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The 'Arab Spring' as a challenge to the Weberian analysis of Islam

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is the application of some Weberian conceptual categories to the contemporary Islamic world. The reconstruction of Weberian thought on the religion of Muhammad seems to retain some heuristic capacity: although modified over time, the organization of Islam gave rise to dynasties with charismatic political leadership who constituted patrimonial-sultanistic forms of power, with their own armies and personal bureaucracy. Characteristics of this type can be traced in the Maghreb and Mashriq countries, where there was an almost exclusive monopoly of power by the state and the prevalence of personal relationships over institutions. A political form that Weber described in terms of neo-patrimonial societies, with a strong role of the charismatic figure of the leader, a society conceived as a collection of groups and not individuals, a centralization of power by the state, and a private and clientelistic management of economic resources by ruling elites. The Arab revolutions of 2010 can be read as a struggle against this neo-patrimonialist model in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. More than a decade after the outbreak of the revolutions, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether indeed these countries have overcome those obstacles to modernization and development identified by the German sociologist in Islamic societies.

Keywords: Weber; patrimonialism; Arab Spring; Islam

1 Introduction

In 2011, what international observers call the 'Arab Spring' broke out in some countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. More than a decade after those revolutions that seemed destined to bring democracy and freedom to authoritarian countries, the balance is not positive: experts speak of incompleteness or failure. The purpose of this essay is to analyse the outcomes of those protests through the Weberian conceptual categories. The countries involved, in fact, can be made to fall under the category of patrimonialist regimes, analysed by the German sociologist, and the revolutions of 2011 can be read as an attempt to overthrow these regimes and move towards a real democracy. It is not possible

to consider exclusively the serious socio-economic problems (high unemployment, economic inequality, endemic corruption) that triggered the protests, but also some Weberian reflections on social change, such as the absence of a unified and cohesive leadership within the protest movements, the lack of an entrenched democratic political culture and established democratic institutions.

The protagonists of the protests defined their actions as *'thawra'*, i.e. revolution, in the awareness that it was at an important historical moment to change and break with the past. The reaction of foreign observers to the events of 2011 reveals an Orientalist view, of which Weber himself is a victim, which sees a passive and monolithic East in front of a dynamic and rational West, an absence of democratic traditions (the 'Eastern despotism', quoted from Montesquieu) and a people unprepared for freedom (in addition to the dangers of Islamism although Islamists were not the main actors in the revolutions of 2011). These movements were mainly the result of social anger and political and economic failures; however, no political organization was there to turn this social anger into a governing programme. This has impeded a process of renewal of the political class and elites: therefore, the same cycle started again, marginalizing emerging actors and returning control to a limited oligarchy.

2 The concept of patrimonialism in Max Weber's work

It is not easy to reconstruct the genesis of the concept of patrimonialism¹ in Max Weber's work. In the collection of texts prior to 1914, now published as the first systematic core of the *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, the term 'patrimonialism' does not appear, just as it is absent in the three drafts (Weber, 1897; 1898; 1908) of *Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum*, where the use of 'patriarchalism' is widespread. Indeed, the scholar 'derives patrimonial domination in a genetic-evolutionary key firstly from the domestic or *oikos* community. He then translates this form of domestic domination into a form of political domination' (Editorial Note, 2012, p. 167). Weberian treatment is mainly articulated in the presentation of different historical forms and varieties of patrimonial domination: 'from a formal point of view patrimonialism is as heteromorphic as no other text in the older version of the sociology of domination. It has fragmentary passages and repetitions, but also unfulfilled announcements, discordances in line of thought, and a number of lacunar references' (Editorial Note, 2012, p. 168). It is likely that here too there are several stages of concept elaboration and a desire for an unfinished reorganization of the writings. No doubt Weber's reflection was influenced by Georg von Below's book on the *Staat des Mittelalters* of 1914, as Weber himself attested in a letter of June 21 of that year:

I now read with joy and find your book on the State very instructive. In the winter I shall begin to have a fairly voluminous contribution printed to the *'Grundriß der Sozialwissenschaften'* (sic!), which deals with the form of political associations in a comparative and systematic

¹ The basic idea of patrimonialism is '[the] private appropriation of rights that are in principle public' (Breuer, 1996, p. 532), has its roots in the doctrine of the patrimonial state developed during the eighteenth century and then flowed into the German nineteenth- and early twentieth-century public law debate.

way. Terminologically I will have to stick to the concept of 'patrimonialism' also and precisely for certain modes of political domination. But I hope that you will find sufficiently emphasized the absolute distinction between the power of domestic, corporal and landed lordship and political domination – for which there is no other criterion except that it is not this at all (but military and judicial power). (Editorial Note, 2012, p. 171)

Weber's interest, then, shifts from the patriarchal form of domination to patrimonial domination: 'we shall name this special case of the patriarchal structure of domination – domestic power decentralized to the sons of the house or other dependent domestic subordinates by means of cession of land and possibly inventory – a patrimonial domination' (Editorial Note, 2012, p.192–193). If Below, known and taken up by Weber, refers the origin of the concept of patrimonialism back to the formulation of Haller (who interprets patrimonialism as an evolution of patriarchalism), in Aristotle and later in Hobbes a reflection can be found on the nexus between dominion and patrimony: in the former linked to the domestic structure of the *oikos*, which will be taken up directly by Weber; in the latter there is a shift from dominion based on the traditional authority of the patriarch to a realm based on patrimony (*Leviathan, De Cive*), as later conceptualized by Weber.

Patrimonialism, as a variant of patriarchal rule, falls within the traditional type in the well-known Weberian tripartition of *Herrschaft*:

by far the most important type of rule among those based on traditionalist authority [...] is patriarchalism: the dominion of the father of the family, the husband, the family elder or clan elder over his associates, that of the lord and patron over slaves, servants, and freedmen, that of the lord over domestic servants and household officials, that of the prince over household and court officials, ministers, clients, and vassals, that of the patrimonial lord and prince ('father of the fatherland') over 'subjects'. It is peculiar to patriarchal rule (and patrimonial rule, which falls into it as a variant) that alongside a system of inviolable norms, considered absolutely sacred, the violation of which brings magical or religious sanctions, it also knows on the part of the lord a reign of arbitrariness and grace that he disposes freely, that in principle he judges only on the basis of 'personal and not objective relations, and in this sense is irrational.' (cited in Palma, 2014, p. 362)

Thus, two sources of legitimacy are part of this irrationality: tradition and grace, which find their synthesis in the figure of the *dominus*. A figure that, consequently, approaches the type of dominion of a charismatic nature, conceptually antithetical to the idea of tradition. Yet, as Weber warns, charisma also routinizes, becomes quotidianized: 'the process of quotidianization and that is to say, of traditionalization has settled down. [...] As a rule, this meant a patrimonialization of seigniorial powers, as could also be developed from pure patriarchalism with the disintegration of the lord's strict power.' Patrimonialization occurs when charism becomes historicized, and becomes institution: 'after the constituent moment, the institution created by charism reproduces itself as a patrimony imputed to persons. The legitimizing matrix of charismatic and traditional dominions, though antithetical in their temporal development (punctual the former, distended and iterative the latter), is paradoxically the same: the rootedness in (the property of) the person, of which dominion is protestative-authoritative explication' (ibid.).

In the wake of Max Weber's thought, the concept of (neo)patrimonialism has become, especially since the 1970s, particularly relevant in thinking about the state in Africa 'to explain the lack of economic development and political instability, accompanied by a dose of pessimism about democratic transitions considered weak' (Zamponi, 2018, p. 206).² According to Christopher Clapham (1985), one of the scholars who most developed the concept of neo-patrimonialism, this political model constitutes 'a form of organization in which relations of an essentially patrimonial nature pervade a political and administrative system that is formally constructed on rational-legal lines. Officials hold positions in bureaucratic organizations with formally defined powers, but exercise those powers, as far as they are able, not as a form of public service but of private property' (Clapham, 1985, p. 48). That is, a modern-rational basis sits alongside an authority that governs privately 'implementing practices of loyalty and reciprocity rooted in tradition and local custom' (Zamponi, 2018, p. 208). In Weberian terms, this is a 'creative meshing' of two types of domain: 'a traditional subtype, the patrimonial domain, and a rational-legal one, the bureaucratic domain' (Erdmann & Engel, 2007, p. 104) that has given rise to a form of power not necessarily viewed exclusively negatively by the German scholar, although the lack of distinction between public and private, the presence of weak institutions, and the reliance on shared customs and traditions rather than formal rules easily lead to forms of corruption, clientelism, all the way 'to a real form of predation' (Zamponi, 2018, p. 209).

3 Weberian analysis of Islam

Reflection on patrimonialism (and sultanism as its historical form³) intercepts Weberian analysis of religions, particularly Eastern.⁴ Weber's interest is not in the essence of religion, but in understanding it as a form of social action, capable of producing concrete effects and practical impulses. This is clearly demonstrated in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which religious ethics is placed at the basis of an economic attitude, becoming a determining factor in the rationalization process of the modern world. For

² Cf. Bratton & van de Walle (1997).

³ 'In contemporary times, Weber's patrimonialism has experienced a new fortune through Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and his analysis of modern patrimonial, or neo-patrimonial regimes, which, far from being dissimilar to traditional ones, nevertheless acquire contemporary connotations and tend to change and expand continuously. At the same time, Juan Linz, through many comparative studies of authoritarian regimes in Asia, Latin America, and Eastern European countries, re-actualizes the Weberian concept of "sultanism" (Linz, 1990). What characterizes it is the presence of a leader who exercises his power without restraint and with the presence of a "familialistic" and clientelistic apparatus, whose power derives from support for the leader. Although patrimonialism and sultanism may appear to be completely unconstrained by legal-rational norms, this is never exactly how they present themselves in empirical reality. Regimes that approximate these ideal types can be found in all parts of the world' (Redazione, 2018, p. 200).

⁴ Weber used the term East as the opposite of West (i.e. in the meaning of non-West, as two antithetical and separate poles of each other), just as he used interchangeably that of Oriental and Asian: the German scholar usually uses the term Asia to refer to India, China, and the Far East, excluding the Near East, or the Middle East, and Egypt but also uses interchangeably Mesopotamia, Western Asia, Near and Middle East; thus the geographical area he defines as the East begins with Egypt, extends to China and Japan, and includes Russia (Turner, 1978, p. 99).

this reason, the analysis of the spread of religions becomes explanatory of the different organizational patterns of contemporary societies, and in this sense, Islam constitutes a particularly interesting comparative field both because it 'represented a precondition for Western development, and because of the comparative possibilities that the great value attributed in Islam to predestination offered compared to ascetic Protestantism' (Morrone, 2006, p. 196). As is well known, although Weber intended to devote a monograph to Islam, just as he did to other monotheistic religions (from ancient Judaism to Taoism and Confucianism, from Hinduism to Buddhism), the outbreak of war and then death prevented the fulfilment of his project. The reconstruction of his thought on Islam, therefore, is somewhat difficult and is based on fragments and references found in his various writings.

Weber's reflection on the Islamic religion is linked to the thesis on the development of capitalism and the contrast between the European tradition of Puritan asceticism and the mystical ethics of Asian religions. Only the West – according to Weber – has experienced the process of rationalization and the combination of decisive elements that have given rise to the state, 'in the sense of a political institution with a rationally-stated "constitution", with rationally-stated law, and with an administration entrusted to specialized officials' (Weber, 2002, p. 7) and to the capitalist mode of production, understood as the 'most fatal force in our modern life' (ibid.). Islamic institutions, on the other hand, according to Weber, are incompatible with capitalism because they have long been dominated by a history of patrimonialism. The warrior class that distinguishes the Islamic religion of the Medina period, belonging to powerful tribes and oriented towards holy war, held economic wealth in high regard, requiring that the followers of other subjugated religions pay tribute (*jizyah*) and placing enormous importance on the spoils of war: 'the importance in Islam of war-originated and political possession, and wealth in general, is diametrically opposed to the Puritan stance. Tradition portrays luxury in dress, perfume and the careful treatment of the beard as acceptable to God, thus constituting the extremely opposite pole of any Puritan economic ethic' (Weber, 1995, p. 302). Therefore, according to Weber, Islam was a 'religion of masters', in which 'the ultimate elements of its economic ethics are purely feudal' (ibid.). The combination of a warrior religiosity and a mystical acceptance of the world produced 'all the characteristics of a typically feudal spirit; the obviously unquestioned acceptance of slavery, serfdom, and polygamy [...] the great simplicity of religious requirements and the even greater simplicity of modest ethical requirements' (Weber, 1965, p. 264). The type of feudalism of the Islamic East, however, according to Weber, was sharply distinct from that of the West, where the former was patrimonial in origin and the latter charismatic. The author draws on Becker (1916/2000) to explain the characteristics of Islamic military feudalism, which arose from a hired army and the contracting out of taxes:

the patrimonial lord who was unable to pay had on the one hand to reward the hired men with allotments on the taxes of his subjects; but on the other hand, he had to transfer to the military official (emir) the office, originally independent of the latter, [...] of the tax official endowed with a fixed salary [...]. On the one hand, the holder of the benefit had to perform military service as a soldier in the first place, and on the other hand he had to pay, theoretically, at least the excess of the taxes collected over his own payment requirements. (Weber, 1995, p. 179)

What this type of feudalism lacked, compared to Western feudalism, was ‘everything that flows from the devotion of the retinue and especially the norms of the specific personal allegiance of vassalage’ (ibid.). Precisely the relationship between feudal lord and vassal is what divides the two conceptions: in the West it is marked by reciprocity and a division of power that somehow contains *in nuce* ‘the principle of contract as the foundation of the division of political power, which will lead to constitutionalism’ (Weber, 1995, p. 186), while in the East it is configured as a patrimonialistic relationship, based on duties of reverence.

It seems clear, then, that Weberian theory on Islam is situated within a more general theory of modernity which, for the German author, coincides with rationalization, albeit with religious roots. Islam lacks the ethical rigour, legalism and rational conduct that, as Calvinism shows, can be generated by belief in predestination. Since Islam is essentially a religion of war, spread among the warrior classes, and Muhammad’s social policy ‘entirely as a function of the intimate unification of believers for the outward struggle, with a view to the outfitting of as many of God’s warriors as possible’ (Weber, 1995, p. 144), the concept of redemption, which is essential in rationalizing behaviour by directing it towards a particular goal, is completely absent. The aspiration, in fact, for a saving good involves a ‘rational arrangement – either only at particular points or as a whole – of the conduct of life’ (Weber, 1982, p. 529), which is precisely what happens in Calvinism, in which believers regard ascetic behaviour and the accumulation of wealth in business as signs of salvation. For Muslims, on the other hand, there is no predestination; rather, they believe in predetermination, which concerns one’s destiny in this world, not in the next. ‘The Islamic concept of predetermination (and not so much predestination) referred to the destinies of the hereafter, not to the salvation of the hereafter, and thus the ethically decisive element, i.e. confirmation as predestined, had no part in it; therefore, only warrior intrepidity (as in the case of *μóιρα*) could result from it, but no consequences for a methodical life, for which the religious reward was precisely lacking’ (Weber, 1982, p. 99, note). Since Islam, according to Weber, is a religion oriented primarily in a warlike sense, and thus towards the extraordinary and the transitory, it lacks the element of continuity and everydayness necessary for the development of a predestination capable of giving rise to a rational conduct of life, ‘as Puritanism did, in which predestination concerned precisely the destiny in the beyond, and thus, *certitudo salutis* depended on the daily confirmation of virtue’ (Weber, 1995, II, p. 259). In short, Islam lacks a form of intramundane asceticism considered a sufficient and necessary condition for the rise of rational capitalism (Turner, 2010).

The Weberian approach to the analysis of Islamic religion began to be problematized beginning in the 1950s, particularly with the work of Maxime Rodinson, *Islam et capitalisme* (1966), in which the author, through the documentation of Muslim and European scholars, aims to demonstrate the possibility that capitalism also developed within Eastern societies, refuting Weber’s main hypothesis that social practices and economic activity can be influenced by an ideology or religion, although Rodinson himself admits that they may be affected by values and traditions. In this vein, other authors challenge the German scholar on the idea that modernization is incompatible with non-Western societies (Eisenstadt, 1997; Ülgener, 2006) and detect in his work a deeply Eurocentric view, influenced by the Orientalism prevalent in his time (Schluchter, 1999; Abdel-Malek, 1963). Bryan Turner distances himself from these, at least in part, as one of the first Western scholars to recon-

struct and analyse Weber's position in a 1974 paper entitled *Islam, capitalism and the Weber theses*⁵ and in the later volume *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (1974b). Turner takes up the Weberian idea that it was the patrimonial nature of Muslim political institutions that precluded the appearance of those preconditions necessary for the development of rational modern Western capitalism, namely, a rational law, a free labour market, autonomous cities, a monetary economy, and a bourgeois class. Weber showed that Islamic institutions were incompatible with capitalism because they had been dominated by a long history of patrimonialism, the conditioning of which was greater than Islamic beliefs themselves, and while the path identified by Weber is really only one of the possible explanations for the secularization that occurred in the West, Turner (2010) asserts that he nonetheless considers the German sociologist's viewpoint valid as a general framework.

4 The neo-patrimonial regimes of the Maghreb

What remains of the Weberian analysis of Islamic societies? In the awareness of the scholar's non-exhaustive reflection, which, unfortunately, as it was not completed, appears extremely fragmentary and limited, it is possible, however, to observe certain features in modern Arab states that echo Weberian heuristic categories. The policies of countries such as Egypt, Algeria or Tunisia can be considered neo-patrimonial, where by this term is meant 'a mode of exercise of power in which the political and economic resources of the state are not the object of rights, but rather considered an extension of the personal wealth of the leader and granted by the "good father" power – personalized in the supreme leader – to citizens when they are "good children", part of the national "family"' (Pioppi, 2010, p. 57). Power is thus centralized in the hands of a leader (Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia) who can possibly delegate in part to members of his close entourage, starting with the family. These subordinate kingpins may in turn delegate part of their power through practices of clientelism and nepotism, typical of neo-patrimonial rule. Although considered traditional forms of power, thus incompatible with modern political institutions, not only do they persist even in democracies, but more importantly they represent the main lens through which the political history of Arab countries has always been read, even in the face of economic and political liberalizations. Liberalizations, however, that have failed to produce an independent and competitive private sector (Hakimian & Moshaver, 2000) precisely because of the neo-patrimonial power system that, instead of fostering a retreat of the state, has actually incorporated new private clients within the public sector (e.g. many civil servants are also private entrepreneurs). In this way, new emerging social groups have been co-opted within a client system and the poorest and most marginalized social groups have been excluded. In short, political space has been found for new elites but not for the people, thus strengthening the power of the leader instead of fostering effective pluralism.

⁵ In this article, Turner outlines four different Weberian theses about the connection between religious beliefs and capitalism, demonstrating the falsity of at least three of them and considering the fourth, which examines the consequences of patrimonial domination, as a possible explanation for some developments in the Islamic world.

According to Bank and Richter (2010), the political regimes of MENA (the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa) countries are most effectively explained by the concept of neo-patrimonialism rather than authoritarianism, as they are able to accentuate two fundamental characteristics: personalism and informality. While the father of the concept is undoubtedly Eisenstadt (1973), who in the 1970s described neo-patrimonial regimes as systems of government in which the figure of the leader administers thanks to a clientelistic network based on exchanges and favours chosen not for competence but for demonstrated loyalty and trust, it is Pawelka (1985; 2002) who adapts the concept to the Middle East. The German scholar develops a model based on the example of Egypt in which the leader occupies the central position, around which the different social elites revolve, in positions corresponding to personal distance with the leader, as well as the different sectors of society, which, in the case of Egypt, are identified as: the military, the palace, the economy, social organizations, the religious sector and the bureaucracy. The five principles underlying this neo-patrimonial model of government are: 'personalism, emanation, elite pluralism, balance of power, and intersection of institutional authority.' The first refers to the founding logic of patrimonialism, whereby members of the elite are appointed to key positions in the bureaucracy and economy who, in return, show absolute personal loyalty to the leader. The leader maintains his or her power by surrounding himself or herself with family and clan people on the one hand, and by bestowing favours and rewards on the other: 'in this way leadership is legitimized by both a form of "traditional loyalty" (that of family) and "material rewards"' (Pawelka, 1985, p. 24). Emanation means that the decisions of such members have force only because they are direct emanations of the leader and, therefore, reflect the leader's will and not their own. Elite pluralism refers to the logic of competition between different members of the elite to gain the leader's favour. This allows there to be a certain degree of balance of power, while the principle of rotation and intersection of institutional authority guarantee the leader's decision-making autonomy, preventing the formation of possible coalitions and power groups among elite members.

The concept of neo-patrimonialism helps to explain the stability of political regimes in MENA regions (Pawelka, 1985; Tripp, 1995; Brownlee, 2002), which seem particularly adept at absorbing internally any hint of change, although – compared to traditional definitions of neo-patrimonialism – some scholars (Bank, 2004, p. 157) suggest including additional elements that can more specifically and in a more up-to-date way explain these kinds of regimes, such as 'the external influences or the role of identity, political discourse and ideology'. That is, there would exist other elements of legitimation of neo-patrimonialist regimes, such as 'Rent-seeking and Allocation', the 'Politics of Participation' and the 'Politics of Symbolism' (Bank & Richter, 2010, p. 6). The latter, in particular, echoes Weberian analysis as it concerns 'the immaterial aspects of culture, identity and discourse, in this way adding new aspects to the classic Weberian categories of charisma and tradition' (Bank & Richter, 2010, p. 8).⁶

⁶ Included in this dimension, of course, is the use of the media by media owners to impose their narratives and dominate the public sphere.

The political semi-immobility that seems to characterize the MENA region has led to talk of neo-patrimonial states with new 'sultans' in power.⁷ In Algeria, the National Liberation Front has led the country since independence in 1962, and Bouteflika was president of the republic from 1999 until 2019. In Libya, Qaddafi was in power continuously from 1969 until a popular uprising – flanked by NATO – led to the overthrow of his regime and his death. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI has ruled since 1999, when he succeeded his father, Hassan II. Similarly in Jordan, the current monarch Abdullah II succeeded on his father's death in 1999, while in Saudi Arabia the current King Salman took the throne after the death of his half-brother Abd Allah (who in turn had inherited the kingdom from his father Fahd, who had been in power for about two decades) and on the very day of his coronation appointed his half-brother Muqrin as crown prince and replaced the prime minister with his son Muhammad. Finally, in the Syrian republic, controversial President Bashar Assad has been at the helm since 2000, having been designated as his successor by his father Hafiz al-Assad.

5 The revolutions of 2011

The question becomes one of explaining how it was possible, during the period of the Arab Spring, to come to overthrow regimes that seemed indestructible and had been administering power for decades. In this sense, the revolutions of 2010–11 can be read as a challenge to Weberian interpretive categories, that is, to those patrimonial regimes already identified by the German scholar and able to explain and describe the politics of those states quite effectively.

As is generally known, what is called the Arab Spring⁸ in the West (but which in the countries involved is called tawhira, revolution) came about as a result of the protest by

⁷ Weber himself, in *Economy and Society*, speaks of sultanism as a particular type of traditional power. With the rise of a purely personal administrative and military apparatus of the power holder, all traditional power tilts into patrimonialism and, with the extreme expansion of power, into sultanism: 'In the extreme case, the sultan tends to arise whenever traditional rule develops an administration and military force that are purely instruments of the master. [...] Where domination [...] operates primarily on the basis of discretion, it will be called sultanism. [...] The non-traditional element is not, however, rationalized in impersonal terms, but consists only in the extreme development of the ruler's discretion. This is what distinguishes it from any form of rational authority' (Weber, 1995, pp. 226–231).

⁸ The expression 'Arab Spring' was coined by Marc Lynch in *Foreign Policy* to recall the Western uprisings of 1848 and the Prague Revolution of 1968: i.e. as many historical moments characterized above all by a new generation's 'desire for rebellion, a demand for dignity from the youth' (Castellani Perelli, 2020). The terms used to refer to what happened in Arab countries in early 2011 is the subject of lively debate. According to Paonessa (2013, p. 84) 'in the attitude of Westerners to talk about "uprisings", or even worse, the Arab Spring (or the Arab winter), is not even so latent an attempt to downplay the magnitude of the events taking place and the results of the regimes' remission in order to reduce, implicitly, their intensity and depth'. Campanini also confesses 'a certain discomfort in using the term revolution. That an event is historically revolutionary can only be verified over long periods of time. Certainly, the Arab uprisings disrupted a political framework that had been essentially immobile for many decades, but I find it premature to speak of revolutions since the process is still ongoing, there are strong elements of ambiguity in their unfolding, and furthermore many premises/promises have been betrayed' (Campanini, 2013, pp. 7–23).

young street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi who, on 17 December 2010, set himself on fire in protest after yet another abuse by local police⁹ (and who would die after several days in hospital as a result of the burns suffered). It was an episode that sparked revolt in the streets and, less than two weeks later, reached Egypt (where Mubarak ‘the Pharaoh’ left power after 30 years), and then spread to Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

The protests were the outbreak of widespread discontent that had already been simmering in the populations of these countries in previous years. In the decade leading up to the Arab Spring, the living conditions of large sections of the population had progressively deteriorated, especially for the increasingly numerous and educated young people. Various forms of protests and uprisings had already broken out due to the difficult socioeconomic situation (Paciello, 2011) and harshly suppressed by the government using military force. Indeed, the role of the army has always been a key element in the politics of Arab states: used more as a tool for suppressing local insurgencies than as an organ for defending national borders, it often plays the role of the balance of power. On the one hand, it represents one of the characteristic elements of a patrimonialist regime, both because it is often composed of people close to the leader by family, clan or interest ties (e.g. the core of the Saudi National Guard comes from the same region as all the ruling families in the peninsula), and because the leader establishes an exchange relationship with the army based on benefits, money and protections in order to obtain unconditional loyalty and support. Consistent with the clientelistic logic typical of a neo-patrimonialist regime, there is thus a lack of competence and professionalization in the army (as well as in the administration), which are sacrificed in order to have full loyalty and obedience. On the other hand, however, the army was instrumental precisely during the Arab revolutions of 2010–11 in bringing down the regimes and of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt (and, later, also of President-elect Morsi), as well as playing a decisive role in Libya and Syria. In short, the deployment of the army is central and indispensable in deciding the fate of Arab political systems.

This has been compounded since the early 2000s by a sharp rise in inflation, especially for food items, which has contributed to a worsening lifestyle for the citizens of these countries. Countries that the Tunisian scholar Larbi Sadiki has described as ‘bread democracies’, since they were based on an exchange between government and citizens whereby the former ensured basic necessities and the latter ensured political quiet: ‘the bread agreement, which in the 1960s was in force in the Arab world from Algeria to Jordan, defined the welfare role of the Arab states to cope with the generalized impoverishment of the population. In exchange for political deference, the state pledged to provide citizens with basic goods and commodities’ (Sadiki, 2012, p. 331). As grain prices soared however, it became very difficult for the government to maintain this policy of food subsidies, making them dependent on imports (in 2010, almost half of the top 20 grain-importing countries were Middle Eastern countries, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Tunisia).

⁹ In fact, analysts have pointed out that these revolutions lack a real leader, a charismatic figure capable, as Weber already pointed out, of initiating change. Rather, we witness a collective hero, who communicates and organizes through social networks. Plenel, for example, emphasizes the democratic and social nature of both revolutions marked by the absence of leaders, parties or vanguard movements (Stora, 2011).

These economic factors have been linked to a very significant structural-demographic element: the high proportion of young people.

The proportion of young adults aged 15–29, as a fraction of all those over 15, ranges from 38 percent in Bahrain and Tunisia to over 50 percent in Yemen (compared to 26 percent in the United States). Not only is the proportion of young people in the Middle East extraordinarily high, but their numbers have grown rapidly over a short period of time. Since 1990, the youth population aged 15–29 has grown by 50 percent in Libya and Tunisia, 65 percent in Egypt, and 125 percent in Yemen. Thanks to the modernization policies of their sultanistic governments, many of these young people have been able to go to university, especially in recent years. In fact, university enrolment has soared throughout the region in recent decades, more than tripled in Tunisia, quadrupled in Egypt, and increased tenfold in Libya. (Goldstone, 2011)

French sociologist and demographer Emmanuel Todd (2011) points out that the increase in the educational level of young people in their 20s and 30s has occurred in parallel with another important structural factor: the drastic decrease in the fertility rate. According to Todd, in order to understand the political evolution of Arab countries, the three variables to consider are precisely the level of education, the fertility rate and the endogamy rate, which are closely interrelated. Growing literacy, in fact, increases citizens' political participation, while the declining fertility rate reshapes the relationship between men and women by challenging authority relations, both at the private and public levels.

The co-presence of these elements undoubtedly underlies the riots that erupted in 2011. The failure to develop a modern entrepreneurial class has weighed significantly on job opportunities, which have become less and less available and attractive, especially for the great mass of young people who, in recent years, have increased their level of education and, consequently, their job expectations. According to some political scientists (who partly draw on the well-known and controversial *Clash of Civilizations* thesis proposed by Huntington in 1993), the so-called 'youth bulge' (the bulge of the demographic group between the ages of 15 and 24 in a country's age pyramid)¹⁰ may in certain cases be correlated with an increase in political violence, due to the dissatisfaction and frustration of the younger generation with respect to the opportunities for realizing their expectations. According to Jack Goldstone's theory of revolutions (1991), such pressure can lead to regime change. In the 1970s, both the French sociologist Bouthoul (1970) and the scholar Choucri (1974) took up the idea that conflicts are consequent to the alteration of a country's economic-demographic balance, but it is mainly Jack Goldstone who applied it to the Arab world where young people, excluded from the political and economic life of their country, may embrace violent behaviour in order to promote democratic reforms.¹¹

¹⁰ Gary Fuller first used the expression in 1995 in his speech at a CIA conference entitled *The Demographic Backdrop to Ethnic Conflict: A Geographic Overview* (Schomaker, 2013).

¹¹ After a phase of demographic deceleration that undoubtedly had a major impact in economic and social terms, the Arab world is now witnessing a 'counter-demographic transition' (Courbage, 2020, p. 75).

6 Ten years on

In order to assess what remained of the revolutionary wave of 2011, a few premises are necessary: first, it must be remembered that the uprisings affected different countries, although they shared certain characteristics (as we have tried to show in this paper), consequently, the outcome over the long term also differed depending on the historical and national context. As Emiliani (2020, p. X) warns ‘that of the Springs was not a unified movement, but a sequence of different uprisings from country to country that allow for comparative analyses, but only up to a certain point’. Second, the protest did not end in 2011: in 2019, the squares filled again and other decades-old presidencies fell (al-Bashir in Sudan, Bouteflika in Algeria). For the purpose and theoretical hypotheses of this paper, only a few cases will be explored, such as Tunisia and Egypt, which did not degenerate into civil wars but show ‘how the economic problems that generated the Springs have not “been solved,” nor their matrix, namely the very serious deficit of democracy’ (Emiliani, 2020, p. 228). In Libya, the end of Qaddafi’s 42-year reign led to civil war and chaos the end of which is not in sight, with heavy foreign interference (primarily Russian and Turkish). Similarly in Syria, the weight of radical Islamism and the proclamation of the Caliphate (as well as again the meddling of Russia and Turkey) led to a civil war that still has Bashar al Assad in place and has triggered a terrible humanitarian crisis. Moreover, as Emiliani notes (2020, p. 128), in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria the Springs ‘were caused by, or resulted from, the intra-Muslim sectarian clash between Sunnis and Shiites.’ Moreover, in both Yemen and Bahrain ‘Saudi Arabia directly intervened with its own troops to turn their outcome in its favour.’ For the purposes of our analysis, the Algerian case seems interesting, where in 2011 the street riots that had begun ‘in the typical manner of patrimonial states: with a shower of aid to the poorest strata of the population, the raising of public sector salaries and other similar gratuities’ (2020, p. 219). The Algerian population then waited until February 2019, when the 82-year-old Bouteflika intended to run again for the presidential elections for the fifth time (despite a severe stroke that had afflicted him, rendering him nearly mute and paralyzed), to more forcefully express their discontent and demand for democracy and economic justice. Again, the army, which in the early 1990s had been responsible for a coup that plunged the country into a long and bloody civil war (which ended in 1999), did not turn against the protesters but convinced the former president to retire from political life.

In some cases (Tunisia and Egypt) new constitutions were enacted, in others (Morocco) the existing one was amended. But what actually changed? The opinions of analysts and scholars are rather unanimous in branding the Arab revolutions of 2011 as failed, betrayed or otherwise unfinished, even though they undoubtedly represented a major upheaval of established powers.

In Tunisia, for example, as Leila Belhadj Mohamed explains, nepotism run by the family of President Ben Ali’s wife, Leila Trabelsi, who controlled the entire economy, was ‘eliminated. In practice, nothing could be done unless one had contact with the Trabelsi family’; subsequently, however, ‘the elected ruling class was unable to manage the economic resources and reforms that needed to be made’ (Marinoni, 2021). Tunisia has long been considered an, at least partial, exception (Mohsen-Finan, 2020) to the failure of the 2011 revolutions, as it seemed to be the country where things had changed the most.

A rather peculiar circumstance given that Tunisia has been ruled in an authoritarian manner since its independence in 1956, first with Habib Bourguiba and later with Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The 2011 uprisings succeeded in toppling Ben Ali's regime without much violence, leading to the formation of a coalition government since no party had won an absolute majority in the elections held that year. Two years later, in 2013, a government was born based on a 'historic compromise' between modernist forces and an Islamist party that showed the acceptance of coexistence between forces with opposing ideological visions: a result achieved thanks to a number of elements present in the country. First, the presence – even during the years of Ben Ali's authoritarianism –, of opposition groups, such as the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH). Second, thanks to some important choices, such as that 'of mass and free education decided in Tunisia from the first day of independence [...] which took a new form with digital dissidence and the development of rebel sites [...] and remained demanding even after 2011' (Mohsen-Finan, 2020).¹² Moreover, as already recalled in discussing the characteristic elements of neo-patrimonialism, because of the role played by the army and foreign powers (particularly the United States). On 14 January 2011 (the day Ben Ali left the country and flew to Saudi Arabia, where he would die in 2019), in fact, the army, which up to that point had also worked hard to suppress the uprisings, decided not to fire on the crowd. Evidently, the game already seemed to be over: Ben Ali had received no outside support, with the exception of Qaddafi's Libya, and the United States, which did not appreciate the total closure towards moderate Islamic parties, considered strategic in the fight against extremism, had openly sided with the Tunisian people.

The uniqueness of Tunisia lies precisely in the relative 'success' of the revolution compared to other Arab Spring countries. Here, in fact, free elections were held, freedom of expression was restored, and a progressive constitution was approved (2014). At the same time, however, corruption shows no sign of abating, production has declined, citizens experience an enduring sense of insecurity, and tourism (among the main sources of revenue) has plummeted. Moreover, the 2015 ISIS attacks and economic stagnation have led many Tunisians to reconsider the scope of the revolution and attribute to it 'the deterioration of the social climate, the absence of jobs for young people, the lack of security, growing inequalities, and the degradation of public services' (Mohsen-Finan, 2020, p. 20). In fact, while the achievements of the uprising seemed well evidenced by the principles enshrined in the new Constitution, what was lacking was a truly modern and progressive political class capable of transiting the country out of the neo-patrimonialist vision to which it had been condemned for long years. From the start, in fact, the Islamist party (which had won a majority, relatively, in the first free elections) sought to impose itself on its governing allies, using the old strategies of nepotism and cronyism. In the 2014 elections, 'the pre-revolution political scene, dominated by two major formations, was thus re-established, sweeping away all the parties that had emerged in 2011' (Mohsen-Finan, 2020, p. 22). Two formations at the antipodes, modernists and Islamists, were unable to find a compromise for governing the country so that in the end Essebsi (Bourguiba's for-

¹² The Tunisian people, indeed, took to the streets again in 2013 against the democratically elected government that was considered incompetent.

mer minister who had founded his own party, the *Nidaa Tounes*, in 2012) ‘as a man of the past, acted for a return of the latter, rehabilitating Ben Ali’s cadres and making ministers and the prime minister mere implementers of a policy he wanted to devise himself’ (Mohsen-Finan, 2020, p. 23). With Essebsi dead, the 2019 presidential elections saw Kais Saied, a law professor not supported by any party or association, victorious during an election campaign centred on the ‘divide between the promise of the 2011 revolution and a political life that is constantly deteriorating, to the point of generating a sharp divorce between the ruling class and the citizens’ (Mohsen-Finan, 2020, p. 24). The difficult economic situation, aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, led in July 2021 to the dissolution of the Tunisian parliament by President Saied and the amendment of the Constitution born out of the 2011 revolutions, again in an authoritarian direction. In short, even in the country that seemed to have been the only one where protest really had brought about change in a democratic direction, the revolution lost and the system is returning – a little more than a decade later – to a scenario very similar to that of Ben Ali’s presidency.

The case of Egypt is also emblematic, as it has ‘represented the thermometer for regional stability, given the decisive role that [...] it has played and continues to play in the area’ (Emiliani, 2020, p. 43). Here the role of the army emerges even more overbearingly (after all, Mubarak had been a marshal): first the SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), under pressure from the United States, persuades President Mubarak to leave and then sets out to manage the country’s transition to democracy. Although in the 2012 elections, where, as Emiliani (2020, p. 48) points out, ‘the turnout figure of only 46.4 percent of the electorate [...] was already a clear indicator of the disaffection of the Egyptian population towards the transition process’, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi emerged, the SCAF began a bitter tug-of-war with the new president that would end with a coup in 2013 that put General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in charge, who to all intents and purposes restored an authoritarian government.

Reading the events from a Weberian perspective, it does indeed seem that neo-patriotism has once again won, that the protest of the youth has failed to undermine the clientelistic system typical of these regimes. Weber’s research about Islamic religion, that was intended to be part on his comparative analyses on the economic ethics of the world religions, concerns the relationship between politics and religion and their interconnections. According to this scholar, based on the contrast between the European tradition of Puritan asceticism and the mystical ethics of Asian religions, the Islamic religion was incompatible with the development of capitalism, as happened in the West. In Islam, according to Weber, there was little tension between religion and the world and therefore ‘Islam did not confront the ultimate problem of the relationship between religious ethics and secular institutions, which is the fundamental problem of the relationship between law and religion’ (Weber, 1966, p. 233). This approach sheds some light also on the economic and cultural dimensions of Arab Spring movements. Faced with global economic pressures and public revolts Arab governments have responded by increasing the subsidies on food and fuel. But the Arab Spring demonstrates that the Arab world needs a fundamental rethinking of the social contract, a new development paradigm that is based on a competitive entrepreneurial, on private sector and on its young and educated population, that employing modern media to project their ideas and demands onto a public space that governments struggle to control. According to Turner, currently there is a more general

development in Islam of 'personal piety' (Jung, Petersen & Sparre, 2014; Kersten & Olsson, 2013) that can be considered as consistent with Weber's views on the consequences of religious reform such as Protestantism. Movements of urban piety, or 'post-traditional Islam' or even 'post-Islamism' (Bayat, 2007) – observed in Malaysia, Morocco, Egypt and Turkey – are developed among educated young Muslims (especially young women) and promote self-actualization, individualization, personal discipline and ethical enhancement, in conjunction with success in this world: 'Is this development perhaps the ironic conclusion of Weber's sociology of Islam, namely the Protestantization of Islam?' (Turner, 2016, p. 222).

With the Arab Spring, civil society expressed a clear desire to overcome state authoritarianism and advanced the demand for greater social justice and an adjustment to democratic values but, ten years later, the dynastic idea of power and those characteristics ascribed by Weber to the Islamic world seem to have prevailed. According to Oliver Roy's (Castellani Perelli, 2020) reading, however, the Arab Spring was not futile, 'it has positively transformed political culture. It destroyed the myth of the charismatic leader in the region and also the illusion of the collective we, Arab or Islamic, that was exploited by the regimes. It brought a new individualism'. What was lacking was that the movement could not transform itself into a party, and it did not even have an ideology or a program that was not just 'more democracy'. A political vacuum was created, which was taken advantage of first by radical Islamists and then by the *ancien régime*. As Campanini (2019) points out, the Arab Springs teach 'that civil societies in Arab countries are puny; not immature, but weak'.

The new uprisings, however, of 2019 and 2020 in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq (also abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that provided the pretext for further securitarian tightening) show how the revolutionary wave has not subsided as the economic, political and social problems that generated the Arab Springs have not been adequately addressed: 'These phenomena of demonstrations and anger, resulting in incidents of violence, will be repeated over the years until a democratic form of government and a situation of widespread wealth prosperity arrives in the region. Conditions in the 10 years since the Revolutions have worsened, certainly not improved' (Emiliani, 2021).

7 A Weberian perspective on the Arab Spring

The explosion of revolts was a struggle against the neo-patrimonialist model that developed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the end of the colonial period and in crisis in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. The revolutions are a challenge to Weber's analyses, because they want to overcome those obstacles to modernization and development identified by the German sociologist in Islamic societies: a non-rational legal system because it is arbitrary and aimed at equity; an administrative apparatus selected on the basis of personal trust and therefore incompetent; an economy dependent on the favour of the holder of power (Solivetti, 1993, p. 57–67). According to Bratton and de Walle (1997), the three typical characteristics of neo-patrimonialism – presidentialism, systematic clientelism and the use of state resources for one's political legitimacy – are present in various Islamic countries: Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Mubarak's Egypt, Gaddafi's Libya, Ben Ali's Tunisia and Assad's Syria.

In part, Weber's reflections arise from the observation of the revolts in Russia in 1905 and 1917. Until this moment, the German sociologist employed the word revolution without defining it specifically but only in a historicist sense, i.e. 'descriptive of the great revolutions of the past' referring to the French Revolution, the July Revolution of 1830, the German Revolution of 1848 and also to the Paris Commune of 1871, or referring in general to the revolution of the propertied classes, to the great technical revolutions, to the industrial revolution, to the ecclesiastical revolutions, that is, those events 'that have decisively changed human life' (Hanke, 2013, p. 15). Observing the events in Russia, Weber (who quickly learned the Russian language to read the local press directly) discusses 'the possibilities for the development of democracy and individualism in the country, i.e. the possibilities for a liberal development, in the Western European sense' (Hanke, 2013, p. 14). As in the case of capitalism, Weber considers even revolution a typically Western phenomenon. Historical-comparative analysis will lead him to consider a change in this direction impossible in a country considered not yet mature for this change since

there is a lack – he states – of great charismatic leaders able to emotionally involve even foreign observers: the revolutionary leaders were too engaged in wearing themselves out in matters of tactics [...]. The fundamental themes that frequently recur in Russian political writings are: the difficulties of affirmation for liberal values, the social, ideological and political consequences of capitalist development in a very backward context, finally the loss of legitimacy of the tsarist regime and the probability of an authoritarian outcome, right or left, of the political upheavals that had then taken place in Russia. (Carpinelli, 2000, p. 106–108)

Weber's reflection deviates both from the Marxist–Leninist revolutionary theory and from the 'Western and material idea according to which the importation of mature capitalism into Russia would automatically lead to the spread of democracy and freedom' (Hanke, 2013, p. 15).

The concept of revolution is part of Weber's theory of social change, as a result of the mutual 'interaction of technical and spiritual revolutions; it refers to Kantian concept of revolution, as an inner transformation and change of principles, which will later and in an even more evident way be shown in the accentuation of the concept of charisma' (Hanke, 2013, p. 16). Weber inserts the Kantian concept of revolution within his conception of charisma, 'therefore revolution, ethics of intention and charisma merge' (Hanke, 2013, p. 25), and defines charisma as 'the specific force revolutionary creator of history'. Weber does not have a systematic theory of revolution, but an 'anthropological affirmation that men with particular charisma can intervene in the course of history to shape and modify it' (Hanke, 2013, p. 25). Charisma, in fact, is a break with traditional and rational norms, even if it is 'always linked to well-defined limits, imposed by the cage of rationalization and bureaucratization' (Hanke, 2013, p. 26). In analysing the Russian situation, the lack of charismatic leaders is, according to Weber, one of the weak points of the revolution. As Cavalli (1968, p. 337) points out, only the leader possesses those 'capacities capable, thanks to the profound and direct influence he has on the masses, of making so that new principles of behaviour are widely and rapidly internalized – thus producing the only true change, which is the one within man.' According to Weber, the 'freedom fighters' in Russia did not make a 'revolution', but only the 'elimination of an incapable monarch', because 'the power has not passed from the hands of landowners, officials, banks, into those of peasants and industrial workers' (Carpinelli, 2000, p. 109).

Although Collins (2001) considers the German sociologist's reflections on revolution taxonomic and limited, and wonders if they can still be useful, he recognizes that Weber's ideas help us to consider more deeply what the revolution reveals about the character of the state power (Collins, 2001, p.172). Weber, in fact, does not limit himself to considering the classic modern cases (revolution, French, Russian, Chinese) but, taking ancient Rome as an example, he explains that he considers the revolution as a form of un-legitimized change, which consequently produces illegitimate forms of power. For this reason, according to the Erfurt sociologist, the revolution cannot win: it can succeed, but at the price of being incorporated into the military-centred state and losing its revolutionary character. Weber's analysis of the revolution, as it emerges in his writings on Russia, is openly critical of Marxism. Although there are some overlaps with the Marxian paradigm, he questions the materialist theory according to which the revolutions are born from below, from the growing demands for change by a social class that represents the future, as opposed to a threadbare class that supports the status quo. For Marx, the economic classes are the central subject, while Weber's analysis considers not only the class interests but also the governmental structures that emerge from these interests and the power of the different factions struggling to implement structural changes.¹³ In this way, he anticipates elements of the future paradigm of the collapse of the state (Collins, 1999; Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 1978), elaborated some sixty years after his death. This paradigm sees revolution triggered from above, with the state collapsing due to a defeat in war or a financial crisis. In the nations involved in the Arab Spring, there is a deep social discontent resulting from political and social failures. Weber's conception of the revolution and social change, together with considerations on the characteristics of the East and the influence of religion in the social structure help analyse the results of the 2011 revolutions. First, the absence of a unified and cohesive leadership within the protest movements is an element that the German sociologist already considered essential for the success of a revolution. Many of movements of the Arab Spring were spontaneous and decentralized, with a wide range of goals and ideologies, which made it difficult to establish a common vision for the future, weakening the ability to negotiate with the government or establish a stable government after the riots. Revolutions have developed without the support of a solid belief system and a well-defined political project. Once the governments in power collapsed, the same fragilities in the institutions that in the past had favoured the rise of neo-patrimonial regimes arose again and above there was not a significant renewal of the political class (as the new bourgeois elite that, in 1789, led the French Revolution). According to Yves Aubin de La Messuzière (2011), French ambassador to Tunisia from 2002 to 2005, the Arab Spring is more a 'transition' than a 'revolution', given the nature of the regimes established following the revolts. Furthermore, revolts were broken out in Arab countries (Egypt, Yemen, Libya) which were going through a crisis of legitimacy and succession. Weber's analyses discuss the problem of legitimacy and succession of the leadership. The old leaders who had led – in the past – the protest against the colonial power, had obtained a legitimacy of a charismatic type, but already during the sixties it was clear that power was in the hands of the

¹³ For a critical reading of classic debate between the Weberian and Marxist paradigm about the role of religious and economics factors in the origins of capitalism, cf. Löwy (1989).

leader and his faithful followers, opposed the totality of the population which began to develop a widespread discontent.¹⁴ The loss of leadership legitimacy and the problem of succession of a charismatic leadership is one of a triggers for the revolutions of 2011.

The demonstrations of 2010–11, in which there was a huge youth participation, destabilized the concept of revolution of the West: ‘the revolutions and the fervour of the Arab youth based on the utopia of a radical change have called into question the consensus that the West had built on the end of the revolutionary perspective’ (Paonessa, 2013, p. 88). These events have also stimulated a profound reflection on democracy, which is also in crisis in the Western context. The protest of the Arab Spring was conducted without an institutional opposition, ‘disavowing in practice – at least in part – the form Western democracy based on representative government, on mediation, on intermediate bodies’ (Paonessa, 2013, p. 89). Different social entities of various kinds have joined in requesting the suppression of the system, overcoming differences and acting as a single collective body. This union found expression in the famous invocation ‘the people want’ (quoted by the Tunisian poet and writer Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi, Paonessa, 2013, p. 92). In this collective cohesion, it is possible to recognize a further contrast with the individualistic and fragmented approach typical of the western world. The Muslim world could once again resort to the function of control and pressure of the *assabiyya* (group structures) and to the dynastic idea of power, confirming the characteristics ascribed by Weber to the Islamic world and rejecting the requests of civil society to overcome authoritarianism, to have a greater social justice and an adjustment to democratic values.

Bertrand Badie defines the revolutions of 2011 as ‘first post-Leninist revolutions, in other words, revolutions without leader, without party, without structured organization, without ideology, without doctrine’ (Badie, 2011, p. 97). In this definition, it is possible to identify elements highlighted by Weber’s perspective on social change. The results obtained by the Arab Spring’s movements demonstrate how it is possible to achieve organization and coordination without necessarily relying on a traditional force, such as a political party or a leader. Therefore, what many define as ‘the main problem of the Arab revolts, the absence of a modern prince in the Gramscian sense of the term, constitutes one of the elements on which we will have to reflect more in the future. No longer a centralized control but a convergence of multiple autonomous thoughts, even organized ones, which are expressed with different means on shared principles’ (Paonessa, 2013, p. 93). The Arab Spring and other social movements elevated the idea of an alternative, horizontal, leaderless organization where – according to critical leadership studies (Collinson, 2011; Dufield, 2000) – ‘that leadership is a relational, socially constructed phenomenon rather than the result of a stable set of leadership attributes that inhere in the leaders’ (Sutherland et al., 2013, p. 1).

Leaderless movements are entirely distinct from formal organizations (Sutherland et al., 2013) but just because an organization is *leaderless*, it does not necessarily mean that it is also *leadershipless*.

This resonates with Weber’s work in the concept of charismatic rulership, as an analytical tool for analysing power and domination. The Arab Springs are movements with-

¹⁴ Cf. theories of power of the sultanistic type by Linz (1990) and neopatrimonial regimes by Bratton and de Walle (1997).

out an individual leader but 'these movements have been charismatic in the sense captured by Weber's use of the term because uniquely disruptive, meaning driven by extraordinary needs that established social and political institutions were not seen as capable of satisfying, thus engendering demands of drastic change in order to placate these needs' (Hassanzadeh, 2017, p. 336). Weber's theorization of charisma 'is a mode of authority that seeks dramatic change, on political and symbolic levels, but is maintained by a form of power that is collectively participatory' (Hassanzadeh, 2017, p. 336). This form of popular charisma, that has no need of heroes, is a 'form of authority that breaks in a meaningful sense with existing practices of governance, and does so by affording average citizens greater control in practicing political judgment. It draws on Weber's theorization of charisma as an embodiment of exceptional needs, while expanding the narrow locus with which he associates it' (Hassanzadeh, 2017, p. 336).

This type of charisma, embodied in the Arab Spring, is important for a future transformation towards democracy. It is probable that this mode of revolution without heroes is also a reaction to the type of politics that characterized the post-colonial period in these countries, based on the cult of personality of the leader, on the single party, clientelism, corruption and domination of the elite. The charisma based on the people, claimed by the social movements of the Arab Spring, wants to break with the model of the authoritarian and charismatic leader. Despite a history of centralized and unaccountable authority, the characteristics of these movements announce a rupture with the pattern of mid-twentieth century and demand a greater inclusion in decision-making. Popularly based charisma of the Arab Spring movements is an occasion to re-thinking of existing discourses and debates about authoritarian and democratic institutions, and the respective roles of elites and publics in the political process.

8 Conclusions

The consequences of the Arab Spring have demonstrated the complexity of revolutionary processes and the transition towards democracy. The reasons for failure are diverse and interconnected, including the lack of unified and charismatic leadership, the violence of authoritarian regimes, international geopolitical interests, socio-economic problems and the absence of a democratic political culture. The instability following the 2011 uprisings (and those of 2019) is understandable, and the outcome will still require time to settle, also due to the different historical paths and traditions of the various countries. The transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system takes time and continuous effort to develop stable institutions and widespread political participation. In many cases, this process was hindered by lack of experience and conflicts among different political forces.

'The appropriation of the results of the revolts by actors who were not initially their instigators shifted the direction of change into the hands of those who already had governing experience, institutional structures, and established social networks. Thus, representatives of the previous political class, military leaders, and even Islamists reaped the benefits' (Ventura, 2014, p. 336). What was lacking was that charismatic leadership that Weber had already identified as the sole creative force in history capable of proposing a political alternative and achieving a true revolution. The street protests seem to repeat

what Weber had observed in the Russian revolution: the overthrow of an incapable monarch rather than a true revolution. Although in the work of the German sociologist there is not a theory of revolution or an analytical treatment of the Islamic religion and its influence on social structures and political institutions, the final result of revolutions begun in 2011 will demonstrate whether these countries have exited the Weberian description or are still frozen in a new neo-patrimonial system, changing only the leaders in power.

However, what the Arab Spring certainly demonstrated was an enormous capacity for citizen mobilization and a no longer marginal role for public opinion. Regarding the Egyptian case, the political analyst Mustafa Kamel el-Sayyid believes that ‘the significance of the Egyptian revolution is primarily cultural, as it marked the end of the culture of fear, submission, and hypocrisy in political affairs’ (Paonessa, 2013, p. 101).

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