

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT IN HEGEL AND THE ARAB SPRING

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Abstract

Hegel's position indicates that conflict is natural. In this paper, we wish to explore, from a simple analytic point of view Hegel's triadic movement called the 'dialectic'. With this, he developed one of the enduring achievements, a philosophy of history based on change and freedom. He asserted that human nature like everything else; changes from one historical epoch to another. Hegel's enterprise was not purely a historical account, but a way to comprehend the entire evolution of human civilization in a comprehensive perspective, with an intention of understanding the meaning and rationality behind the evolution. This rationality of world history is the progress of consciousness of freedom. For the past few years, the Arab World which according to Hegel had been static and outside the framework of world history owing to the unchanging nature of their civilization has experienced chains of conflicts. The region that endured abuse and misery for more than a century has risen against the despots to the admiration of the entire world. We therefore, set out among other aims to unravel the root causes of the uprising. Using analytical method, we intend to establish whether or not the recent uprising is a response to or awakening of the consciousness of freedom as posited by Hegel. It is our conclusion that unless despotism is uprooted, and human rights and freedom restored in the Arab world, there will be no end to conflicts in the region.

1. Introduction

Conflict is in fact, a primordial to all things. What matters is how to manage it to ameliorate or completely quell its negative effects. Wars, Opposition, strike action or protest, boycott as well as passive resistance, are all forms of conflict. They ought to be there as a check for a minimum social order. The world is a severely bifurcated society. This assertion is not new to anyone-young or old, educated or illiterate, man or woman. It is replete in every sphere of human endeavour. There is no nation in the world that does not have a multicultural background. Similarly, Anjov opines that there is "No nation that can boast of speaking one language. No nation that can proudly point to one common religious belief system"¹. These undoubtedly breed conflicts. Conflict has been the scourge of humanity from the earliest times and has been seen as what underlies every reality. "Indeed, conflict lurks in all human affair as a reason d'etre of all human dealings. It is the underlying principle of all history."² We can say in this sense, that conflict possesses a metaphysical value as some philosophers like Heraclitus of Ephesus and Jean-Paul Sartre hold.

As stated earlier, Hegel's literary convictions indicate that conflict is natural. With his triadic movement called the 'dialectics', he developed a philosophy of history based on change and freedom. Conversely, the Oriental World for him is static, non-dialectical and outside the framework of world history³ owing to their unchanging nature of civilization. They failed to inculcate freedom with their intellectually rigid and long calcified political system, purged of consciousness.

Recently in the Arab world, the surge of the Arab spring has eclipsed the activities of the region. The world did not wait long to witness a chain reaction within the region that has suffered abuse and misery for more than a century. These extraordinary events metamorphosed profoundly cemented into an unstoppable cycle and grew into an inspiration. We propose therefore, to examine critically the root causes and consequences of the revolution. Establish a link between the present crises and the socio-political formation of the Arab world and whether or not the recent uprising is a response or awakening in search of the consciousness of freedom as posited by Hegel. We maintain de facto that unless the Arabic despotism is obliterated and people's deprived freedom and rights restored, respected and revitalized with a kind of political system preferably, democracy, there will be no end to the conflict in the Arab world as monarchism has become an extreme cliché. This paper is divided into five parts; the introduction, nature of conflict in Hegel, Arab Spring, the Arab Spring in the light of Hegel's dialectics and conclusion.

2. Nature of Conflict in Hegel

Hegel offers a rather unique take on conflict. Although he does not define what conflict is, nor even use the word like we do, a large portion of his work can be interpreted in terms of conflict and its unfolding. In these lines, Hegel talks about a disruption of the norm as a negation of the status quo. Conflict is the negation of the given situation, whether big, small, violent, non-violent, within the borders of mutual understanding or not; a negation (conflict) is a contradiction.

Treating conflict as the only way to overcome the status quo and achieve a better state of being, a Hegelian framework suggests that conflicts are natural phenomena, a result of the duality of existence. This suggests a dialectical understanding of nature, as well as conflict. But what do we mean by the dialectical nature of the conflict? To answer that question, let us further explore the idea of dialectics, what exactly they are and why they are so central and important in Hegelian philosophy. "The philosophical system of Hegel" for Odimegwu "could be described as a complex centripetalling dialectical triads."⁴ According to Hegel, everything in the universe is dialectical. Conflicts are constructed as dialectical. It is nearly impossible to see a non-dialectical conflict. There is constant unfolding of narratives-counter narratives and action-reaction between agents. A dialectical way of thinking is the basis of Hegelian understanding. Quoting Hegel, Speight claims that not only "the very nature of thinking is dialectic...finite things are inherently dialectical."⁵ Perhaps the best example that can be provided is found in the preface of the Phenomenology. With the following example Hegel shows that dialectics are not just an unfolding of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, but an interlocking system with many layers:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms

are not just distinguished from one another they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.⁶

According to understanding of dialectics in this metaphor, conflicts, though “they negate the given situation” cannot exist if it were not for the conditions in which they happen.⁷ In other words, every situation inherently has its own negation, every status quo inherently has its resistance, every couple inherently has their couple problems, and every war inherently opens the door for anti-war movements. If it was not for the inequalities in the U.S. political system, for example, there would not be a civil rights movement. If there was not any conflict, there would not be the field of conflict resolution.

In addition to this big picture sense of dialectical existence of conflicts, we can identify dialectical patterns in conflicts themselves. During a mediation session, we will most likely hear positions and counter-positions, arguments and counter-arguments, narratives and counter-narratives. A party will employ a negation when he or she is confronted with a position or an argument that differs from their own. Two countries at war will have different perspectives on the history of their dispute and those perspectives will most likely try to negate each other.

This means a conflict will unfold in a dialectical pattern. When A contradicts B, this means these two parties are in a state of conflict. Where B is the status quo, A is its negation; where B is the thesis, A is the antithesis. Their meeting will result in a synthesis, regardless of an intervention. Synthesis means nothing more than the clash of thesis and antithesis. What kind of synthesis it will bring about, however, might depend on the intervention or lack thereof. For example: There might be a synthesis which becomes an intractable conflict with a constant stalemate, just as experienced between Israel and Palestine. There might be a synthesis which becomes an intractable conflict, not with a constant stalemate, but with lack of communication and lack of willingness to engage the conflict, just like there has been between Turkey and Armenia. The synthesis might unfortunately end up being a violent act, such as murder, war, or genocide.

In the three cases above, the newly established synthesis becomes the new status quo. In such cases, the intervener needs to shoulder the role of “contradiction” as he or she tries to negate the conflict situation. The purpose of the clash between the new status quo, “the conflict,” and the intervener is to supply a momentum, as aforementioned. The momentum will be towards “the Understanding.” Without having to confront the conflict as an established status quo, it would be best to guide the clashing parties to a synthesis that would bring the parties closer to “the Understanding.” Such perfect intervention, unfortunately, is rarely the case.

In a more macro sense, conflict can be understood as a negation of the status quo and peace efforts as a negation of the conflict. The resulting product would be ‘the synthesis’ or the new status quo which also has a further negation, and this dynamic would keep unfolding. Furthermore, Hegelian framework of conflict has to do with freedom as much as it has to do with the dialectical nature of conflicts. Why the concept of freedom is important for a Hegelian framework of conflict goes back to the dialectical understanding of conflict. With a swift dialectical move, Hegel submits that the essence of Spirit is Freedom: The nature of Spirit may

be understood by a glance at its direct opposite—Matter. As the essence of Matter is Gravity, so, on the other hand, we may affirm that the substance, the essence of Spirit is Freedom.⁸ In furtherance of this, he maintains that:

Matter possesses gravity in virtue of its tendency toward a central point. It is essentially composite; consisting of parts that exclude each other. ... Spirit, on the contrary, may be defined as that which has its centre in itself. It has not a unity outside, but has already found it; it exists in and with itself. Matter has its essence out of itself; spirit is self contained existence.⁹

Hegel goes on to explain that the unrelenting restlessness of the Spirit's consciousness constantly pushes for more Recognition. Defining the Spirit's measure of Recognition as Freedom, Hegel concludes, "the final cause of the World at large, we allege to be the consciousness of its own freedom on the part of the Spirit, and ipso facto, the reality of that freedom."¹⁰ This means that every conflict in the world happens because there is a lack of Recognition and Freedom in the conflict situation.

This brings us to Hegel's idea that every entity in the world, from humans to states, is related to each other with mutual recognition and freedom. To explain this further, let us contrast Hegel's idea of free will to relational freedom. Hegel does not oppose an understanding of "fully reflexive, free human mindedness."¹¹ This means a power to create a world in one's own image, so to speak, or a free will of agency. Although he does not oppose it, such an understanding of free will does not concern Hegel. According to Hegel, the existence of relational freedom is much more prominent, liberating, or limiting than any kind of free will one can ever possess. A "perfect freedom and independence, 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I,'" is the idea of freedom Hegel sees as most important. This "being with self in another" is a collectively achieved relational state.¹² It is involving oneself, relating oneself to others, being active with others via deeds and practices.

Such an idea of relational freedom focuses on our relationships, which can enable more for us, instead of mainly focusing on the enabling power of individual agency. According to Hegel's ontology, world history is a process by which the Mind actualizes self-consciousness. This means history is teleological, that is, it is going towards an end. It also means historical progress is governed by the Mind and, at the end, the Mind will reach a state in which it can see itself perfectly in what has become the realization of this entire dialectical unfolding as well as of the status that is reached at the end, "being with self in another."¹³

3. The Arab Spring

A nation's history cannot be fixed at a certain starting point, nor can it be dated from a specific event. It rather comprises a continuum of events emanating from beginnings that may belong to a remote past as was the case for the Arab nation – although the course of her history has not adhered to a single pattern. The Arabian Peninsula was the original home of these peoples, and the hallmarks of modern Arab identity are, on the ethnic dimension, Arabic language and culture, and on the religious dimension, Islam.

According to Sati al-Husri, the most influential theorist of modern Arab nationalism,

Every person who speaks Arabic is an Arab. Everyone who is affiliated with these people is an Arab. If he does not know or if he does not cherish his Arabism, then we must study the reasons for his position. It may be a result of ignorance – then we must teach him the truth. It may be because he is unaware or deceived - then we must awaken him and reassure him. It may be a result of selfishness – then we must work to limit his selfishness.¹⁴

Arabia's geographical position between India and the Far East on the one hand, and the Mediterranean World and the West, on the other hand, placed it at astride the international trade routes. This had a decisive influence on both the settled and nomadic societies of the Peninsula. The region has been subjected to a series of domination by external powers and elites. At the height of its power in the 16th and 17th centuries, the tri-continental Ottoman Empire controlled much of the Middle East and North Africa. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, all parts of the Arab World (apart from Saudi Arabia and Northern Yemen) fell under European imperial domination. In the 1950s and 1960s, most states won independence, but soon came under control of military dictatorships.

The Arab Spring, or Jasmine Revolutions, began on 17th December, 2010 after the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi a trader in Tunisia, in response to police corruption and what he regarded as ill-treatment towards him, sparking a wave of popular protest against the leadership of Tunisia. Additional important factor to note was the lack of freedom many citizens experienced, human rights abuses and the recent rapid increase in commodity prices, particularly food and oil. Among the uprisings' figureheads was the 'blue bra girl', a peaceful protestor at Tahrir Square, brutally beaten and stripped of her clothes by policemen¹⁵.

Furthermore, many Arab states were 'Kleptocracies'. This means the ruling elites used their power to further their own causes, often financially. This was more-often than not done overtly. Revolutions have occurred in Tunisia, and Egypt; a civil war in Libya resulting in the fall of its regime; civil uprising in Bahrain, Yemen and till date in Syria; major protest in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Oman; and minor protests in Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Western Sahara. The protests have shared techniques of civil resistance in sustained campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, as well as the use of social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness in the face of state attempts at repression and internet censorship.¹⁶ Many demonstrations have met violent responses from authorities, as well as from pro-government militias and counter-demonstrators.

The ripple effects of the uprising have been felt in many places. Tunisian President Zine El Abidine, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on 14th January, 2011, following the Tunisian revolution protests. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned on 11th February 2011 after 18 days of massive protests, ending his 30 year presidency. Former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown on 23rd August 2011, after the National Transitional Council (NTC) took control of Bab al-Azizia. He was killed on 20th October 2011, in his hometown of Sirte after the NTC took control of the city. Additionally, governments in Jordan have been removed – instigated by King

Abdullah. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al- Maliki then made a promise not to seek re-election at the end of his term in office. He kept the promise and handed over to Haider al-Abadi on 8th November, 2014. Economic concessions have been made by King Hamad of Bahrain, Sultan Qaboos of Oman and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. King Mohammed of Morocco has made political concessions in order to maintain relative peace and stability within his country.¹⁷

The effects of the Arab Spring are numerous and far reaching. Firstly, if the protesters achieve one of their principal aims, then Arab nations will begin to hold free and fair elections – democracy will (hopefully) become commonplace in the Arab world. The principal near-term consequences of the Arab Spring, therefore, are that a new global spotlight has been directed at dictatorial regimes. All of these regimes are now scrambling to buy off popular discontent with salary increases, new state subsidy packages and fake promises of political reforms. Simultaneously, new recognition has been given to democratic movements and the aspirations of millions of Arab and Muslims who seek political freedom, social justice and dignity. Prior to the Arab Spring, it was long assumed that the voice of the region did not matter in terms of Western policy. There was a tacit assumption that this voice was too fractured, too politically immature or incoherent or too radical to be taken seriously. Akbar Ahmed, the former High Commissioner of Pakistan to United Kingdom, observed that the uprising has both short-term and long-term implications. Both are enormous. Both are historic. For the first time ever, there is a genuine revolution reverberating throughout the Arab world and it has been encouraging for three reasons. First, it was led by young people – idealists – many of them skillfully utilizing social media and technology. Secondly, there was relatively little violence used by those in revolt. Thirdly, the quick successes in Tunisia and Egypt spread like wide fire throughout the region. The revolts had a common characteristics running across the nations – these include but not limited to – Civil Disobedience, Civil Resistance, Demonstrations, Online Activism, Protest Camps, Rebellion, Revolution, Strike Actions, Uprising and even Urban Warfare; and by last count over 38, 000 people have offered their lives for the struggle.¹⁸

The countries where citizens are more actively agitating or fighting for their rights – Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen are the more advanced to date – have very different local conditions and forms of governance, with ruling elites displaying a wide range of legitimacy in the eyes of their people. Governments have responded to the challenge in a variety of ways, from the flight of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan leaderships to violent military repression in Syria, and Bahrain, to the attempt to negotiate limited constitutional transformations in Jordan, Morocco and Oman. A few countries that have not experienced major demonstrations – Algeria and Sudan are the most significant – are likely to experience domestic effervescence in due course. Only a few wealthy oil producers (like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) seem largely exempted, for now, from this wave of citizen demands.

Two words capture every important dimension of the Arab Awakening: “non-recognition” and “legitimacy”. They explain why the Arab region is erupting, and what needs to be done to satisfy these popular demands. The typical Arab citizen, with few exceptions, has felt humiliated and unrecognized in recent decades by his or her government. Hundreds of millions of Arabs feel they have been denied their human rights and their citizenship rights, the result of decades of socio-economic stresses and political deprivations. These include petty and large-scale

corruption: police brutality; abuse of power; favoritism; unemployment; poor wages; unequal opportunities; inefficient or nonexistent public services; lack of freedom of expression and association; state control of media, culture and education; and many other dimensions of the modern Arab security state. At the same time, ordinary men and women in countries across the region have seen small groups of families in the ruling elite; grow fabulously rich, simply because of their connections.

Young people sparked the revolt because they are generally the ones who suffer the most grievous consequences of the failed political order. They are unable to enjoy life's full opportunities and rewards, in terms of education, employment and income and material well-being. Millions of young Arabs took to the streets in greater part of 2011 because they refused to consent in either the legacy of stunted citizenship or the prospect of limited life opportunities. Their increasingly mediocre and irrelevant educations meant they had difficulty finding jobs that pay enough to live decently get married and start a family. They saw in front of them, an entire lifetime of restricted opportunities and stolen rights. When they tried to speak out against unfair and corrupt practices, they were prevented from doing so by police and security agencies. The revolt we are witnessing is not about ideology. It is mostly about men and women who, so brutalized by their own and foreign powers, are asserting their fundamental humanity – their right to use all their human faculties; to read, speak, listen, think, debate, create and enjoy to the full extent of their God-given ability or desire, whether in culture, politics, art, media, technology or any other arena.

A widely shared public sentiment across the region is that Arab ruling elites have responded more to the dictates of foreign powers than to their own people. When decisions have been made internally, they have primarily carried out the interests of the ruling families and their cronies, or the security and military systems that were the ultimate power brokers. Nowhere in national decision-making did ordinary Arab citizens feel that their voices were heard, or that their rights and sentiments mattered. The Arab Awakening is in the first stages of creating a citizen-based sovereignty that values social justice and equal opportunity. It is an audacious quest, for Mohamed Bouazizi and the millions of Arabs inspired by him, just as it was for Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement in Southern America. Succinctly put, Moncef Marzouki, Caretaker President of Tunisia in March 2014 insists that:

The 'Arab Spring' is still in its infancy and may continue for decades. It will not fail, even if it stalls here or there.[...] It is a river sweeping forward only, so it will never flow backwards.¹⁹

4. The Arab Spring in the light of Hegel's Dialectics

Many Philosophers of history agree that the force of philosophical history is conflict but are in disharmony over what the conflict is about. For instance, St Augustine of Hippo held world history as that of salvation – man's fall and his redemption.²⁰ But Immanuel Kant claimed it is the struggle between the social and antisocial tendencies in man.²¹ Hegel thought it to be the conflict of opposites as the Absolute Spirit works freedom through man.²² In the same vein, Karl Marx maintained that the spirit of history in the strict sense is the class struggle arising from economic situation.²³ Francis Fukuyama interpreted Hegel to hold world history as the history of

man's struggle for universal recognition and declared that the same history has ended with the emergence of liberal democracy where such universal recognition is achieved.²⁴

Mohamed Bouazizi inspired the mass protests that have planted the seeds for stable citizenship across the region – the spontaneous action of a single indignant and dehumanized person resonated widely and powerfully with millions because of his refusals to live in humiliation. His self-immolation and refusal to be dehumanized are direct quests for this universal recognition and this did not wait too long to yield results as it sparked off mass agitation for freedom and justice whose opposites characterized the entire Arabian space. Fukuyama captures this more clearly as he quotes Hegel thus:

And it is by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance... The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.²⁵

We can at least say that according to Hegel there are certain people who exceed their time and who progress the Spirit of World History. People who embody the History of the World are according to Hegel not bound by the laws and morality of their time (since they are beyond it).²⁶ They are justified by the results of their actions, which they might not be necessarily aware of. To use Hegel's favorite example, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and especially, Napoleon Bonaparte who introduced so many reforms in Europe in so many different areas that no one else could have pushed the progression of World History if it was not for Napoleon. Through them the World Spirit, in special ways, realizes significant progress in its march through history. The interest of philosopher in these individuals is not in their particular passions but in what the World Spirit has accomplished for itself through them²⁷. That is why, according to Hegel, the millions of deaths in Napoleonic wars were justified.²⁸ Arguably, were Hegel to present another list of historical individuals Mohamed Bouazizi would have been on the merit list.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, one of the consequences of a dialectical mode of thinking is the acceptance of the idea that nothing ever ends but rather evolves in a dialectical unfolding towards a goal. The realization of this dialectical unfolding and its end is called "the Understanding." In line with this, the incessant harassment of policemen and the bottleneck government system translated into the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi to form the thesis which accordingly culminated to the horror of mass protest and mobilization against their government as the anti-thesis and the resultant removals of Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and death of Muammar Gaddafi of Lybia as well as the continuum in other Arab nations, the Synthesis. The movement is still on and recurring towards the goal of self-recognition and freedom in many other eastern countries like Syria, Bahrain and Iraq.

The Orient was understood to be static in time and place. It was understood as being eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself. This was in opposition to the West which saw itself as being dynamic, innovative, and expansionist. Succinctly for Hegel, "the east knew and to the present day knows that one is free."²⁹ Ironically, for the past nine years through their consistent

violent and non-violent movements the Arabians have shown the progress of consciousness of freedom which is the rationality of world history.³⁰ They currently know that one can't just be free, if not all, many should be. Therefore, through civil disobedience, strife and strike they upturned the status quo in the Arab World which is a dialectical understanding of nature. This explains more why through their historical individual - Mohamed Bouazizi who refused to be humiliated and inspired the mass protests; the Arab World has remained in the world headlines seeking attention from within and international communities to be liberated from the inhuman treatments meted by their government and agents.

5. Conclusion

This essay did not intend more than to humbly introduce the basics of Hegelian ideas to the field of conflict and offer an opportunity for humanity to consider basic merits of dialectics, relational freedom, and the Understanding. Accordingly, the Arab Spring proves once more that freedom, democracy, rule of law, social justice, human dignity and human rights are not mere inventions of the West, as it is often alleged, but universal, inviolable and inalienable values that spring from the very nature of human beings. Again the Arab Spring corroborates the claim that power belongs to the people, every nation has the right to choose its leaders and the right to governance. Leaders who along the line turn into tyrants lose the legitimacy and authority to continue to govern their people. Consequently, they can be sacked peacefully or violently as the case may be.

Despite the long list bumps and rigours along the road to true democracy in the world at large and in the Arab World particularly, I think and feel that the way out is Democracy. This choice is based on the fact that the option it provides will be hinged on the consent of the governed. The people are sovereign- they are the highest form of political authority. The people will be free to criticize their leaders and representatives genuinely, who cannot afford to be autocratic, iron-handed and barbaric like their monarchs. They will observe how their leaders conduct the business of government.

Democracy is a system or rule of laws, and not by individuals, the law protect the rights of citizens, maintain order, and limit the power of government. It is our submission that with this type of political system in place, the incessant and lingering conflicts in the Arab World will be grossly minimized and will become a thing of the past. Freedom and justice, a direct irony of the choking grips of their monarchs and dictators will be enjoyed in the political terrain of the Arab World. Affirming the positions and conclusion of this study, the thoughts of Saleh, Chalala writes:

Since the “doom and gloom” chorus is founded on the new authoritarian policies of Islamist Tunisia and Egypt, Saleh finds the political and social hardships caused by these regimes to be expected and even necessary in order to achieve genuine democracy. As Hegel introduced into the discussion, the “negative” manifested by the immense sacrifices of the Egyptian and the Tunisian peoples for the past two years, are a precondition to achieve the “positive,” that is the birth of genuine democracy. It is the Hegelian

dialectic; an idea challenged by counter idea, to subsequently produce a new idea.³¹

Endnotes

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