotherhood) which eventually ended with the victory of the former 2 years later and the installation of a military regime. The weakness of the other opposition forces, in the first place of the left, and the preponderant role of the military in the state and in the economy, therefore foreshadowed two likely outcomes since the very beginnings: the return to the military dictatorship, or the taking over of the brotherhood in a perspective inspired by the AKP in Turkey (not the AKP of the democratic aspirations of the early years of the century, but rather that of authoritarian Islamism of the 10's). The choice, therefore, was between authoritarianism of religious inspiration and military authoritarianism. The book very well explains the causes of the final victory of the military, highlighting the multiple errors made during the Morsi presidency by the Muslim Brotherhood and its inability to build coalitions (albeit temporary) with the other opposition forces, as happened instead in Tunisia, and nevertheless, it describes the long-term structural fragility of the new Al-Sisi's regime.

The author's thesis contributes to the debate on the conceptualization of revolution and on the understanding of the peculiar Egyptian events. On the first point, however, it is striking to note how, although the revolution is defined in general terms, actually the revolutionary outcome, to be considered as such, is reduced to a single possible conclusion: an easily recognizable socialist revolution, carried out by a 'Leninist' revolutionary party capable of organizing popular committees in factories, workplaces, neighborhoods, and campaigns. Eventually, this would generate a situation where the new regime 'break with the liberal frame' and the market economy. The fact that also a possible success of the Muslim Brotherhood could be defined as a 'revolutionary outcome' is never taken into consideration by the author. Quite the opposite, the Brotherhood is associated with the military as an agent of the 'counter-revolution'. Now, in the opinion of the writer of this review, a 'revolutionary outcome' cannot be limited to one specific ideology: revolutions are characterized by multifinality in its outcome, and the Iranian case is concrete proof of this claim. Likewise, blaming liberal and social democratic opposition for using the lexicon 'of human rights, defense of minorities, legalistic reformism, and political responsibility' instead of that of 'radical change' is at least questionable. Isn't the implementation of, and respect for these principles a radical change in itself, compared to the previous authoritarianism? Even the installation of a fragile democratic regime, like in Tunisia, would have been an actual revolutionary outcome. In summary, if the author explains very well how the democratic outcome was unlikely, the same is certainly true also for a socialist revolution in Egypt, given the total lack of the social, political, and international underlying conditions for this type of revolution to occur. On the contrary, a truly 'revolutionary' outcome similar to that of Iran, or contemporary Turkey under Erdogan, could have been among the likely results of the 2011 uprising.

A second point that deserves further debate and study is the role played by international factors throughout the revolutionary process. This dimension is explicitly excluded from the analysis, for the choice to avoid the multiplication of explanatory factors. However, it is difficult to understand the choices of the Egyptian military without taking into account, at least, the evolution of the US position toward Egyptian events and the complex relations between Egypt and Israel. Far from being a direct explanatory variable, an examination of the international context of that period could have facilitated understanding the range of choices and the freedom of action that domestic actors faced during those intense years.

All in all, this book is an essential tool for understanding the reasons for the failed Egyptian revolution. Del Pantà shows all his theoretical preparation and analytical skills in this ambitious project. If you were looking for the next generation of Italian political scientists specialized in Middle East Politics, you've definitely found it.