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"Opportunity Structures" and "Counter Publics" Reconsidered: Why social movements and social media failed in Egypt

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Public as well as academic debates about the relationship between media and democratic transformation have shifted in recent years. While in previous decades the link between the political system and the mass media – like CNN or Al-Jazeera – was hotly debated, the Green Revolution in Iran 2009 and the Arab Spring of 2010-2013 changed the debate, which has since then focused on social movements and social media. The main reason behind the new development is that both phenomena seem to enhance not only the access of marginalized people to the public sphere but also the chances to transform previously authoritarian states into participatory societies. Democratization, the narrative continues, benefits from the shift because it is now possible to bypass the elitist element of political systems, political parties and the mass media. The Arab Spring not only raised high hopes for "Facebook revolutions" but also for post-modern forms of democracy that avoid the "colonization" (Habermas)[1] of democracy by media owners and the politico-economic complex.

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It is interesting to note, however, that both fashionable terms "social movements" and "social media", although seemingly related to the political process of transformation, are linguistically connected to the "social" rather than the "political". And it is therefore quite amazing that both phenomena were considered by many observers to be so important for political processes. It is my intention in this little comment to argue, as I frequently did during the Arab Spring,[2] that social media and social movements, while helpful in certain phases of the transition from dictatorship to elections as well as in the subsequent consolidation of democracy, are by no means the essence of democratic transformation. On the contrary: excessive use of social media and reliance upon social movements can be detrimental to the democratic process. Such behavior puts too much weight upon public sphere participation, and distracts political energies away from the processes of institutionalization and reform of the political system – energies that are direly needed for

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[1] Habermas, Jürgen, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, 1989, German Orig. 1962).

[2] Hafez, Kai, "Eine neue Welle der Demokratisierung? Warum arabische Revolutionen gelingen und wann sie scheitern. Eine Zwischenbilanz", in: Sicherheit und Frieden 30/2 (2012), 101-107; Hafez, Kai, "Macht und Ohnmacht der Medien in Demokratisierungsprozessen: Lehren aus dem Arabischen Frühling'", in: Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft 24/3 (2014), 341-351; Hafez, Kai, "Radically Polarized Publics and the Demise of Media Freedom in Egypt", in: Égypte-Monde Arabe 11/2014, https://ema.revues.org/3397 (Accessed 5 January 2016); Hafez, Kai, "The Methodology Trap – Why Media and Communication Studies Are not Really International", in: Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research 38/3 (2013), 323-329.

any long-term consolidation of democracy and which were missing in Egypt, where democracy was suffocated by military intervention in 2013.

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The notion that representative democracy could be "leapfrogged" by avoiding political parties and mass media, and by shaping politics through social movements and oppositional voices on the Internet, is a misunderstanding of several modern political concepts like "political opportunity structures" or "counter-publics", which are frequently mentioned in current debates. This paper will argue that social movements *as such* pose no real chance for democracy, and that the link between movements and the political system, which is the *real* core of the idea of "opportunity structures", was too weak in Egypt for any opportunity for democratization. It will also be laid out against the background of the existing empirical research of online deliberations of several Egyptian social movements that the quality of the discourses of the Arab Spring revealed a radically polarized political culture that made no real contribution to the democratic consensus and to political decision-making.

Which opportunity structures?

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Democracies in Europe and North America went through historical stages of participation. Classical democracies in Greece or Rome as well as early modern democracies in France, the United Kingdom or in the United States were dominated by white male citizens. Neither women nor slaves were part of the body politic. After the abolition of slavery and the introduction of female suffrage in the 19th and early 20th centuries, political parties and other mass organizations like trade unions integrated a growing mass of people into the political system. These organizations and institutions were considered the backbone of representative democracy. Whoever wanted to participate in the political game, joined a party or other lobbyist organization.

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Modern democratic politics can be described as a constant interaction between existing political systems and newly created social movements which seek enhanced participation. More and more political scientists hold that democracies cannot be based on a minimalist-procedural culture of elections but must be sensitive to societal aspirations and public deliberations (see below).[3] The urge for improved political participation and integration of the population is not only a democratic necessity but also a consequence of shifts in our life worlds. The post-Fordist "knowledge society" is so complex that civil society with its ever larger shares of educated people is sometimes more competent than the political class in solving societal problems. This is

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[3] Vandewoude, Cécile, "A Universal Understanding of Democracy?", in: Lamont, Christopher K., van der Harst, Jan, Gaenssmantel, Frank (eds.), Non-Western Encounters with Democratization. Imagining Democracy after the Arab Spring, (Surrey/2015), 9-30.

not only true for classical Western democracies and industrial societies but also for so-called developing societies, for instance, young democracies in Asia or the Middle East. Although illiteracy is often widespread there, many Middle Eastern countries, according to the UNESCO developing indicators, produce a comparatively high number of academics.

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The main problem, however, is the almost permanent discrepancy between the political system and civil society. Neither in authoritarian systems nor in democracies are the established political classes usually sensitive to new social movements, and therefore at times street protests, upheavals or even revolutions occur to change the systems. The most frequently cited work of that type of political transformation is "Contentious Politics" by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow – which is probably also the most misunderstood. The two authors never suggested that social movements are all powerful actors which themselves comprise the "opportunity structure" to bring about lasting political changes. On the contrary, they speak of a "symbiotic relationship (…) between democratic politics and social movements" in the sense that social movements have to seek for alliances in institutions, in parliament and in political parties.[4] The most successful social movements in establishing democracies occurred, for example, in Poland and the Ukraine, where revolutionaries, after achieving free elections, turned into party politicians and consolidated their work.

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While the genius of the Arab Spring was that it created a nationwide alliance within civil society, especially among secularists and Islamists, its tragedy was that it never found supporters among the rank and file of the political establishment, and that the pressure of the social movements to form political parties and change the system from within remained weak. The Arab Spring in Egypt suffered from the missing link between social and political actors. The coming into existence of a protest movement in Egypt in 2011 was important to shake the authoritarian system and to oust the dictator Mubarak. Since neither opposition group was strong enough for regime change, an alliance was needed for the job. But social movements cannot be the decisive actors in all stages of transformation, and sometimes they almost turn into stumbling blocks for democratic consolidation. After initial transition they should, ideally speaking, cooperate with new elected politicians and parties. But that dynamic never really materialized in Egypt.

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Many of revolutionaries hesitated to become politicians, and especially the secular parties were extremely split and badly organized. Rather than consisting of listed party members, party gatherings were often composed of loose networks of sympathizers. As Sultan Mohammed Zakaria argues, the intermediate structures between strong governments and strong families – the core of contentious politics – have always

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[4] Tilly, Charles and Tarrow, Sidney, Contentious Politics (Boulder/London 2007), 133, see also 45, 17.

remained weak in the Middle East.[5] However, Islamists were much better organized and soon dominated parliament and the presidency. This created a new asymmetry between Islamists who matched the transformation from uprising to institutional politics and secular forces which remained weak in the institutions and who still relied to a large degree on street politics. In many interviews I led after the revolution in Egypt, I could witness that there was a new post-modern fashion among many activists and pro-democracy intellectuals to show contempt for the traditional realm of institutional representative democracy and rather stay with social movements. While for decades political parties were the puppets of Egyptian dictatorial regimes and therefore had a bad reputation, social movements were deemed emancipatory by nature.

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In the end, the Islamist dominated democratic institutions and secular social movements clashed during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi over issues like the Egyptian constitution. And they found no means to resolve their conflict – until the old elites around General Abd El-Fattah Al-Sisi stepped in and factually ended the democratic experiment by killing and imprisoning Islamists and repressing all critical voices. The heritage of radicalism that had helped to mobilize people and overcome autocracy now stood in the way for the compromises needed in a democracy. The constitutional debate was only the most visible expression of civil society activists' inability to compromise. After the end of the Mubarak regime and de-mobilization of the front that toppled him, many social movements in Egypt developed a radically polarized political culture. Movements like the Revolutionary Socialists or the 6th of April Movement were mere examples of an uncompromising trend in politics that was not the prerogative of the Muslim Brothers, but also befell the seeming progressive camp of the secular social movements. Most of the social movements were quite radical in their views and in not accepting the "other" camp as legitimate counterparts. Moreover, they sometimes threatened the young democracy of Egypt with hate speech (see below). It might be questionable to what degree disperse actors like social movements are really ever capable of moderation, since radicalism and ideological symbolism have always been the binding kit of otherwise unclear programs.

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In a nutshell, social movements were not only incapable of creating opportunity structures for lasting transformation and diverted energies away from the political center, they also helped to destroy institutional procedural democracy by paving the way to counter-revolution through radical opposition against Morsi. This is not a plea for a return to a minimalist-procedural understanding of democracy and to ignore social movements. Rather, Egypt's case is a lesson that social movements can only be part of the puzzle of democratic consolidation. There are many roads to democracy, revolutions, reforms "from above" (the Gorbacev model) or "negotiated democracies", where previously radical movements curb their views to be

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[5] Zakaria, Sultan Mohammed, "Arab Spring and Middle East Democratization: Issues and Challenges", Lamont, Christopher K., van der Harst, Jan, Gaenssmantel, Frank (eds.), Non-Western Encounters with Democratization. Imagining Democracy after the Arab Spring, (Surrey/2015), 67-85), 72.

able to participate in the new representative democracy (as in Portugal or Spain).[6] In Egypt the experiment with a negotiated "democracy without democrats" (Salamé)[7] has obviously failed. Since many social movements did not feel the urge to moderate their policies and remained detached from institutional politics, or, as in the case of the Muslim Brothers, served as a radical counterpart to their ruling political arm, the road to the military coup of 2013 was ready paved. Real "opportunity structures" hardly ever occurred.

Which counter publics?

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In their book "Contentious Politics" Tilly and Tarrow consider discourses to be part of the social movements' strategies. Therefore their work is often considered the link to public sphere theory. Democratic participation cannot be equated with public deliberations and is certainly not sufficient to explain political transformation. Power and economy are still mainly negotiated on the "backstage" of politics and not so much on the "frontstage" of public discourse.[8] However, the public sphere is a means of letting people participate; however, this mode of "deliberative democracy" is merely operative within the consolidated political institutions of representative democracy, because frontstage and backstage must be coordinated. Bearing in mind such qualifications, public discourses are important, and world-wide democracy went through several historical stages. Western democracy, for example, has come a long way from those days in the 18th century when British parliamentarians were not allowed to talk publicly about parliamentarian debates to contemporary times when almost everything that happens in parliaments is discussed in the media or even on Twitter before the sessions have ended.

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The concept of "counter publics" was developed in the 1960s and 1970s in an effort to integrate the periphery of the public sphere – the poor, minorities, those who are unheard – into central political debates that have a direct influence on politics. Habermas used the term "plebeian publics"[9]. However, in subsequent years the term "counter publics" became fashionable. Habermas later confessed that he underestimated the class character of the bourgeois public sphere as represented in the mass media.[10] But he has remained skeptical that the Internet was a solution to the problem since he is afraid of the inherent fragmentation of public discourses that would weaken the political effects of the traditional mass media.[11] His own focus

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[6] Merkel, Wolfgang, Systemtransformation. Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung (Opladen, 1999), 129.

[7] Salamé, Ghassan (ed.), Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World (London/New York 1994).

[8] Meyer, Thomas, Mediokratie. Die Kolonisierung der Politik durch die Medien (Frankfurt, 2001).

[9] Habermas: (see FN 1).

[10] Habermas (1992), "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", in: Calhoun, Craig (ed.), Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 421-461.

[11] Habermas, Jürgen, "Preisrede von Jürgen Habermas anlässlich der Verleihung des Bruno-Kreisky-Preises für das

therefore is on how to integrate the marginalized voices of civil society more effectively into the mass mediated discourse, in order to organize the rational discourse that is needed to consolidate democracy.[12] In other words, the fact that especially in young democracies like Egypt 2011-13 the mass media often fail to reflect marginal voices because many mass media are still in the hands of old elites or political parvenus is not a case for social media but for better mass media and for media reform; the mass media must be shaped by the people, not by elites and counter elites.

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Of course, that idea of a rational, integrated and consensus-oriented public debate is overly simplistic. Quite naturally, during the Arab Spring eighty million Egyptians debated politics on all possible levels of society, in personal encounters, during political gatherings, through social media and in the mass media. After centuries and decades of dictatorship, rational as well as emotional energies of people to express themselves freely exploded in what can now be considered the most diverse and pluralist phase of Egyptian public deliberation on all possible levels. Perhaps for the first time in history, a considerable proportion of people's opinions were actually expressed and – in particular in small media – laid out in written form. As Rasha Abdulla argued, digital media had an "enabling" effect triggering social change.[13] Even though media studies often ignore the equally important interpersonal and group-based oral political communication that is taking place, it is still fair to say that textual and visual messages of the social media considerably widened the public sphere.

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However, the question remains: where should counter publics ultimately be situated? Which counter publics do we envisage to be effective tools for democratization? Where are the real "opportunity structures" of contentious politics in the field of public opinion? For a number of reasons, the above mentioned basic dilemma between free networking in social movement and integration into the political system is duplicated in the public sphere arena. While social media are a place for civic and diverse expression, free from any censorship and control, the traditional mass media, albeit "colonized" by many vested interests, are the only place where public opinion could ideally exert the role of a "fourth power", reach larger audiences, control elected politicians and thereby contribute to the consolidation of young democracies. Not the social media as such, but a) the establishment of counter public mass media, for instance, the leftist-alternative daily *die tageszeitung* in Germany or *El Tahrir* newspaper in Egypt 2011-13, and b) the link between social media, the mass media and political institutions seem of utmost importance for the integration of counter public voices into the democratic political system.

politische Buch 2005 am 9. März 2006 im Großen Festsaal der Universität Wien", http://www.renner-institut.at/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/kreisky_preis/habermas2006-03-09.pdf (Accessed 5 January 2016).

[12] Habermas, Jürgen, Faktizität und Geltung (Frankfurt, 1992).

[13] Abdulla, Rasha, "Mapping Digital Media: Egypt", Open Society Foundations, August 2013, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/mapping-digital-media-egypt (Accessed 5 January 2016).

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When measured against the ideal of influencing politics, social media show a number of weaknesses. They are decentralized and non-integrated by nature. There is an inborn contradiction between the wish to be heard by the political center and the decentralization of the Internet, which is so divided by a multiplicity of actors and voices. Using social media might be an effective strategy employed by social movements to stimulate the communication within the movement itself and to mobilize for political activism outside the institutional realm. However, it remains unclear to what extent that type of mobilization can affect the political system beyond exceptional times of upheaval and transition.[14] "Opportunity structures" must be publicly debated in daily politics and in the long-term consolidation of democracies, especially *after* the first free elections have taken place – when vested interests of old elites and the "deep state" fight their battles for counter revolution. It is during the times of transition that real revolutions must prepare structural changes in institutional politics and public opinion by creating political parties, mass organizations and by establishing independent ownership structures within the mass media.[15] Further, it is *after* the transition to democracy and during the democratic consolidation that the changing political system must be controlled by a strong public opinion that is quite naturally represented first and foremost by mass media, often close to the newly formed political parties, and supported by social movements in the sphere of social media. A mere fragmentation of the political discourse that is neither co-oriented towards political parties and allies nor towards like-minded mass media, leads to a chaotic public opinion incapable of rational deliberation.

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The only chance for the social media to play a vital role in the political system and formulate strong messages is when so-called "social movement organizers" are successful in mastering the digital chaos and in formulating strong, innovative, albeit rational and practical messages that are in tune with related forces in the institutional arena of representative democracy. Based on the existing empirical research, however, Egyptian large social movements were not too successful in handling this problem. The 6 April Youth Movement aggravated protest, but after the fall of Mubarak, it was divided into various interest groups with no clear and integrative political strategy, and it certainly developed no strong link to party politics. On the contrary, the movement rejected becoming a political party or cooperating with one, and defined itself as a mere pressure group. The Revolutionary Socialists' online style of argumentation during the constitutional debate was highly confrontational and polemic, even to the point of challenging the state with an anarchical wave of activism. The discourse of the Muslim Brothers remained uncompromising and illiberal in nature, dominated by official websites like *Ikhwan Online.* In that sense it is fairly unclear whether the Muslim Brothers can be considered a social movement at all, because organizational communication prevailed. Younger and more liberal elements within the movement showed no meaningful political strategy against President Morsi's disintegrative policy approach. The Salafyo Costa movement was the exception to the rule

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[14] Hafez, "Macht und Ohnmacht" : (see FN 2).

[15] Hafez, "Radically Polarized Publics": (see FN 2).

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since their discourse was less dogmatic. However, they never seemed to have found a link with more established liberal Islamists like the *Wasat* party, although moderate parliamentary alternatives to the Muslim Brothers and against the Salafist *Al-Nour* party would have been so important. Unlike in countries like Indonesia, in Egypt liberal political Islam was never able to organize effectively in social movements and political parties.[16] Facebook remained the only tool the Salafyo Costa used to articulate and mobilize for support. On the whole, Egyptian social movement online discourses mostly selected posts which reinforced own positions rather than stimulating rational and interactive communication. Social movements varied in their degree of pragmatism and responsiveness, but for most movements "consensus" became a combat term that was used to stigmatize the political opponent as intolerant, destroying either the national or the Islamic identity of Egypt.

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Egyptian social movement discourse on social media was often dogmatic, ideologically confined and not consensus-driven. It was seldom in line with Habermasian expectations that online deliberations should be of high quality, rational, informative, engage in deliberations and oriented towards practical participation. These observations resonate with as number of studies in other countries showing that political discourses in social media often lack quality, concentrate on a narrow range of issues, are quite limited in expressing mutual interests, are often incoherent, dependent on the mass media agenda and reveal no clear signals for institutional politics or the mass media to be processed.[17] Such negative effects run counter to the social media's potential to leverage oppositional and alternative views, and certainly to their undeniably capacities to mobilize for short or mid-term protest.

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To be sure, ideological camps in Egyptian social movements resonate to a large degree with class conflicts. Egypt's often radically polarized political culture is based on divergent socio-economic interests, whereby each political camp includes "haves" and "have-nots" who use Islamist or anti-Islamist ideological slogans for

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[16] Assyaukanie, Luthfi, "Die Wiederentdeckung der Pancasila. Demokratie und Islam in Indonesien", in: Qantara.de, 2012, http://de.qantara.de/content/demokratie-und-islam-indonesien-die-wiederentdeckung-der-pancasila (Accessed 5 January 2016).

[17] For example: Stromer-Galley, Jennifer and Martinson, Renate, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Coherence in Online Chat", Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of Communication and Technology Division, International Communication Association (New York, 2005); Wilhelm, Anthony G., "Virtual Sounding Boards. How Deliberative is On-Line Political Discussion?", in: Information, Communication & Society 1/3 (1998), 313-338; Jankowski, Nicolas and van Selm, Martine, "The Promise and Practice of Public Debate in Cyberspace", in: van Dijk, Jan and Hacker, Kenneth L. (eds.), Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice (London et al., 2000), 149-165; Beierle, Thomas C., "Digital Deliberation: Engaging the Public through Online Policy Dialogues", in: Shane, Peter M. (ed.), Democracy Online: the Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet (New York/London, 2004), 155-166; Drüecke, Ricarda, Politische Kommunikationsräume im Internet. Zum Verhältnis von Raum und Öffentlichkeit (Bielefeld, 2013); Jankowski, Nichaolas W. and van Os, Renée, "Internet-Based Political Discourse: A Case Study of Electronic Democracy in Hoogeveen", in: Shane, Peter M. (ed.), Democracy Online: the Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet (New York/London, 2004), 181-193; Dahlberg, Lincoln, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse. Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere", in: Information, Communication & Society 4/4 (2001), 615-633.

their own socio-economic interests. The ideological battles about religion camouflage the hidden matrix of social conflict, which is nevertheless effective in the sense that it prevents a moderation of the political culture. During the Arab Spring 2011-13, social media reinforced a radical style public debate. Without rules and regulations like, in parliamentary debates, a radical discourse triggered ongoing street protests with no clear effect on rationalizing the mass mediated public sphere or the front- and backstages of institutional politics.

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Of course, that institutional realm was not in tune with societal needs either. Radicalism as well as disorganization of the political discourse through political parties and mass media alike all cumulated with a similar tendency in social movements.[18] However, it seems fair to say that social movements that were so important in generating protest against the Mubarak regime and during the early transition, on the whole, failed to revamp their discursive strategies in the phase of democratic consolidation after parliamentary and presidential elections.

Conclusion

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A lasting Arab Spring "wave of democratization"[19] was not only impeded by internal reasons. Arab democracy never received the kind of full-fledged support from the international community that would have been needed to compensate for the lack of stability of Arab civil societies and their newly created political systems. While countries like Germany, Austria, Japan or Italy after World War II were assisted with all possible means, political and financial support for the Arab Spring by the Great powers of the world, despite the world-wide enthusiasm, remained half-hearted. Financial support was considerably lower than investments in Eastern Europe post-1990.[20] Instead of leveraging the Arab political progress, Western countries, not to speak of other great powers like Russia or China, secured their own interests in controlling the flow of migration and refugees, and fighting terrorism by cooperating with regimes in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and puppet regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to speak of the continued support for Israel and the constant support for the Egyptian military regime of Al-Sisi.

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However, the suffocation of the Arab Spring is also the result of the fragility of Arab civil politics and society. One could argue that the radical political polarization of Egyptian political culture is not so much a long-term

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[18] Hafez, "Radically Polarized Publics": (see FN 2).

[19] Hafez, "Eine neue Welle": (see FN 2).

[20] Boduszyński, Mieczysław P., "Western Democratic Leverage and the Arab Spring", in: Lamont, Christopher K., van der Harst, Jan, Gaenssmantel, Frank (eds.), Non-Western Encounters with Democratization. Imagining Democracy after the Arab Spring, (Surrey, 2015), 127-141.

cultural feature but rather the outcome of specific communication strategies in civil society and institutional politics. The main actors of civil society relied heavily on modern media, and ignored traditional means of institutional communication and the mass-mediated public sphere. Instead of stabilizing the Arab Spring's achievements by aligning themselves with progressive forces of representative democracy, especially with political parties, and by serving, as grass roots movements, as a corrective element to elitist trends in parliamentary systems, those main actors tended to destabilize the young democracy through radical speech acts and inflammatory rhetoric on social media. The "laughing third" – *duobus litigantibus tertius gaudet* – of such political activism was a counter-revolutionary authoritarianism which played social movements against each other and against political parties.

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If there is ever to be another round for the Arab Spring, lessons will have to be learned by social movements as well as other democratic forces, inside and outside the Arab world. It is only through negotiated democracy, real compromise and a political culture that translates radical polarization into liberal pluralism that democracy can be consolidated. Neither social movements nor social media are a guarantee to such basic social contracts. Social movements with all their legitimate desire to represent counter publics must not pose themselves above the political order of representative democracy that is mandated through free elections, and they must resist all temptation to topple governments as long as these respect the basics of democracy: free elections, gatherings and freedom of opinion. The raison d'être of social movements is not to serve as an alternative political body but to find means to present and lobby legitimate cases in meaningful ways. The rule of law, electoral procedures and probably also the mass media's role in organizing the public sphere comprise the essence of democracy. The role of counter publics in social movements and social media should be reconsidered as playing a complementary rather than a substitutional role in new democracies. Social movements and social media are part of the puzzle of political "opportunity structures" that are needed for democratic transformation – without ever *being* these structures themselves.

About the Author

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