

Interview



Interview with Professor Asef Bayat

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Interviewed by Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh.

Asef Bayat is Professor of Sociology and Catherine & Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In this interview, he explains how his personal background has informed his research trajectory. We also picked Professor Bayat's brain about the last decade or more of contentious politics activity in the Middle East, his interpretations of the 2011 Arab revolutions and the counterrevolutionary wave, and his ideas about innovations in the field of contentious politics scholarship.

Protest: Let's start where the personal meets the scholarly. What drew you to the study of protests and social movements in the first place?

Asef Bayat (AB): I think it partially had to do with my social background, and partially the political conditions in which I was operating as a young person. I was born and grew up in a poor small village of some 150 mostly illiterate sharecroppers; the village had no piped water, electricity, or paved roads. There was something we called 'school' in the warehouse of an absentee feudal lord, but it went up to only fourth grade. The absence of schooling forced my family to move to Tehran. So, in Tehran I lived the life of a rural migrant who nevertheless managed to finish high

school and go to college. I suppose the coincidence of this rural migrant positionality and college life and educational opportunity (I studied Political Science) shaped my interest in politics and activism. By the time the Iranian revolution of 1979 came, I had become highly political, with a socialist orientation. The Iranian revolution was key in shaping my interest in contentious politics and social movements. It was an invaluable experience both to be part it, feel it, and bear its consequences while at the same time studying it. Not surprisingly, I wrote my PhD dissertation on the Iranian revolution; I examined the role of the working class and the experience of ‘workers councils’ that aimed to run workplaces democratically from below in hundreds of factories. The dissertation was published in 1987 as *Workers and Revolution in Iran* in London. Even though the book is rather dry and lifeless (I was still struggling with my English language at the time), it is based on extensive field research in that turbulent revolutionary episode.

Protest: Over the past few decades, your pioneering body of work on the Middle East (added to Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam) has more or less created the field of revolution studies for the region. What has surprised you about how this ‘subfield’ has taken off?

AB: Interestingly, the Iranian experience has been dubbed the “last great revolution”. In a way it is perhaps the last radical revolution of the 20th Century. Ten years later, the Eastern-European revolutions of 1989 emerged as if to end this type of revolution. The East-European revolutions and the collapse of the USSR opened a new era in which the idea of revolution as a radical and deep structural change dissipated. So, for a long while after the cold war there was not much interest in revolution as a political strategy among activists and political classes. In fact, interest in revolution was replaced with widespread attention to individual and individual rights, NGOs as a short-cut to civil society, identity, liberal reform, and of course free markets. So, activists and intellectual circles in the Middle East, like their counterparts in many other places in the world, were operating under such political and discursive landscape. But as I have suggested, ‘revolutions as movement’, or revolutionary uprisings, can happen even if people might not have thought about them in advance. And they did happen in the Arab World, in the 2010s—I mean the so-called Arab Spring. The spread of these remarkable uprisings caused a dramatic shift of interest to ‘revolution’ again. Once again, revolution became a household name not just in the Middle East and North Africa but also in many other countries around the world. The amount of literature published on the Arab uprisings alone is astonishing. In some ways

it is unfortunate that scholarship has become so tied to the market, to demand, with the result that the political failure of these revolutions will probably drive scholarly attention away from revolution again. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some valuable work has been produced in the process, and some very fruitful debates have taken place. For instance, I find the debate that has appeared in the *Journal of Historical Sociology* over the last two years to be very useful. Still, one would expect some sharper and more innovative perspectives to emerge out of this sizable scholarship, given that this repertoire of collective dissent has globally been raging under quite different historical conditions, which are marked by interesting novelties.

Protest: *Can you reflect briefly on twists and transformations in your own thinking, theorizing, and work on contentious politics and social movements?*

AB: Well, yes, there have been a few twists and turns in my own thinking. Recently, I published the Persian edition of my first book on revolution (*Workers and Revolution in Iran*, 1987) some 35 years after its original English edition had come out. I was hesitant to publish it in Persian because my ideas on popular politics and revolution have shifted since. I agreed to its publication only after I did substantial editing and some major revisions. Indeed, the immediate repression and war (with Iraq) that followed the Iranian revolution of 1979 made me quite disenchanted with the idea of revolution and its desirability as a political project despite that I, as a young idealist, had cherished the idea for quite a long time. So, this disenchantment pushed me to delve into the potency of everyday life and popular politics. The books *Street Politics* (1997) and *Life as Politics* (2010) were the product of this shift. But I could not escape observing how the broader social movements of youth, women and students were pushing the Islamic Republic towards a post-Islamist condition. I tried to discuss these matters in *Making Islam Democratic* (2007) and *Being Young and Muslim* (2013). But a lingering question for me was how contentious politics can go on under repressive regimes, where even organizing a street demonstration, even gathering in private homes, let alone building an organized and sustained movement, is not tolerated. Western social movement theory broadly does not adequately address this problem, because it mostly takes an open and democratic polity for granted. It was in this context that I tried to develop the idea of ‘non-movements’, the collective action of non-collective actors, that could dodge state surveillance while playing a significant role in surreptitious social transformation. My analysis of the logic of non-movements in the Middle East in the 1990s and

2000s seemed to anticipate the rise of the Arab uprisings in the 2010s. Yet, I must admit that the stunning spread of the Arab revolutions surprised me. And interestingly, once again the idea of revolution moved into the center of my research work and political imagination. But as I went deeper into the workings of these new revolutions, I became more perplexed by their mode of mobilization and outcomes. To me, the Arab Spring came to represent a new generation of 21st century revolutions that somewhat departed from their 20th century counterparts. They were, to be more precise, refo-lutions—revolutions that emerged to compel the incumbent autocratic regimes to reform themselves on behalf of revolution. I tried to formulate this through a historical-comparative perspective in the book *Revolutions without Revolutionaries* (2017). This study took a mostly macro-structural, political, and state-centric perspective. But I felt that this perspective, even though indispensable, was not adequate to give us a nuanced understanding of revolution. There was a need to examine what the revolution means in the social realm, among the grassroots, in the everyday lifeworld. This everyday outlook, articulated in my latest book *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring*, offered a productive ground to understand the relationship between the everyday and revolution, the mundane and monumental, routine and rupture, and between ordinary and extraordinary. These are important theoretical considerations that are mostly missing from the existing literature on both revolutions and everyday popular politics.

Protest: *Your scholarship has dealt with both historical and contemporary movements and politics. To what extent have ‘real life’ (“street politics”) empirical developments around the world (the fall of the Soviet Union, anti-globalization protests, the Arab Spring, populist movements, etc.) influenced your scholarship?*

AB: There is no doubt that big ‘real life’ developments have influenced my scholarship. As I alluded earlier, the Iranian revolution was a turning point for me—both as someone whose personal life was affected by it and as someone who was involved in scholarship. Following the Iranian revolution, we saw the rise of Islamism and its diverse manifestations around the globe; I then began to study this particular form of contentious politics by focusing on the Middle East and North Africa. In the meantime, the fall of the Soviet bloc and the spread of neoliberalism after the cold war altered the way activism and political struggles were imagined. Ultimately, I think, the political, socio-economic, and ideological climate after the cold war deeply influenced the character of the current generation of 21st century revolutions and in turn my own scholarly work.

Today, the pace of technological, demographic, social and not to mention climate change is mind-boggling. I think we should appreciate more the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's notions of 'liquid modernity' and liquid life, and how this 'liquid' present makes it very difficult to speak of enduring social structures, patterns and processes.

Protest: How do you think the contentious politics frame can help us understand the seemingly global rise of populist, often anti-democratic movements? Are conceptual/theoretical or methodological innovations required to study protests that are not normatively 'good,' or can we examine them in the same way we investigate social movements demanding greater socio-economic or civic/political rights, for instance?

AB: Contentious politics and social movements literatures have overwhelmingly focused on normatively 'good' movements ('good movements' from the perspective of the scholars). The prominent French scholar Alain Touraine, for instance, perceived social movements in terms of 'liberation'. Similar normative approaches shaped judgement on revolutions as well—revolutions were those that led to 'good' outcomes. Of course, the immediate question is 'good' for whom? But, I think, things are somewhat different now. Scholarship on contentious politics (with its conceptual tools and methods) has also moved to examine the 'right-wing' or 'conservative' movements as well, such as religious fundamentalism and anti-democratic movements. I think that aspects of the contentious politics frame are certainly helpful in examining populist movements today, such as cycles of contention, opportunity structure, framing, etc. But there are important nuances to consider. For instance, in Western democracies, contentious politics usually refers to the non-institutional politics that are expressed outside the institutions of liberal democracy (like political parties, elections, or legislature, etc.) and are directed against adversarial elites. But today, anti-democratic populist movements have one foot within the democratic institutions and have powerful allies and even leadership among the elites. This changes the dynamics of the contention. So, did Donald Trump lead a 'social movement' or a 'coup'? Did ISIS represent a 'revolution' or a 'counter-revolution'? Is Hizballah in Lebanon a 'resistance movement' or an institution of the state? So, yes, we may need more innovative concepts and new vistas to be able to make sense of these kinds of political formations.

Protest: In our journal Protest, we attempt to chart what we consider the recent 'protest turn' around the world. How do you view what appears to be the near-ubiquitous proliferation of global protests?

AB: Yes, the proliferation of large-scale protests around world in recent years has been remarkable. Mass protests escalated by an annual rate of 11.5 per cent between 2009–2019 stretching from Latin America to Asia to Europe and Africa. I see three key factors involved. First has been the spread of neoliberal economic policies around the world that have entailed unprecedented inequality, exclusion, and precarity since WWII. This is the case more or less both in the countries of the global North and South. The second and related factor is the emergence of a class of informed, aware and educated precariat who feel deprived, devalued, morally outraged, and extraordinarily resentful. Some layers of this constituency are mobilized by right-wing populists. And the third is the spread of the new communication technologies (social media, Twitter, cellphones, etc.) that have considerably eased mobilization of vast number of people in a short span of time. In short, there are strong reasons to protest; there are many people who are willing and know how to protest; and it has become easier to protest. While the adversarial elites were earlier caught off-guard by these movements, they now deploy more sophisticated surveillance of communication technologies and respond with relentless suppression. Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China and Central Asian regimes, in particular, spearhead this pattern of surveillance.

Protest: As a leader in this subfield, what do you consider to be some areas for further development and future research in contentious politics and social movement studies?

AB: I think there are a number of themes that needs further development—indeed, these are the themes that were so pertinent to the recent wave of revolutions, in particular those in the Arab world. Current scholarship has mostly focused on studying ‘revolution’, popular mobilization, regime change, and democratization. Without doubt, these are indispensable. Yet, we also need more attention also to ‘counter-revolution’, those structures, institutions, power blocks that resist change and may come back with relentless counter-movements in favor of restoration and repression. I believe one of the weaknesses of current social movements and revolutionary organizations is the asymmetry of knowledge between the contenders and adversaries. The adversaries (the elites, the states, or corporations) know by far more about the contenders (social movements, revolutionaries) than contenders know about the adversaries. Social movements and revolutions have become increasingly open and transparent with their profile of activists, modes of operation, and tactics, all expressed in their websites and online platforms. Whereas movements have become more transparent, the adversaries are becoming

increasingly covert, intelligent and secretive. This asymmetry of knowledge between the contenders and adversaries, which I have discussed in my *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* in more detail, no doubt affects the dynamics of contention—something that needs serious scholarly attention. The recent attention to the implications of the new communication technologies (social media, twitter, etc.) for revolutionary movements is well-taken and well-deserved. Now we need serious studies to understand how these very technologies are empowering the counter-revolution and their apparatuses of surveillance and counter-movements. There are other areas for further studies, but I stop here.

Protest: What protests or movements do you currently have your eye on: whom and what are you watching closely, and why?

AB: I find several movements and counter-movements to be interesting to follow, both 'good' and 'bad' ones, inspiring as well as perplexing. I am very interested to find out what is happening to the 2019 revolution in Sudan. This revolution has been inspiring both in its mode of mobilization, the remarkable participation of women, and its organization, leadership and negotiation with the incumbent regime. Not only did the movement topple the autocratic General Bashir but it also instituted a transition government (composed of the military and civilian personnel) to pave the way for a civilian democratic rule. However, the military under General Burhan staged a coup to dismantle the transition government, but was then forced to back down by remarkable popular resistance. In this midst, the revolutionary leadership has demanded a full civilian government. The emergent interregnum offers a productive ground to examine post-revolution dynamics and the bumpy road to democratic rule in conditions where both the internal and regional counter-revolutions (Egypt, in particular) are adamant to defeat the revolution. Now, the Sudanese coup attempt is an instance of a counter-revolutionary reaction that we have seen occurring in Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere following the Arab uprisings. These regimes tend to discredit and transcend the revolution and yet strive to claim it. In other words, we are witnessing a kind of Gramscian 'passive revolution'—a contradictory mix of restoration, repression, and reform—events which I eagerly want to follow.

Interestingly, a mundane antidote to such regimes of power seems to be the unassuming non-movements—a kind of everyday politics that usually finds strength in those social spaces that escape state supervision, such as informal sectors and under-societies. Now it appears that these states are empowering themselves with new modes and technologies of control—chiefly through digitization of the economy, society, and

population. For instance, the murky informal sector, which had largely remained outside state control, is brought increasingly under the governmental knowledge bank and regulations. I think it is crucial to understand what these modes of governance and technologies of surveillance mean for the operation of the non-movements that breathe on informality, opacity and socio-scapes.