

Call for papers

When “Adjusted” People Rebel. Economic liberalization and social revolts in Africa and the Middle East (1980s to the present day)

Dear colleagues,

Here is a call for papers for a special issue of the social history journal *International Review of Social History* entitled « When “Adjusted” People Rebel. Economic liberalization and social revolts in Africa and the Middle East (1980s to the present day) ». We would like to receive by 15 April proposals for articles of about 3000 characters specifying the issues and the methodology envisaged. Articles should be written in English, but intermediate steps can also be done in French.

The proposals we will select should lead to first versions of articles by the beginning of November 2019.

We will focus on papers that offer a perspective from the actors (rebels or actors of liberalization policies) in a perspective of modern social history . Studies must be based on empirical work in one or more countries of the region concerned.

Please circulate in your networks.

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December 29, 1983. Douz, Kebili, Kasserine, Gafsa, in Tunisia: the government reduces grain subsidies in accordance with the economic prescriptions of international financial institutions. As bread prices skyrocket, riots break out in several cities in the south before moving northward to the capital. After eight days of popular riots pitting civilians against the military, official reports count 84 dead and more than 900 injured¹. **March 10, 1994.** Niamey, Niger: several months after the signature of an initial structural adjustment program between the International Monetary Fund and the Nigerien government, students take their anger to the streets of Niamey, burning car tires and blocking roads. One of them, Tahirou Harouna, is hit

¹ D. Le Saout D. et M. Rollinde (dir.), *Émeutes et mouvements sociaux au Maghreb. Perspective comparée*, Paris, Karthala, 1999, p. 233.

in the face with tear gas fired by a police officer. He dies the following day². **October 5, 1999.** Egypt, the Nile Valley: controls let up on agricultural property rents in a process begun five years earlier, culminating in a new law. More than 900,000 farming families have already been forced to leave their lands³. Unrest breaks out in several villages in the south. In just a few days, nine people have been killed and hundreds more are injured in conflicts among the army, landowners, and renters⁴.

Each one of these events has its own logic, and involves actors from different backgrounds. However, they all occurred during the liberalization movements of the 1980s and 1990s, which were fueled by international financial institutions and were implemented by governments of countries said to be “developing.” In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, one of the primary manifestations of this liberalization were structural adjustment programs. These programs had several goals: to boost public finances by cutting state expenses, to encourage commercial activity/entrepreneurship[JA1] by limiting institutional constraints, and to balance trade by lifting protectionist measures then in place. These adjustment policies are already the subject of much critical work: the existing literature questions the political economy of liberal reforms, looks into their various concrete applications, and studies their effects on society (impoverishment, the rentier state, job market feminization and fragility, emergence of a new political and financial elite)⁵. Another part of the literature approaches adjustment from a more ideological perspective, engaging with the neoliberal development and its spread in various seats of power from the 1930s to the present day, particularly in development institutions⁶. But the repeated social riots in response to structural adjustment have received considerably little attention⁷. Some of the most high-profile uprisings, such as the temporary siege of San Cristobal, Mexico, by Zapatistas on January 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force, have been amply discussed⁸. But other, more sporadic movements, such as the series of riots in response to the devaluation of the CFA franc, which occurred ten days after the start of NAFTA, are relatively unknown. A transversal, comparative examination of such events – one that considers both their most obvious political

² V. Bonnacase, “Politique des prix, vie chère et contestation sociale à Niamey : quels répertoires locaux de la colère ?”, *Politique africaine*, n° 130, 2013, p. 99.

³ H. Ayeb, *La Crise de la société rurale en Égypte. La fin du fellah ?*, Paris, Karthala, 2010.

⁴ S. El Nour, « Les paysans et la révolution en Égypte. Du mouvement national de 1919 à la révolution nationale de 2011 », *Revue Tiers Monde*, n° 222, 2015, p. 57-58.

⁵ N. Cagatay and S. Ozler, “Feminization of the labor force: The Effects of Long-Term Development and Structural Adjustment”, *World Development*, vol. 23, n° 11, 1995, p. 1883-1894; D. Sahn, P. Dorosh and S. Younger, *Structural Adjustment Reconsidered: Economic Policy and Poverty in Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁶ P. Mirowski et D. Plehwe (eds.), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, London, Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁷ J. K. Walton and D. Seddon (eds.), *Free markets and food riots: The Politics of global adjustment*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994; D. Slater (ed.), “Social Movements and Political Change in Latin America”, *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 21, n° 3, 1994, p. 3-116; P. d’Almeida, “Defensive Mobilization: Popular Movements against Economic Adjustment Policies in Latin America”, *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 34, n° 3, 2007, p. 123-139; J. Auyero and T. Moran, ‘The Dynamics of Collective Violence: Dissecting Food Riots in Contemporary Argentina’, *Social Forces*, vol. 85, n° 3, 2007, p. 83-91.

⁸ M. Estrada Saavedra, *La comunidad armada rebelde y el EZLN. Un estudio histórico y sociológico sobre las bases de apoyo zapatistas en las cañadas tojolabales de la selva lacandona (1930-2005)*, México, El Colegio de México, 2007.

manifestations, but also the less evident ones, those that play out above and beyond the expected spheres and involve expressions of popular rage – has yet to be taken on. These lesser-known manifestations are at the crux of this call for papers, which seeks work on the various riot movements that occurred throughout the world in response to the structural adjustments of the 1980s and 1990s, as seen from the perspective of the rioters themselves.

Rioting – or not

When working on the history of riots and revolutions, the question is not so much “why do men and women riot”, but rather “why does it happen so rarely?”⁹ Crossing the line from suffering to anger, from anger to action against those said to be responsible for the suffering is no easy road. Edward Thompson’s research on the moral economy of the English crowd, which rioted against increased bread prices in 18th-century England, abandoned a causal, mechanistic analysis of popular revolt. The food riots Thompson studied were more than the consequence of poor people rendered angry by hunger – itself the consequence of an increase in the price of wheat. The revolts also conveyed shared ideas of what is just and what is not at a time when a new liberal political economy was coming to the fore¹⁰. In the same way, riots in response to structural adjustments cannot be seen as the inevitable result of price hikes, of public sector job cuts, or of medical center closings. A more nuanced reading is necessary in order to understand why a riot happens in one place and not another.

The sociology of social unrest has provided various keys aimed at explaining the how – rather than the why – of rioting. Analyses of riots and revolutions can be enhanced by information about the resources available to populations wishing to organize, about the political opportunities populations have had throughout their history, and about a population’s tendency to conceive of their anger in a unified fashion¹¹. But these keys – particularly when they are applied schematically – can also flatten a given riot’s ways and means of breaking out¹²: seen from the rioters’ perspective, a riot’s outbreak depends much more on happenstance, on the interactions taking place between the rulers and the ruled, and on the chance meetings of wildly contrasted interests, motives, and means of action¹³.

Rather than through ready-made explanations, riots are better described by following closely the paths of their protagonists, even if that means, at times, using a single day of uprising as a

⁹ B. Moore, *Injustice. The Social bases of Obedience and Revolt*, London, Macmillan, 1978.

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”, *Past and Present*, n° 50, 1971, p. 76-136.

¹¹ J. McCarthy, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, n°, 1977, p. 1212-1241; Sidney Tarrow: *Power in Movement. Social. Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge. University Press, 1994; D. Snow *et alii*, “Frame Alignment Processes. Micromobilization, and Movement Participation”, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 51, n° 4, 1986, p. 464-481.

¹² J. Siméant, “Protester/mobiliser/ne pas consentir. Sur quelques avatars de la sociologie des mobilisations appliquée au continent africain”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 20, n° 2, 2013, p. 125-143.

¹³ M. Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques. La dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1986.

scale for analysis¹⁴. Such descriptions may help to reveal how popular responses to structural adjustment may vary according to nationality, political culture, level of militancy, living arrangement, socio-professional activity, and gender (riots are not necessarily masculine). Such descriptions may also help to understand the various ways of rioting, from well-organized collective riots such as strikes and demonstrations to more spontaneous movements such as isolated riots or ransacking, to less visible or even illogical forms sometimes conceptualized as “non-social movements”¹⁵ or “popular political action” (mode d’action populaire du politique)¹⁶. Finally, they may also help to reconsider the riot/non-riot dichotomy: popular responses to adjustments have assumed intermediary forms in between refusal and acceptance.

Describing riots, but also defining what is meant by the term, requires an assessment of the sources available for such a task. Some sources, such as press articles and police reports, provide an outside look at rioters. But they also may facilitate a selective look at popular reactions to structural adjustments in that they might overemphasize some reactions and neglect others. In the same way, sources provided by former rioters or activists may glorify their own actions or those of their organizations. Alongside the most obvious sources, then, it is important to look closely into those that might help to see the event from a new angle: certain indirect accounts coming from non directly militant spheres, an otherwise overlooked state body, material traces, equipment used by rioters, journalistic reports, or art works are several examples.

The many faces of anger

“You’re seven, we’re six billion!” shouted G7 protesters in the 1990s, suggesting a worldwide opposition to the liberalism of the richest countries in the world in collaboration with international financial institutions¹⁷. The slogan refers to a theoretical antagonism existing between a “multitude” and “new capitalist power”¹⁸ and may not be the most salient example of popular dissatisfaction at the time of structural adjustment. And yet these adjustments were part of change occurring on an international scale: who is to say that this was not the true scale of people who, having taken to the streets, were protesting the recent measures of the World Bank and the IMF?

Who – or what – is the object of a riot against structural adjustments? The question is deceptively simple. Examining rioters’ targets from a spatial and material perspective reveals that opponents vary according to country, rioters, and the given moment. In one case, a target

¹⁴ A. Dewerpe, *Charonne, 8 février 1962, anthropologie historique d’un massacre d’État*, Gallimard, coll. Folio-Histoire, 2006.

¹⁵ A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010.

¹⁶ J.-F. Bayart, A. Mbembe et C. Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire. Nouvelle édition augmentée*, Paris, Karthala, 2008.

¹⁷ M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000 and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, Penguin Press 2004.

¹⁸ V. Bonnacase, “Ce que les ruines racontent d’une insurrection. Morales du vol et de la violence au Burkina Faso pendant les journées insurrectionnelles des 30 et 31 octobre 2014”, *Sociétés politiques comparées*, n° 38, 2016.

might be the headquarters of an international organization, or a Western chancellery. In another, government buildings or a state symbol might be targeted. And in yet another, a bank, a corporation, or a commercial stockroom might be in the crosshairs. Rioters conceive of power, and the exercise of power, in different ways. When, for example, the state is the main target of a riot that, from the outside, seems to object to liberal globalization, particular critical attention is required. The question of the target also complicates an issue strongly present in contemporary revolts: the contestation of corruption. Elites are seen as being accommodated by the international criteria defined by the World Bank and the IMF.

This question of scale also refers to the scales of protest affinities and political intermediation. Some of the social movements happening in the wake of structural adjustment were anchored in local, neighborhood, or village solidarity networks, fueled mainly by neighborhood and family ties, professional practices and, more generally, the everyday dialogue that works to develop a shared definition of what is right and wrong¹⁹. Other movements were rather more part of national dynamics, even transnational dynamics that can in some cases be observed with mimicry effects from one country to another, or through actual contacts and meetings among the most highly organized rebels. There is also the question of people or organizations that create and maintain links from one struggle to another, and help include them in a more or less wide scale²⁰.

Finally, the question of scale also raises the question of spaces where concrete adjustment measures are put into place, and where protest movements are likely to occur. When a medical center or a school classroom is closed, the effects are observed on the level of a neighborhood or a village. When a *caisse de déstabilisation* [JA4] is dismantled, effects are felt on the national level. And when the CFA franc is devalued, the regional level is concerned. Above and beyond the geographical spaces adjustment measures are implemented in, we can also interrogate the perceptions of those concerned by the measures. This might be called the mental space of adjustment: the breadth of such a space depends on the action of the dissenting organization, but also on the behaviors of the more or less visible actors charged with implementing the adjustments. These range from local state agents to international public actors, including individuals who – sometimes unwittingly – contribute in their daily life and work to making the adjustment a reality²¹. Timothy Mitchell's research on Egypt brought up to date “a widespread but very thin network of ties and exchanges” that make up the network of economic regulatory institutions on the global level²². In adopting the perspective of the insurgency, a rounder knowledge of the adjustment and its political implications may emerge, thus making it possible to deconstruct the apparent inevitability of economic policies.

¹⁹ E. Goffman, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. London, Harper and Row, 1974.

²⁰ J. Siméant, “La transnationalisation de l'action collective”, dans O. Filleule, É. Agrikoliansky et I. Sommier (dir.), *Penser les mouvements sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010, p. 121-144.

²¹ B. Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011.

²² T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 2002.

Adjustment and the political imaginary

Through the present day, these adjustments appear to remain a very strong chronological marker in popular memory, perhaps just as much as independence was in countries having obtained it 30 years prior. But while independence was marked by great promises of political autonomy and material life, adjustment was marked by a narrowing of possibilities, a cold realism that was to be accepted – except, perhaps, if one were to revolt.

As such, we might reflect on what everyday parlance says about the social reception of adjustment, sometimes on a strongly emotional basis: ways of speaking, signs above theatres or shops, songs and rhymes, and stories that are told and have been passed along until today. Such stories tell of the violence brought on by adjustment measures. Some of these expressions are marked by anger, but others seem rather to indicate disillusionment, a sometimes wistfully humorous distance from the events, and a certain propensity to “accept things,” which is neither submission nor open resistance²³.

We can also question the links populations establish with “the olden times,” sometimes presented as a time when life was easier, when the rules were both clearer and better under the control of all. In this respect, it is not insignificant that the regulatory apparatuses dismantled during the structural adjustments often came from openly authoritarian regimes: figures such as Nasser in Egypt, Kountché in Niger, and Bourguiba in Tunisia are still commonly associated with the image of a state that met its responsibilities in terms of subsistence and access to social services, even if this may also be the result of a retrospective projection. (The paternalistic system of post-independence regimes operates precisely in this way – when the figure of Bourguiba appeared on television to announce that the rise in bread prices was nonsense, for example, the riots stopped immediately to make room for popular jubilation, and the system was back up and running). Such links with the past do not only concern memory and representations: riots and, more broadly, political behavior is sometimes charged with references to what was done before, and what is seen as being more just²⁴.

Conversely, that adjustments were made in parallel with the establishment of political pluralism in a number of cases (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America) led certain populations to take a negative view of the democratization process, even though it originated in popular uprisings. This is more salient in cases when the adjustment was initially strongly opposed by the men and women of democratically elected governments applying liberal measures, and who owed part of their legitimacy to this positioning. One wonders to what extent this situation worked in the favor of often rapidly-restored authoritarian governments. Moreover, did the absence of riots work in the favor of these restored governments in places where, several years earlier, crowds were shouting their opposition to a military regime?

²³ A. Lüdtkke, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*, Hambourg, Ergebnisse, 1993.

²⁴ J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, 1976.

Finally, there may be parallels with the present day: in the 1980s and 1990s, countries that were “adjusted” and placed under trusteeship were African, Asian, and Latin American, even though debt levels were also high in some OECD countries. Today, the governments of Greece and Spain (though perhaps tomorrow France or the United Kingdom) are forced, in the name of economic rationality, to implement policies that go against the wishes expressed by popular vote. Looking closely at what happened in the adjusted world of the 1980s and 1990s may well provide insight into what is happening, or may be happening, today in the more global world of the 2010s.

This special issue aims to gather contributions focused on African and Middle Eastern areas. In addition to the fact that this both coordinators' areas of expertise, this choice is guided by the relatively low production of research on these areas (in comparison with South America in particular). It also appears that the repeated revolts in sub-Saharan Africa and the southern Mediterranean have often been read with focuses that have marginalized the role of supra-national policies in their outbreak, confining them to readings of protests against existing authoritarian regimes - a dimension that is certainly present, but overly reductive.