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## **Those who had no part**

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**Abstract:** If the notion of a dissident architecture in the modernist sense has become an illusion, there is still room to argue that the discipline could play a resistant role. On the ground that the absence of an actively engaging architecture is in itself a demonstration that some fundamental dimension is missing in the social sphere, one could argue that this fact alone constitutes a basis upon which a correlation between the political and the architectural could rest. Further, the shifting of positions required by any politics that seeks a new distribution of roles is not emptied of architectural traces. Analogically at least, the effort to reconfigure the real has some undeniable architectural overtones to it, which implies that the architectural could definitely play a role in elucidating the meaning of the political. Using the recent events in Tunisia as a background, the paper will try to highlight a few aspects of this reading.

**Prologue:** Today, everything about architecture is problematic, from its mission to its relation to society. One would have thought that the decades of critical elaborations and interdisciplinary exchanges would trigger an increased confidence in the power of architects to positively affect the world. This has not taken place, however. What appeared at first as an expansion of architectural consciousness turned out to be its reduction. A new process has formed whereby the progressive categories that once guided the avant-garde came to be either diluted or instrumentalised.

To many, of course, this flight back to the professional realm is a confirmation that the freedom of imagination and the spirit of the avant-garde, whether at the design or at the critical level, is not in contradiction with the emphatic demands of the architectural practice. To the contrary, the instrumentalization of theoretical categories should be seen as both legitimate and constructive.

As a consequence of this consolatory view, the place of architecture in society has become vague. To put it otherwise, the audacity of architectural thinking that was formed when architects freed themselves from the cult of professional immediacy evaporated in an unprecedented way. Since, in the meantime, the world grew less humanistic and since progressive thinking lost its glittering force, architecture has become less believable in turn. The theoretical nodes that once provided the discipline with the ideals of utopianism have lost their force to the point that it has become almost immature to evoke them today. The clichés about architecture casting a glow of happiness and harmony over a discontented world are perceived as being trivial and even abhorrent.

From a different angle, one could argue that not everything has been lost. Although architecture cannot dispense the solace it once promised, it still can play a role in overcoming the hegemonic forces dominating life itself. There is a sense in which a withdrawing architecture can regain some emancipatory legitimacy indeed. Rather than promising a not-yet world, it can expose the deficiencies of the world in which it operates.

Such a demonstrative role could be defended on the ground that the discipline is not possible only because of its constructible capacity. Nor is it possible because it derives its material from the principle of creative imagination. The discipline is possible because it can also signal a certain lack in the built environment. By pointing at the roots of social despair and marginalization, architecture can redeem itself in this particularly negative way.

From this angle, the consequent shifting of positions that may occur within the political sphere becomes necessarily architecturally-determined. Specific entities such as places, centers, roundabouts, squares, avenues, as well as spatial moves such as shifting, patching, assembling, blending, mapping, disseminating, escaping, hiding, inscribe an architectural sense within the community despite the manifest absence of constructability in them. Between the political and the architectural registers, there is similarity and analogy. What is denoted here is the realm that is prior to the will to build, the function that involves space as an a priori condition for any possible political visibility.

Two particular aspects of this function ought to be highlighted: one is explicit

and demonstrative, the other implicit and relational. The explicit aspect has to do with the degradation of the built environment at the most basic level. The propagation of slums and uncontrolled human settlements is one noticeable case of this spatiality of lack, this repressed architecture which remains a direct symptom of a flagrant political and economic disequilibrium.

The implicit-relational side is characterized by social moves which, although not immediately perceived as architectural, carry within them an architectural dimension. The relevance of these moves resides in their similarity to the spatial operators architecture uses to express itself. The remainder of the paper will try to expand some of aspects of this side.

**Shifting of positions:** To start with, let us stress that social wrongs do not express themselves in a *nihil*; they reveal themselves as a series of specific expressions of the body and do engage the same body architecture tries to serve. This view, of course, places architecture closer to the theatrical. Unlike within theater, however, these expressions are not to be equated with artistic representations of an idea but with real material manifestations of political tensions and intentions. The architectural hovers here around the theatrical without touching it as it were.

On the other hand, since the business of changing the world remains essentially a political prerogative, all that the architectural discipline could do is remain constantly focused onto community concerns. The negative and symptomatic role played by a repressed architecture is to be regularly mapped onto the plane of political promises. For this to succeed, the architectural has to step beyond its boundaries and place itself within the political sphere.

Needless to reiterate that the view contending that the determination of architecture is exclusively constructive is as limiting and as illusionary as the notion that assigns to the discipline (idyllic) goals it cannot fulfill.

An objection could be made that the architecturally-absent is not in itself affirmatively architectural, and that the negation of something cannot at the same time constitute an affirmation! This quasi-logical objection is not substantiated by empirical and psychological data. Hunger, for example, is in itself a call for nourishment; injury is a pointer to reparation; injustice is the seed of emancipation. What is affirmative about this type of negative contents is their potentiality in the most Aristotelian sense of *entelechy*. And so we may say that a negative and symptomatic architecture that exposes the roots of social despair, inequality, marginalization, and other wrongs, is affirmative in this specific sense.

Such a form of consciousness ought to be next analyzed in relation to the essence of a politics which turns on equality as its principle. Along this line of thought, it is perhaps helpful to refer to Rancière's political philosophy, especially to the link between equality and politics. As defined at the beginning of *Dis-agreement*, politics begins with a major wrong, which is not some flaw calling for reparation, but the introduction of an incommensurable at the heart of the distribution of speaking bodies.<sup>1</sup> For political philosophy to exist, it must arise from a count of community parts, which is always a false count, a double count, a miscount.<sup>2</sup>

The count of community parts is the first step toward identifying a geography of inequality. As the recent political events in Tunisia have shown, the voice of those who had no part was

fundamentally the voice of those who, for decades, had lived in the margins. The common and official political epithet to characterize these zones is: "regions of shadow" (*dhil*), an expression which in Arabic almost rhymes with "regions of shame" (*dhul*). Within this layout of dissimilarity, fourteen out of twenty four regional districts were made nearly non-existent at both the economic and the symbolic level. Because some major wrongs had been committed throughout decades against these regions, a consequent process of marginalization had gradually built up and morphed into an aesthetics of exclusion, whereby entire social groups were denied the right to participate in the political and economic life of the country. Insofar as the recent uprising itself involved at its very foundation these wrongs, it necessarily sought a new distribution of social bodies and roles based on the fundamental presupposition of equality.

Unequal distribution of wealth was reinforced by an unequal allocation of speech chances. The so-called zones of shadow became the regions where politically-reinforced silence asymptotically tended toward aphasia. The full clinical examination of this phenomenon is yet to be undertaken but the self-immolation of Bouazizi, for example, is in many ways an admission that normal speech definitely lost its communicative power. Self-immolation became one efficient means to transcend mutism and impose new forms of communicative acts. This is the first step toward redefining and shifting positions: to communicate otherwise. Through self-immolation, the uncounted

party acquired a new role and became detectable. It moved from the realm of pain and incomprehensible noises (*pathos*) to the realm of speech and justice (*logos*).

Spatially, the self-immolation took place not at home, not in the market, but in front of the Governor's office, a place where Bouazizi was not expected to be. This is another pertinent move toward shifting roles: to challenge the established order in spatial terms. What reinforced the pertinence of self-immolation was the fact it was carried out by someone who was supposed not to be seen nor heard. The message that turned into a discourse of defiance read as follows: "Instead of you further hurting me, I'm going to hurt myself in your presence. I'm taking away from you your most potent role. You are not the master anymore. If you don't see me, if you don't hear me, if you don't acknowledge my humanity, I'll burn myself."

As Rancière has written in *The Emancipated Spectator*, emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. "It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that transforms this distribution of positions."<sup>3</sup> This scenario is, of course, not emptied of architectural connotations especially if we map it onto the history of design strategies used to enhance the notions of control and power.

This shifting of positions was reenacted again, although in a slightly different way, when the former Tunisian ruler was



Ben Arous Trauma Hospital, 28 December 2010.

shown at the Trauma and Burns hospital standing at the bedside of the bandaged Bouazizi.

The ruler, of course, represented the order of bodies that defined the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying. He stood for the organization of bodies which assigned to them a name and a particular place and task. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, the position of Bouazizi represented the hegemony of the political insofar as politics is one of producing and forcing into everyday experience a distinct organization of the sensible. What the famous photo shows is a reconfigured space whereby he who was supposed to be suppressed was made visible and audible, and the other way around. This mirroring of roles is not without some amusing features. As one Egyptian protester has put it, "before, I used to watch television; now it's the television which is watching me."

**Futility of patching:** In effort to absorb the intensity of public resentment, the sovereign power resorted to specific strategies of patching, both in the sense of mending an already-torn fabric and of fitting a

discourse through heterogeneous spots and nodes.

During the events that shook Tunisia, those who had no part did not ask for something that it would have been possible to agree to. They were not on a strike and, therefore, they didn't have specific demands to be met through the usual and futile negotiation channels between the UGTT (General Trade Union) and the government. Their demand, if at all, was hard to meet and hard to categorize. They wanted a new order.

In facing this new and unexpected category of calls, the sovereign power made successive attempts to absorb its enigmatic intensity. Promises pertaining to employment, prices reduction, freedom, and accountability were aired live on the television but, despite three consecutive televised appearances, the former ruler failed to convince the audience that something could be negotiated.

It was just too late. As the psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama has commented, "All these propositions appeared like patches (*rustines*) stuck over the abyss that suddenly opened up."<sup>4</sup> Like the worn out overcoat in one of Gogol's stories, the battered social body couldn't be fixed anymore.

This new configuration, born out of the meeting of two incongruous theses, led to the possibility of politics between those who had a part and those who had no part. What makes a given action political, according to Rancière again, is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which substantiation of equality is written in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing uniquely through being divided. For a thing to become political, it has to give rise to a meeting

of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance. Nothing is therefore political in itself; and yet, anything may become political if it gives rise to a meeting of these two logics. The same thing – an election, a demonstration, or a strike– can give rise to politics or not. “A strike is not political when it calls for reforms rather than a better deal or when it attacks the relationships of authority rather than the inadequacy of wages..”<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, politics takes through a system of subjectification, that is through a sequence of actions and enunciations not previously identifiable within a given field of experience and whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience. Any subjectification is a disidentification, that is a removal from the naturalness of a place, the “opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part.”<sup>6</sup> Politics is made up of such miscounts; it is the work of classes that are not classes that, in the particular name of a specific part or of the whole of the community (the poor, the proletariat, the people), inscribe the wrong that separates and reunites two heterogonous logics of community.

**Blind spots and propagation:** But let us go back to the original act of self-immolation. When we think today of Bouazizi, his half-bent body set on fire, his hands half-raised in the air, his unsteady walk toward death, his entire being at work on the legitimation of his right to terminate his life in order to denounce injustice and humiliation, do we still bear in mind that this memorable and painful act was pertinently sudden and unexpected?

Like every inventive idea, the cry of this excluded man sprang from what the psychoanalyst Benslama called *un angle mort* (blind spot.)<sup>7</sup> The self-immolation and the uprising that immediately followed was a surprise, particularly for those who exercised the power to control what ought to be seen and heard. The consequent uprising erupted in a situation in which the very idea of rebellion was withdrawn from the space of thought, in a country often perceived as being passive and obedient. What really eluded the entire world was the fact that the most violent political eruption that has inaugurated the 21<sup>st</sup> century sprang out of the least expected spot, a spot that was inaccessible to the field of controlled vision.

Starting from the base point of Sidi-Bouزيد, the rebellion spread to nearby villages, then to the capital Tunis. The propagation was like laying out copies of a defiant impulse along the curve defining the national political plane. It was a reverberation, a sound that was repeated several times as it hit many sides and made them shake violently. As Badiou, quoting Jean-Marie Gleize, has noted, a revolutionary movement does not expand by contamination, but by resonance. Something emerging here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something emerging out there.”<sup>8</sup> Spatially, the uprising swept a vast territory and generated a new political surface by extending an insurgent profile along a specifically receptive path, both at the national and regional level.

**Redeeming extrusions:** The series of actions that started with self-immolation



Defiant gestures, Bourguiba Avenue.



had an unprecedented eruptive capacity. What was particularly challenged through all this was an incompatibility, a barrier and a boundary line, but not through a dialogue involving respective interests or reciprocity of rights and duties. It was an incompatibility that passed through the constitution of specific subjects who took the wrong themselves, gave it shape, invented new forms and names for it, and conducted its processing in “a specific montage of proofs.”<sup>9</sup> This is the meaning of how politics could occur by reason of a single universal that takes the specific shape of a wrong.

The spatiality of the subsequent defiance is suggested by the etymology of the word revolution. Albert Camus once wrote that the rebel (*le révolté*) in the etymological sense is he who does a complete turnabout (revolution from the Latin *revolutio*, “a turn around”.) Acting under the lash of his master’s whip, the slave suddenly changes direction and faces the master. The person who had taken orders for a long time, unexpectedly decides not to obey any more, and so s(he) revolves around himself/herself and stares at the master straight in the eyes.

The act of revolving is often accompanied by an act of rising. In Arabic, the word for revolution is *thawra*, from the verb *thara* which implies an eruptive and illuminating action. According to the lexicographer Ibn Mandhour, *thara* means to rise, to leap, to appear, to shine. In light of this etymological background, the rising up of

Bouazizi could be interpreted as a redeeming extrusion in the sense that a flat and injured subject pushed itself out in order to adopt an erect posture, with all the redemptive connotations implied.

Bouazizi, it should be remembered, was a modest and pleasant young man who was slapped by a female police officer whilst going to the Governor’s office to make a complaint. In a notoriously conservative tribal milieu, to be slapped by a woman in public is synonymous with masculine impotence. The act of self-immolation was an attempt to upset this order in that a weakened and injured consciousness finally found power in its very impotence. By saying no, the wounded party emerged from a world predicated on horizontality and shame to a vertical register that promised reparation and sublimation. This is perhaps an echo of what Freud had told us in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, namely that man’s assumption of the erect posture is the first step toward culture through the possibility of a sublimated visuality. The erect stance represents a reorientation away from the animal senses of sniffing and pawing and the beginning of the momentous process of cultural evolution. A short step further brings us to the phoenix, as suggested by Freud in *On The Acquisition and Control of Fire*, the bird which, as often as it is consumed by fire, emerges rejuvenated once more, and which probably bore the significance of a male genital organ revived after its collapse.”<sup>10</sup>

**Collective moves:** Bouazizi’s self-immolation will perhaps remain the most iconic of all images associated with the Tunisian uprising, but the pictures associated with the “Avenue,” as the Bourguiba Boulevard is locally known, are equally representative of this sudden and extraordinary event. The most



Defiant gestures, Bourguiba Avenue.

memorable picture remains the big march toward the ministry of interior.



Bourguiba Avenue (Ministry of Interior), 14 January 2011.

The tsunami of defying attitudes that led to the swift fall of the regime is still engraved in the minds of millions of viewers. Under its diverse manifestations, the unprecedented protest illustrates an undeniable degree of group cohesion. Without any previous preparation, workers, students, intellectuals, unemployed, homeless, artisans, teachers, bakers, men, woman, children, managed to meet in one place and around some definite ideal with which they identified. The exact nature of this ideal is not clearly defined, but it has to be perhaps sought in the identification of the crowd with Bouazizi, seen as a beloved young man who sacrificed himself so that an entire nation could see a new dawn.



Bourguiba Avenue, 14 January 2011.

The Freudian thesis regarding the libidinal constitution of the crowd, as debated in *Group Psychology and The Analysis Of The Ego*, seems relevant here in that a number of individuals put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal so as to identify with one another.<sup>11</sup> As Benslama theorized, these people loved each other through the Bouazizi in them. Such is the imaginary aspect of the setting off of the revolt which began with an act of self-immolation.<sup>12</sup>



Bourguiba Avenue, 18 January 2011.

The Bourguiba Avenue decisive demonstrations were followed by the Kasbah sit-ins. Unlike the first, the second were relatively calmer but not less efficient. They were carried out by particular actors who came from outside the capital and squatted for several days and nights in front of the seat of Government in the upper part of the old medina. They occupied the place where the real shifting of roles was effectively taking place, the spot that had to be occupied at all costs, and they wanted one thing: to finish the job started by Bouazizi.





End of the 1<sup>st</sup> Kasbah sit-in, 29 January 2011.

The demonstrators included mainly those who had no part, those whom we may call the “surplus” of society to use the expression of Žižek.<sup>13</sup> Like the ancient Greek *dēmos*, the active agent within the Greek *polis*, the surplus population of the Tunisian hinterland demanded to be heard on equal footing with the ruling class, and to be recognized as a partner in the political dialogue and the exercise of power. Again, the true stakes were their right to be counted, heard, and recognized as an equal partner.<sup>14</sup>

The first sit-in the Kasbah (January 24<sup>th</sup> - January 29<sup>th</sup>) was staged by these young and frustrated men who defied a nighttime curfew and traveled hundreds of kilometers from the marginalized hinterland toward Tunis, in what was then called “liberation caravan.” They entered the capital tearing through the barbed wire surrounding the office of the interim prime minister, demanding an end to his government. This first sit-in, which came to be known as the “Kasbah 1,” was eventually dispersed by antiriot squads. But the demonstrators didn’t give up. A second sit-in, known as “Kasbah 2”, took place between February 20<sup>th</sup> and March 3<sup>rd</sup> and led to the fall of the Ghannouchi government and the formation of the new (interim) government of Beji Caid Essebsi.

Although the Kasbah sit-ins were the expressions of a desire to impose a new path, they were also, in the absence of parties and recognized leadership, undefined. The precise nature of their path was only imagined as a missing object. As such, they revealed themselves as the expression of an incongruity, an a-topos, a non-lieu, a gap to be constantly visited and filled with the renewed desire to be seen and heard. Once, a few weeks later, the subsequent outlines of a new horizon started to politically materialize, the original energy was lost however. Like every negative gesture, the sit-ins turned into affirmative representations of a new order.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Fethi Benslama, “Suddenly revolution.” [http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/259/Suddenly\\_revolution](http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/en/articles/259/Suddenly_revolution). The contents of this essay are reproduced and expanded in: Fethi Benslama, *Soudain la révolution! De la Tunisie au monde arabe: la signification d'un soulèvement* (Paris : Editions Denoël, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> Benslama, “Suddenly revolution.”

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, “Tunisie, Egypte : quand un vent d'est balaie l'arrogance de l'Occident.” *Le*

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Monde, February 18, 2011  
([http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/02/18/tunis-egypte-quand-un-vent-d-est-balaie-l-arrogance-de-l-occident\\_1481712\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/02/18/tunis-egypte-quand-un-vent-d-est-balaie-l-arrogance-de-l-occident_1481712_3232.html)).  
For the English text, see :  
<http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/394>.

<sup>9</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 39-40.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Acquisition and Control of Fire*. In Ivan Smith, *Freud: Complete Works* (pdf ebook, 2000, 2007, 2010), 4784. By way of elaborating further on the redemptive significance of Bouazizi's self-immolation, one could associate it with fire as a purificatory agent and as symbol of sexual excitation. We are familiar with the theory of fire as a symbol of the libido which Freud, in *On The Acquisition and Control of Fire* (1932), suggested by linking the warmth that is radiated by a flame to the sensation that accompanies a state of sexual excitation, and by stressing the mythological significance of flame as phallus.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and The Analysis Of The Ego*. In Ivan Smith, *Freud: Complete Works* (pdf ebook, 2000, 2007, 2010), 3808.

<sup>12</sup> Benslama, "Suddenly revolution."

<sup>13</sup> In the afterward of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Slavoj Žižek remarks that Rancière's theory offers the clearest articulation of the motto which appeared at the demonstrations of the French jobless movement in the mid-90s: we're not a surplus, we're a plus. "Those who, in the eyes of the administrative power, are perceived as a 'surplus' (laid off, redundant, reduced to silence in a society that subtracted the jobless for the public accounts, that made them into a kind residue – invisible, inconceivable except as a statistic under a negative sign), should impose themselves as the embodiment of society as such – how? It is here that we encounter the second great breakthrough Rancière articulated in *Le Partage du sensible*: the aestheticization of politics, the assertion of the aesthetic dimension as INHERENT in any radical emancipatory politics." See: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of*

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*Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 76.

<sup>14</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 70.