Dear reader,

What if violence constitutes an inevitable, even necessary, component of democratic struggle? A provocative question perhaps, but one that underlines the violence, in its many different forms, that is part of the daily life of many Africans. Specifically, in the case of North African countries, the radical political transformations of the past two years, the so-called Arab Spring, have inevitably coincided with considerable violence. And this was a feature from the outset. As the independent film-maker based in Cairo, Philip Rizk pointed out recently: "Despite the glorification of an eighteen-day revolution as non-violent, violence has been a part of this revolution since the first stone was thrown on 25 January 2011 – followed three days later by the torching of police stations on the Friday of Rage – and until today".[1] So again my question, does violence form part of a democratic process? This might seem like kicking an open door if one considers the abundant critical literature on the history of revolutions. Hannah Arendt, for example, argued in her book *On Revolution* that a revolution is not even conceivable outside the domain of violence. This is why, she adds, there is such a thin line between revolution and war.[2] Moreover, she characterized revolutions as a struggle for political freedom, and not just as a liberation from oppression, which implied above all else the necessity to construct radical new forms of government (e.g. the replacement of an absolutist monarchy with a democratic republic). Yet today, violence and democracy are all too often conceptualized as separate, and even antithetical. If violence is mentioned in the context of democracy, democratization, or more broadly, a struggle for political freedom, it is mostly presented as a threat.

Consider for example the following observation by Marina Ottaway, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC: "In the early days of the Egyptian uprising, when violence threatened to engulf the country, the military did an admirable job of maintaining order without violence and easing Hosni Mubarak out of office". Obviously, she completely misjudged the political intentions of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Moreover, her misjudgment was clearly constructed around the belief that violence and democratic struggle are incompatible. Of course, Ottaway was not blind to the way the situation in Egypt developed. She continued her essay with the observation that "ten months later, (…) [the SCAF had] emerged as the most serious threat in the transition to democracy".[3]

What is interesting about the switch in Ottoway's assessment of the political situation in Egypt is not so much the exposure of the hypocritical and contradictory aspects of the SCAF's "admirable job of maintaining order without violence", but rather the realization that by imposing *non*violence, the military actually managed to stall the struggle for freedom in Egypt. This was only temporary of course. When it became clear that the SCAF had actually betrayed the revolution, protests continued and violence ensued. Today it is perhaps becoming increasingly clear, as Rizk argues, "that violence is a necessary means in the effort to undo the logic of a state dominated by elites and their foreign backers, who disregard the revolutionary demand of "bread, freedom, and social justice"".[4] Nevertheless, after incumbent authoritarian rulers were de-railed by protesters, the actual continuation of violence in Tunisia, Egypt,Libya and other countries, , has replaced that initial sense of hope for the Arab Spring with pessimism, skepticism and disillusion. Numerous accounts and observers even referred to an 'Arab Winter' when the myth of non-violence and peaceful protest was shattered once and for all. Again, it seemed unthinkable that violence could be linked to democratic politics. They are perceived as each other's opposite. Violence has something inhumane, while democracy is humanity's political ideal.[5] The first evokes images of brutality, ruthlessness and totalitarian power, while the latter answers to images of freedom, social justice and power to the people. Therefore, violence in the aftermath of the massive uprisings has been condemned and perceived as evidence of a "lack of democratic culture among the masses".[6] And the region's own history together with the habits engendered in an ancient culture of rule might just be the explanation that underpins this eurocentric perception.[7]

The reason why it seems so difficult to associate violence with a democratic struggle might be attributed to a paradox which, according to the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, characterizes most

reflections on violence. It is worthwhile to quote here how Žižek introduces his book *Violence*: "At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts".[8] In other words, within the context of the Arab Spring, the contours which generated the violence on the streets in the cities of North Africa were shaped by – what Žižek would call – a more objective kind of violence produced by the combination of authoritarian rule and thirty years of aggressive neoliberal reform.[9] By now it is clear that the on-going uprisings were not just a revolt against authoritarian rule as such, but also expressions of a systemic crisis; a structural crisis of the social order of neoliberal globalization. The demands of protesters in the Arab region have been formulated in clear political terms: remove the incumbent regime, install free and fair elections, end corruption, etc. Implicit in these demands, however, is the desire for greater social and economic justice. People were drawn to the streets by pressing economic grievances and uneven development the result of more than thirty years of neoliberal policies.

The objective violence embedded, for example, in an economic system, in years of structural adjustment, privatization and the dismantling of public services, has an invisible character because its 'normality' becomes the "zero-level standard" against which we perceive outbursts of subjective violence.[10] For the most part, such economic restructurings are considered as inevitable, not always pleasant in the short term of course, but necessary to create growth and wealth in the long term. Where subjective violence is a "perturbation of the "normal", peaceful state of things" – e.g. the act of throwing stones at security forces, the torching of police stations or the increase of sectarian conflicts, objective violence is "precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things".[11] For example, at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, it became clear that structural adjustment had not generated the predicted growth and prosperity. On the contrary, those decades became known as the "lost decades", a period of little growth and increasing social inequality.[12] Eventually, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF acknowledged the negative outcomes of structural adjustments. Yet instead of blaming the foundations of the implemented economic policies (i.e. the Washington Consensus), the World Bank was convinced that it was weak government that had led to weak growth in the region because it had "shackled the business environment"[13] The focus shifted from structural adjustment to the promotion of 'good governance'. In the eyes of the World Bank and the IMF, it was now clear that the particular causes for the failure of structural adjustment as a development policy had little to do with the neoliberal dogmas per se. The responsibility for failure was thus passed on to the 'developing' countries and authoritarian rule.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it is all-too-easy to ascribe the current popular uprisings to 'bad governance' alone, without considering the fact that they were also related to the development models promoted by Western donors over the past three decades. As a result, the Arab Spring did not necessarily entail a turning away from the logic of neoliberalism among Western democracy promoters and donors, it actually reinforced it. According to Adam Hanieh, it provided neoliberal ideologists with the tools to "reabsorb and fashion dissent in its own image". Hanieh convincingly argues that "where authoritarian regimes have been the norm, […] calls for institutional reform can be easily portrayed as democratic (and, indeed, they are explicitly framed within a discourse of democratization)".[14] In this regard, he refers to the fact that today, in the midst of the popular uprisings, the IMF and other international institutions continue to promote the same economic models and reforms that caused the very crisis of contemporary capitalism in the first place. 18 days of protest on Tahrir Square and revolution on a massive scale are impressive, but not enough to undo this objective violence, a form of violence that to this day entangles a broader revolutionary *process*.[15]

An interesting thinker who managed to treat both forms of violence distinguished by Žižek within a combined analysis was the revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon. The use of violence against the colonial oppressor, according to Fanon, was the only means to free the colonized from the colonizer. Moreover, he was convinced that violence itself was liberating. Through violence

"decolonization [was] the veritable creation of new men".[16] After all, as Jean-Paul Sartre remarked in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, "violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to de-humanize them".[17] Fanon was attacked by his critics and opponents because he seemed to glorify the use of violence. But such a misinterpretation of Fanon's view on violence could only be made when either the colonial system was considered as the "zero-level standard" (e.g. as a *mission civilisatrice*) or when the preservation of unequal economic ties was considered as the "normal state of things" by which the former mother country 'helped' develop its ex-colony. It is also in the context of this objective violence, in addition of course to the obvious subjective violence used by colonial oppressors, that Fanon considered the use of violence as a necessary *re*action. Violence, usually pictured as something inhumane, was thus actually a means to become human again according to Fanon and Sartre or even *more human* than the colonizer. As the latter also stated: "(...) since the others become men in name against us, it seems that we are the enemies of mankind; the elite shows itself in its true colours – it is nothing more than a gang. Our precious sets of values begins to moult; on closer scrutiny you won't see one that isn't stained with blood".[18]

Moreover, for Fanon, *non*violence could have the opposite effect. "Non-violence is an attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize, before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made, before any blood has been shed."[19] As with the example of the SCAF in post-Mubarak Egypt, the imposition of nonviolence through, for example, a compromise between "the colonial system and the young nationalist bourgeoisie" could seriously threaten the radical process of decolonization in favor of strategic ties between the mother country and its ex-colony.[20] "If we are to take the neocolonial reality in Egypt seriously", writes Philip Rizk, "then we have much to learn from Fanon's analysis of colonial Algeria".[21]

So, if we were to agree that violence can be a necessary component of a revolutionary process, an integral part of the struggle for freedom, for radical democracy, it may also tell us something about the opponent it faces and the contradictory conditions in which objective violence has taken shape. In the case of the Arab Spring, it may tell us something about the politics of Western democratic governments and international donors who claim to support the democratic transitions in the region by insisting on the continuation of neoliberal reform. Let us again draw on Žižek and his reflection on the Haitian revolution at the end of the 18th century. At one point in the struggle, Napoleon's army stood perplexed when they heard that the approaching army of ex-slaves was actually singing the *Marseillaise*, their own French revolutionary hymn. According to Žižek "the message of the Haitian soldiers' *Marseillaise* was not "You see, even we, the primitive blacks, are able to assimilate ourselves to your high culture and politics, to imitate it as a model!" but a much more precise one: "in this battle, we are more French than you, the Frenchmen, are – we stand for the innermost consequences of your revolutionary ideology, the very consequences you were not able to assume".[22] Such a message was a deeply unsettling one for the colonizers at the time, writes Žižek, one they eventually suppressed and boycotted in the following decades.

Similarly, the outbursts at Avenue Bourgbuiba and Tahrir Square may have been deeply unsettling for the promotors of Western democracy. By taking to the streets in massive numbers, Arab people not only rejected the existing strategies for a 'gradual' process of democratization, one which was based on close (mainly economic) cooperation between Western democratic countries and the incumbent authoritarian rulers, they also stood for pursuing democratic ideals to their logical end. Western leaders were not able to embrace the consequences of these ideals, focused as they were on the preservation of strategic, political and economic interests. In addition, one might also note that while many European leaders consider liberal democracy as the solution for many of the problems in the Arab region, on their own continent they are actually more and more convinced that nationally and democratically elected leaders are perhaps not the right figures to resolve the current crisis of capitalism. Instead they now look to technocrats, the IMF, and the European Institutions for salvation. In the case of Italy, it was emphasized openly that the new cabinet of Mario Monti, appointed in November 2011, was made up "only of experts, no politicians" in order to reassure 'the markets'.[23]

By revolting against the system or regime (*nizam*) which provided the conditions for objective violence, the Arab revolts were not so much an expression of a desire to be like us, liberal democrats, but actually showed that in this struggle – even if it is a violent one – the protesters are *more democratic* than those who promote Western democracy. Moreover, what if the Arab people were looking for *new* forms of democracy, and through their efforts, inspired all kinds of movements in Europe, the US and the rest of the world, to demand real freedom, real social justice and real democracy now (Democracia Real Ya!)?

To conclude, I want to refer briefly to the content of our next issue. Ray Bush's article for example can be read with Žižek's notion of objective violence hovering in the background. We also have three other interesting articles on a diverse range of topics: urbanization and its comparative elements, music as a point of social connection in the post-colonial city of Lisbon, and the Equality Guarantee under the Ethiopian Constitution. Also, we publish three reports based on recently completed doctoral research. Finally, AF is now also active on some of the main social media networks, Facebook, Twitter, and Academia.Edu, an academic social media network

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Editorial Committee

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