

## **On the streets of Turin, next to the Arab Spring Fragments of imagination to eccentric and hybrid Europe**

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### **Europe: (re)constructing collective imagination**

This article takes into account the relationship between manifestations of protest which took place in Turin during 2011 and the Arab Spring which occurred across North Africa.

In particular, after the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, on the 17th of December 2010, the Arab world – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and many other countries – was shaken by strikes, demonstrations and riots. At the same time, Europe was crossed by expressions of solidarity with this heterogeneous movement.

Turin, along with other European metropolises, was the place where various identities of the Arab world took to the streets, protesting and fighting against their government, asking for rights and a new democracy

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for the people. This article highlights how the manifestations of protest in Turin connected with the Arab protests across North Africa.

In particular, it is possible to interpret both the European and Arab movements as different manifestations of the same desire. We will use the intuition of Henri Lefebvre (1970; 2000; 2009) who theorised the city as a product of conflicts; in this perspective, urban insurgences could constitute an extraordinary movement of criticism of the present system.

The unusual geography of the most recent urban battles seems to come up against a political imaginary still strongly tied to the colonial spatial matrix. In this intervention, we intend to argue that the movement of images from the North African cities, as well as those spread in the Turin demonstrations, have provided an extraordinary input to turn over the spatial hierarchies of two fundamental axes of the Eurocentric imaginary: centre-periphery and north-south. Moreover, these heterogeneous subjectivities, in many different ways, have a potential role in re-thinking the space and re-signifying the place as an expression of decentralised, and provincialised effort.

It is difficult to give an overall analysis of Europeans' diverse reactions to the Arab Spring. However, there is no doubt that the images accompanying the protests in North Africa and the Middle East have had a strong impact on Europe's young generations, as many articles have pointed out<sup>3</sup>. A combination of both official and unofficial narration and images, coming from all layers of society, reached the northern Mediterranean areas

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<sup>3</sup> See: International articles' collection on online dossier "Mediterraneo": <http://www.uninomade.org/mediterraneo/>; F. Sossi, *Spazi in migrazione. Cartoline di una rivoluzione*; P. Longo, D. Scalea, *Capire le rivolte arabe: Alle origini del fenomeno rivoluzionario*; P. Gandolfi, *Rivolte in atto. Dai movimenti artistici arabi a una pedagogia rivoluzionaria*. See also: [www.infoaut.org](http://www.infoaut.org); [www.internazionale.it](http://www.internazionale.it).

– in particular Italy, Spain and France where the main protests took place – and were soon politically adopted for demanding rights and reclaiming media attention. It needs to be said that Europe has entered a period of social instability which has been growing since winter 2010, due to the gradual erosion of social welfare and the consolidation of the so-called “governments of austerity”. During the past two years, opposing imaginaries and constituting practices have inflamed – and keep inflaming – many European squares in Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal. Places and dates were gradually associated with the Arab Spring as symbols of young generational stereotypes under construction, in which squares like Tahrir in Cairo or Syntagma in Athens played a much more central role than the institutional spaces of power<sup>4</sup>.

The aim of the following article is to examine whether the Arab Spring has played a fundamental role in redefining the European collective political imagination in the Mediterranean area, and in Turin specifically, an ex-working-class and industrial metropolis that is the destination of many migrants.

The Mediterranean, in fact, constitutes a sort of removed element in the process of the political construction of Europe, as proven by the ongoing forclusion\* (by French *forclusion*) of colonial history of many member countries of the European Union, and by the conspiracy of silence over the numerous victims along migratory routes<sup>5</sup>. The place reserved to the Mediterranean in the process of the political construction of the European

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<sup>4</sup> F. Massarelli, 2012 *La collera della casbah*. Milano: AgenziaX

<sup>5</sup> From 1988 to 2012, over 18.000 migrants died in the Mediterranean. Official data from: <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.it/>; <http://www.italy.iom.int/index.php?language=ita>

continent is highly problematic.<sup>6</sup> As Henri Lefebvre (2000) suggested, the Mediterranean is conceived as ‘a space for leisure for industrialised Europe’, and it occupies a marginal position in relation to the main routes of the institutional and political power of the old continent. In this respect, it is possible to observe the restoration of colonial hierarchies in the development of a Mediterranean-centered industry of leisure; exoticism, hierarchy of difference and territorial exploitation are some of the characteristics of the *resort* universe of contemporary tourism in which the differences are removed or domesticated, the space naturalised and detached from past and present conflicts. Within this frame – where the Mediterranean becomes a political space to build and assign meaning – the Arab riots, together with their impact on the media, produced elements of instability and renewal alike, which have become particularly relevant in a phase of progressive definition of hierarchies between North and South in the heart of Europe itself. The images from the Arab Spring engender political passion and hope among young Europeans who lose more and more confidence in the political institutions.

Our theoretical framework is constituted by the Lefebvrian (2000) reflection on the social constitution of space. According to the French philosopher, establishing a policy of space involves three combined factors: spatial practice, representation of space and spaces of representation (p. 60). The first points out the strictly material process of production and reproduction of a social formation and their spatial implications (places of

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<sup>6</sup> E. Balibar, 2004 *Noi cittadini d'Europa? Le frontiere, lo stato, il popolo* Roma: Manifestolibri; S. Mezzadra, 2006 *Diritto di fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione* Verona: Ombre Corte; F. Sossi, 2007 *Migrare. Spazi di confinamento e strategia di esistenza*. Milano: Il Saggiatore

production, channels of transport and communications, capital flows, information etc.); the second refers to the encoded configuration of the spaces in the system of knowledge of a specific historical moment; the third is part of the symbolic system, of the social interaction in what is defined as 'lived space'. As Lefebvre points out, *spaces of representation* are 'linked to the clandestine and subterranean side of social life'. The following analysis is based upon his thought and aims to bring out the latent potential – monadic or even sporadic – for a political redefinition of the European space together with its changes and contradictions.

Spaces of representation, like collective stereotypes, are traversed by representations of different nature and origin, like art and mass communication. They are a constellation of images which are inseparable from the broader discursive logic in which they are immersed. They participate in a process that makes them construct the same reality to which they relate. The spatial triad proposed by Lefebvre – spatial practice, representation of space and spaces of representation – does not correspond to any ontological gradation, but offers the possibility to examine several factors that contribute to the production of space.

### **The 'Arab Spring': comparing imageries**

The outbreak of the Arab uprisings occupied the front pages of European newspapers for a long time, giving rise to long editorial columns analysing possible future developments. Among these journalists, we can cite the

foreign affairs expert Marc Lynch. In an article on Foreign Policy, dated 6<sup>th</sup> January 2011, he coined the term ‘Arab Spring’ to define the scene of popular revolt. The correspondent of Al Jazeera, Joseph Massad, accused his American colleague of contributing toward a strategy led by the White House to use the press to control the movements. In fact, he wrote: “The dubbing of the uprisings in the Arab world by western governments and media as an *Arab Spring* [...] was not simply an arbitrary or even seasonal choice of nomenclature, but rather a US strategy of controlling their aims and goals”<sup>7</sup>.

This media clash, viewed from opposite sides, can be understood as the capability of capitalism to regain lost ground. It fills the gap with a metonymic strategy, shifting the debate from the subject to its image, making a transition from content to container. The theme can be intelligible and can be decoded and classified by encapsulating the subject within rhetoric. Those in favour of a chaos theory argued that protest of the Arab leadership was enabled by the latter’s inability to control the Internet and its social-networks, a Eurocentric vision of a liquid society in which conflict, social relations and the arrangement of battle territories are substantiated only by a swirling and unknown mass of subjects.

This approach once again moves the focus of the discussion, repositioning the Other<sup>8</sup> in a new context in which subjectivities expressed in the streets are classified according to dominant discursive systems. On the one hand, as Homi Bhabha (1994) points out, we use collective terms –

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<sup>7</sup> Massad J., 2012. *The 'Arab Spring' and other American seasons*, Al Jazeera, 20 August 2012.

<sup>8</sup> When referring to the mass subjects that constitute the popular revolt of Turin, we will use the capitalised “Other”, signaling its pre-existing theoretical significations.

the Arabs, the Muslims, the non-Europeans – to disintegrate their potential antagonistic power, to de-humanise the subject, to silence its subjectivity, to reduce it to a stereotyped image. On the other hand, switching the context serves to introduce these stories in Europe through the focal lens of mainstream information. It is an operation very similar to translation; though it is not a procedure used to protect the content in the passage from one language to another, it does serve a more instrumental purpose, like the one described in *The Conquest of America* by Tzvetan Todorov (1984) that mentions how Spanish colonials attributed significations to American natives starting from a Spanish, European cultural background.

Many studies have focused on the media, starting from McLuhan and Lippmann, who have investigated different forms of communication. Some hypotheses, such as those of Luciano Gallino (2011), concentrate on the electronic transfer of information which is considered part of a cognitive capitalism. The media also constitutes a field where the Other's descriptive models are accumulated and settled, before being converted into new contexts. Media make use of attractive language according to communication time and formats. It should be pointed out, however, that if every media channel has its own syntactic and semantic rules; languages are as numerous as the poles of power in which the aforementioned translation occurs.

In this article, we will take a specific topic into account. The Arab uprisings and their heterogeneity expressed daily slogans and practices. Thousands of protesters referred to the economic, social and political conditions in order to demand new spaces of freedom. As often happens in

anti-colonial struggles, this movement generated a collective imagery as a consequence of the media's powerful echo. We cannot forget the evocative power of certain texts that capture the gist of decolonisation: Franz Fanon's words on Algeria; the image of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Nick Ut, who immortalised a Vietnamese girl escaping from the napalm bombing of her village; the news of Indian independence, the pearl of the first military power. These events were transmitted throughout various media images of resistance and rebellion, fight and liberation.

What happens when two collective imageries meet? Let us return to the Arab Spring, on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian merchant, set himself on fire to protest over the confiscation of his goods. We will not follow the outbreak of the insurrection in Arab countries of Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Djibouti, Bahrain and Kuwait. Our hypothesis is that this collective imagery has been influenced by others over the Mediterranean, and that the symbols, the keystones of this cognitive architecture, have assumed a highly critical position in their Italian context.

Therefore, the image has a meaning that goes beyond the representation itself. Consider the photograph of a woman with a niqab protesting in Tahrir Square: it is not merely an expression of historical fact, the political opposition to the government of Hosni Mubarak, but it also mirrors a broader and more specific viewpoint of the fight. At the same time, it gives information about the social composition of the protest and it is also a relevant gender indicator of processes of emancipation. Moreover, the image may not have a direct consonance from the ideological point of view; the

Arab Spring movements are very different from those that were present in Italy. It is not possible to sustain continuity even in terms of identity. In this sense, we are not assuming that the semiotic capacity of the image is a peculiar element as some social processes explode in revolt. Conversely, in our opinion, different placements of subjects in terms of identity, gender and culture can share the same image, each one assigning specific meaning. Therefore, the location and the social geography which are subject to the forms of power determine the compatibility and the usage of images in the collective imagination.

### **The ‘Arab Spring’ in Europe: semiotic potentialities and policies of the image**

Our analysis starts from the Italian context, in which the impact of the Arab uprisings in terms of collective imagery can be measured by examining the real change of the figure of the ‘veiled-woman’ in some mass mobilisations between 2010 and 2012. This thesis will be argued in reference to the images proposed in the text.



These photographs were taken on 13 February 2011 in Turin (Italy) during a protest against Berlusconi's government. The protest

was symptomatic of collective exasperation following the Italian Prime Minister's numerous sex scandals which revealed a political background



focused on a constant exchange between sex and power. The pictures show an impressive parallelism between the Italian protest and the Arab uprisings, with the expression of explicit analogies between governments on both sides of the Mediterranean (“let's kick them all out!” is written under the picture of Berlusconi and Mubarak together); the posters depict protagonists of both Italian and overseas political revolt. In this way, demonstrators expressed anger against the two leaders as well as solidarity: “Berlusconi come Mubarak”<sup>9</sup> and “cacciamo il Rais”<sup>10</sup> were some slogans shouted in the streets of Italy during the whole year of 2011. The similarity between the recent Italian events and the Arab Spring has started to become less obvious, but the contamination of languages and political symbols between the shores of the Mediterranean has left lasting traces, especially upon the young and politicised.

Female figures play a very important role in this iconography: images of young women taking part in revolts are, in fact, a recurrent topos of this street imagery. The picture bears a huge semantic effect. In fact, the manifestations on 13 February were organised by a group of women under

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<sup>9</sup> “Berlusconi just like Mubarak”

<sup>10</sup> “Let's kick the Rais out”.

the label “Se non ora quando” (SNOQ), a feminist movement formed in Italy to reclaim dignity and respect for women against the misogynist climate established by Berlusconi's government<sup>11</sup>. However, the rhetoric which those Italian women had to use when speaking with the network SNOQ brought about problematic factors which were further exacerbated in subsequent public initiatives of the network. A highly standardised, exclusive and excluding female image – substantially coinciding with the white heterosexual upper-middle class woman – was in fact imposed as a dominant strategy to reject sexist and degrading images of a woman as a beautiful and stupid sexual entertainer of men, particularly widespread and intensified by Berlusconi's private televisions and government. Nonetheless, especially among the younger generations in blogs and bottom-up initiatives, a parallel and alternative critique was constituted by focusing on the rejection of vulgar and commercialised Berlusconi stereotypes and against the imposition of the second stereotype proposed by SNOQ<sup>12</sup>.



<sup>11</sup> The network “Se non ora quando” was set up in 2011 and involves numerous and prominent female figures of the cultural and artistic Italian context. Its website is [www.senonoraquando.eu](http://www.senonoraquando.eu), (snoq) receives institutional support and a strong media coverage.

<sup>12</sup> For a critical analysis of ‘snoq’ you can visit various feminist Italian blogs. For a first analysis see: A. Zapperi, G. Gribaudo, *Lo schermo del potere*. For an overview of critical Italian feminism see also Marchetti, S., Masciat, J. M. H. and Perilli, V., eds., *Femministe a parole. Grovigli da districare*.

The Arab Spring is an extraordinary source of imagination. The SNOQ focused on the dignity of Italian women with the often instrumental support of the opposition parties while other political subjectivities recognised themselves under different stereotypes: worlds populated by other female figures like lesbian or migrant women. Therefore, if on the one hand, there is the image of a woman conformed to the logic of institutional policy and functional representation device, on the other is one in accordance with logical and consolidated discourse in the Foucauldian sense. In fact, in the photography analysed, the image of a veiled woman occupies a place which differs considerably from the subordinate rhetoric imposed by Western and Islamophobic points of view. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argued, the discursive device can be synthesised in this sentence: ‘white men are called to “liberate” brown women from brown men’. Compared to this theory, the photograph proposed shows a contradicting semantic reversal: the veiled figure of a woman is free from any victimising rhetoric. She becomes part of an almost heroic iconography and is taken as a model by hundreds of young Western women.

If we pay attention to the overlapping of images and slogans on the signs in the photograph, we can see that the first represents the protagonists of the Arab Spring, and the second are individuals who hold up the signs producing a double effect of identification and hybridisation. It is a bridge between the shores of the Mediterranean where an image of a new, hybrid woman redefines the European space. This practice of deterritorialisation collides with the image of an Italian national femininity in accordance to the one proposed by the SNOQ in public appeals and press conferences. On the

one hand, the recognition of common generational issues has resulted in an immediate overcoming of national boundaries and territorial identification. On the other, the historical connection between women's bodies and the body of the nation is confirmed. It is not a coincidence that the slogan proposed by the SNOQ for the manifestations on 8 March 2011 was "bring Italy into the world"<sup>13</sup>.

In the situation described there are two opposing, contemporary stereotypes. One is consolidated and dominant. Its European geography is based on stable and certain boundaries: it is a corollary of a standardised and naturalised female figure (the Italian woman); the second, which is still in progress and has yet to be defined, transcends any pre-constituted geographical allocation, and deterritorialises and smoothes the surface of decentralised Europe. "We are in the streets" says the slogan on a sign representing an Arab woman challenging her own country's police, thus giving rise to a syntactic and paradoxical discrepancy, with a contradicting discordance between the person of the verb and the subject of verbal attribution ("we" is the subject of the slogan, "her, another" that of the image).

## **Conclusion**

To talk about the way past and present connect in phases of intense political change, Walter Benjamin (2009) uses the expression: "a tiger's leap into the past". It is possible to conjecture a similar prospective even in

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<sup>13</sup> The 8 March statement: [www.senonoraquando.eu/?p=1095](http://www.senonoraquando.eu/?p=1095).

spatial terms, to the extent that geographical coordinates possess the same intrinsic political nature of every historical-temporal operation. From this point of view, the selective and institutionalised memory of contemporary Europe cannot be separated from its territorial rigidity: the removal of the colonial past and inability to cope with migration flows are two sides of the same problem. Therefore, each element of historical-geographical destabilisation constitutes a political chance for the present.

The postcolonial subject, for example, unable to become history (Spivak, 1988), to ‘make history’, produces forms of resignification of the territory that play on the selectivity of boundaries. We can cite three examples coming from the artistic field: first, Ursula Biemann’s *Europlex*, a video installation about Moroccan women who evade European controls by transforming their bodies by wearing various layers of clothes. This is the only way to cross the border without declaring the goods that they will later sell in Spanish markets. Then, Bouchra Khalili’s *Mapping of a Journey*, a collection of video interviews with migrants who draw geographical maps while talking about their journeys. The path, abstracted by Khalili, will then become the constellation guiding future migrations. Something similar happens in Zineddine Bessaï’s *H-OUT*, a map of the routes of *harragas*: the relationship between Europe and North Africa is here represented through the checks and the blocks encountered by migrants on ships and in airports, and by all the dangers that any illegal attempt to enter Europe implies.

Therefore, the ability to share the collective memory of an event is, in a certain way, similar to what Jan Assmann (1992) calls cultural memory, a process linked to ‘symbolic figures to which memory is attached’. Likewise,

in the act of crossing the border, the system of reference is not based on direct knowledge, but on the baggage of experience transmitted orally and repeated through practice. It is possible to speak of postcolonial collective stereotypes, not only as the ability to save useful notions to avoid falling into Europe's constraining cages, but also, and more generally, to migrate successfully. Hence, the diaspora does not end with the journey, but it continues even after crossing the border. For example, looking for strategies enables migrants to break away from the devices that capitalism plays out to maximise profits on hybridisation.

Thus, we can say that there is a collective imagery which is external to the European discourse, and it is expressed by the evocation and the sharing of images. There is a vast, composite whole of languages if we intend eurocentrism as text (Foucault, 1971). Sometimes the interaction of eurocentrism and multiple languages results in integration or, in other cases, in creolism, such as the invention of new meaning, as Edouard Glissant says (1996). The symbolic appropriation of the Arab spring on the northern shores of the Mediterranean belongs to the same order of potential semantic discourse.

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