

As we are watching the fall of dictators and the wind of liberty sweeping in the Arab world, we may not have noticed another victim of this “springtime of Arab people”, namely the individualistic/collectivistic divide. In psychology, many scientists have adopted a kind of culturalism according to which the reason people behave differently across culture because of the “culture” in which they have grown up: People are raised in a particular culture and they come to adopt the particular attitudes and beliefs of their parents, teachers and elders. This explains why people behave differently in different places. For instance, psychologists have often emphasized that some cultures are more individualistic while others are more collectivist and other similar dichotomies have been put forward: sociocentric vs. egocentric, independent vs. interdependent, bounded vs. unbounded.



Tahrir Square, February 10, 2011

Whatever the terms, the central idea in the individualistic framework is that the person is an autonomous agent, whereas the central idea in the collectivist framework is that the group is an interconnected and interdependent network of relationships. In the former, personal goals are primary; in the latter, shared goals are primary.

As [Turiel](#) (who is critical of this approach) puts it:

“A core feature of individualistic cultures (usually western ones) is that the highest value is accorded to the person as detached from others and as independent from the social order. People are therefore oriented to self-reliance, independence, and resistance to social pressure for conformity and obedience to authority. By contrast, collectivistic cultures (usually non western ones) are oriented to traditions, duty, obedience to authority, interdependence and social harmony; hierarchy, status and role distinction predominate.”

In fact, it has been argued that this culturalistic dichotomy works pretty well: Westerners are individualistic and that explains why free market and democracy flourishes in the West, whereas the rest of the world is more collectivistic, supporting things like “Asian values” and “Muslim ethos”.

Well, but then, what about Tunisia and Egypt? How to explain their transformation overnight? How could collectivistic people possibly embrace such individualistic ideas as freedom and human rights? How can they rebel against traditional norms?

You may not be [surprised](#) to find out that I believe the explanation lies in the existence of a universal ‘[sense of fairness](#)’. This sense of fairness is, I suggest, an adaptation to social life and to the competition among individuals to be recruited in cooperative networks. It has been [selected](#) to cause individuals to share the burdens and benefits of cooperation in a fair way. It prevents individuals from exploiting others and also from sacrificing them too easily in the name of the group.

In an in-depth and rigorous [study on morality](#), Turiel demonstrates that, indeed, the respect for

justice and individual rights is present all around the world. Using a unique combination of experimental and ethnographical works (such as Lila Abu-Lughod's [work](#) on Bedouin women, [Kristin Neff](#)'s study of Hindu women, Fatima Mernissi's [story](#) of her life in a harem in Morocco and his own research in the US or in Israel), Turiel shows that people resist oppression and bargain for their rights whenever they can.

But whether or not it is right, this naturalist theory needs to explain why non western cultures *look* so different. I see at least two possibilities:

1. People everywhere have intuitions about fairness and rights but they are kept from behaving on their basis. This seems to be the case in Abu-Lughod's and Neff's studies where women have clear intuitions about their unfair situation but are not in a position to stand up for their rights.
2. People everywhere have intuitions about fairness and rights, but they do not have the same beliefs about the way these rights are to be defended. They may think for instance that democracy is impossible in their country. After all, that was the case in Europe before the French and the American revolutions. Lacking democratic experience, people – even philosophers – thought that democracy was impossible, because they saw people as being too dumb or modern countries as being too big. Better trust enlightened despots, they thought, and despotism may indeed be better than chaos. So, from our perspective, people may look as if they did not care about rights, while they simply did not have the same beliefs about the possibility of democracy.



Picture: Voltaire, liberal philosopher but skeptical democrat

The culturalist account explains differences between societies by positing internalised psychological differences. But how could Arabic people have changed their deep intuitions so rapidly? Can a whole people swing from collectivism to individualism overnight? Probably not. What *can* change very rapidly however are the two elements I just mentioned: the equilibrium of power between the dominant and the dominated, and the information people have access to.

These two points, in particular, explains why internet was so important in the Egyptian and Tunisian uprising.

1. On domination: Facebook and Twitter allowed people to coordinate in a totally new way, and to reverse the balance of power between the people and the State
2. On information: Youtube, Wikileaks and Al-Jazira allowed people to know that revolution was possible and that there was a way toward democracy.



Picture: President Obama's [speech](#) against culturalist theories and in favour of a universal sense of fairness (video [here](#))

“And while the sights and sounds that we heard were entirely Egyptian, we can't help but hear the echoes of history — echoes from Germans tearing down a wall, Indonesian students taking to the streets, Gandhi leading his people down the path of justice.”

Rational choice: yet another victim?

At first sight, the above analysis seems to fit quite well with rational choice models. Rational choice theories of collective actions have emphasized the importance of coordination and information (see Ostrom's [work](#) for instance). To overthrow a government is indeed a collective action problem: everyone has an interest in overthrowing the government but no one wants to pay the cost of trying to do so (see Medina's funny introduction of his book (open access [here](#)), in which he imagined three advisors using rational choice theory and debating with a dictator about the likelihood of a revolution). In this context, being able to coordinate and knowing that such a process is likely to work are crucial elements.

The Tunisian and the Egyptian revolution may nonetheless prove rational choice theories to be inaccurate. As pointed out by Pascal Boyer in an [earlier post](#), these theories suffer from a number of important problems such as “[a] the agents do not know or care about the identity of the other agents involved in the collective action, they are not affected by how the final result is achieved, and [c] they are not interested in the payoffs to other agents (they are only motivated by their own payoffs).”

I'd like to add two other problems that may prevent rational choice theory from explaining the Arabic revolutions:

Rational choice theories do not take into account the fact that people are ready to pay an important cost to overthrow the regime. In Egypt, thousands of people went to Tahrir square knowing that they was a probability to be killed there. Their own interest was to stay at home in the hope that other will take the risks. Rational choice theories are unable to explain the start of a revolution. As Medina writes, for instance: “we can never know when some equilibrium will become focal because focalness depends on salience and salience, in turn, can be the result of psychological frames that individuals come to adopt. But these psychological frames are not accessible to the game theorist.”

Again (no surprise), a naturalist approach based on the idea that humans are endowed with a sense of fairness may help to overcome the difficulties faced by rational choice theories.

On altruism: A sense of fairness may explain why people think that it is their duty to share the burdens and benefits of the revolution (there is a subtlety here, since many people would agree that people are not selfish but many would interpret sacrificing one's own life as an act of altruism that can only be explained by group selection. The alternative explanation, I think, is that it can be mutually advantageous to cooperate to overthrow a dictator: the costs are high, but so are the benefits). On salience: The existence of a sense of fairness may explain why the [self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi](#) and the murder of [Khaled Mohamed Saeed](#) played such an important role. In both cases, the unfairness was so spectacular - there was no way that someone, without being cynical, could argue that both victims were not innocent and that by killing them the policemen were doing a service to the people - that everyone could agree on Facebook to fight against such unfair actions. Of course, I am not saying that it was possible to predict the start of the revolution (the number of parameters are way too important), only that a common sense of fairness provides a clue as to why some cases - because they are more spectacularly wrong - can become better coordination points for people than others.

Picture: President Obama's [speech](#) against rational choice theories and in favour of a universal  sense of fairness (video [here](#))

“This is the power of human dignity, and it can never be denied. Egyptians have inspired us, and they've done so by putting the lie to the idea that justice is best gained through violence. For in

Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence — not terrorism, not mindless killing — but nonviolence, moral force that bent the arc of history toward justice once more.”