

## BLOGGING REVOLUTION IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

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**RESUMO:** Ao longo do século 19 muitos escritores provocavam ações e reações da sociedade ao apontar criticamente situações e circunstâncias políticas e sociais. O poder de criticar pertencia não apenas aos jornais, mas também, e em alguns casos até mais, a escritores uma vez que eles representavam ideologias emergentes a possuíam um alto prestígio social. A situação da figura do intelectual na assim chamada “Primavera Árabe” foi, obviamente, bem diferente devido, entre outras razões, à forte censura, bem como ao fato de que atualmente escritores não gozam da admiração como aconteceu no passado. Por esse motivo, considerando o grande número de revoluções que aconteceram no mundo árabe em 2011, poder-se-ia perguntar se alguém desempenhou aquele papel de intelectual, ou seja, o papel de conscientizar sobre os acontecimentos vigentes. Na era da tecnologia e mais especificamente no contexto árabe, aparentemente alguns(as) “blogueiros(as)” (*bloggers*), num certo sentido, assumiram a responsabilidade de chamar atenção para os eventos que aconteceram em seus países, eventos não receberam a devida atenção por parte de algumas instituições, como a mídia, uma vez que esta era refém do Estado. Assim, considerando a importância de escrever na internet nessas circunstâncias, neste texto discuto o uso da nova mídia usada na revolução, bem como a atividade desenvolvida pela intelectual na “Primavera Árabe”, a engajada “blogueira” tunisiana Lina Ben Mhenni, a qual noticiou seus leitores sobre a revolução em seu país e foi até mesmo nomeada ao Prêmio Nobel.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Revolução; Primavera Árabe; Tecnologia.

**ABSTRACT:** *Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many writers would elicit actions and reactions from society by reporting situations, as well as social political circumstances critically. This power of criticizing belonged not only to newspapers, but also, and in some cases even more, to writers inasmuch as they represented uprising ideologies and had high social prestige. The situation of the intellectual figure in the so called “Arab Spring” was, obviously, quite different due to, among other reasons, the fact there was a strong censorship, as well as that nowadays writers are not in the spotlight of admiration as it happened in the past. For this matter, taking into account the considerable number of revolutions that took place in the Arab world in 2011 onwards, one may ask whether someone has carried on the role the intellectuals used to play in such a context, that is, of raising awareness about the situation. In the age of technology, and in that already expressed Arab context to be more specific, some bloggers, in a certain way, apparently have assumed the responsibility to draw people’s attention to the events which took place in their countries and were not fully reported by institutions, such as the media as they had been hold hostage by the state. Considering the importance of writing on the internet in such circumstances, in this text I discuss the new media used in the revolution, as well as the activity hold by the intellectual in the “Arab Spring”, by the engaged Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, who chronicled the revolution in her country and had even become a Nobel Prize nominee.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Revolution; Arab Spring; Technology.*

This text is aimed at reflecting upon the role played by the intellectual figure in the so called Arab Spring, taking into account the Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, so as to consider the use of technology, considering the new media, in the wave of movements that recently covered the Arab World. It is necessary mention that the brief thoughts that emerged from this issue do not disregard that a Western point of view can review a limited and dangerous perspective on the Tunisian intellectual, as well as what may have happened in the Arab world. For that matter, even though the idea of other is not theorized herein, I do not turn a blind eye to the importance of this problem. The main focus, however, circumscribes only what the heading arises, that is, the intellectual and the use of technology, explicated by the act of blogging.

First and foremost a question that springs up is “who is the intellectual?”. A person, who is either a celebrity or an outsider, could perhaps be pictured. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers could elicit actions and reactions from the class they belonged to by reporting situations and political circumstances. Maybe until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the intellectual would either come from a privileged pedigree or could gain prestige among wealthy and influential people. Several changes befall the intellectual and his or her relation to people and institutions, with which he or she could be tied, mainly due to economic, social and historical transformations. Those changes must surely be studied more seriously and had been considered by Antonio Gramsci and others that continued his studies regarding this matter.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, however, what may be questioned, besides who is the intellectual, might be where this figure can be, that is, which is the place of that person who could posit opinions and influence deeply.

The tradition has shown that the intellectual can certainly be found in the academic world as well as tied in with a specific class; notwithstanding, the relationship between the intellectual and society must be thought in parallel with social transformations, as the intellectual is socially attached to a class. Therefore, it is fruitful to consider the idea of the “organic intellectual” proposed by Gramsci (2001). In a certain way, barely every intellectual can be considered “organic” to a class. According to Gramsci’s definition, the intellectual displays a “social function” and commitment to the class he belongs to. Consequently, this figure, apart from the technical knowledge he or she possesses, must be willing to struggle for hegemony and take part in the practical life. Traditionally, intellectual has empowered the university and the bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the so called “Arab Spring”, the figure of the “organic intellectual”, accordingly to what is pointed out by Gramsci, is exemplified by Lina Ben Mhenni, who has become worldwide known due to her engagement in the Tunisian uprising against the regime. By blogging the events that brought about the Arab Spring from the perspective of someone who participates in the battle against the longtime President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, she performs the organic role of being conscious and active in society.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on this matter, that is, the role the intellectual plays and his or her relation to society, read Edward W. Said’s book *Representations of the Intellectual: the 1993 Reith lectures*, (1994).

<sup>2</sup> A worthwhile contribution to Gramsci’s idea of “organic intellectual” can be read in the study done by Harold Entwistle (1979) cited under the references.

The revolutionary wave of demonstrations occurring in the Arab world began on 18 December 2010, in Sidi Bouzid (the capital of one of the 24 provinces in Tunisia), caused by a widespread commotion following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest against police corruption and the humiliation he had suffered, which illustrated the constant disrespect befall population hitherto. The incident conjoined to the large unemployment, mainly regarding youngsters, and the continuous corruption of the government triggered a feverous popular dissatisfaction, so that the rulers have been forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, among other countries in the Arab world.

Lina Ben Mhenni has been blogging everything that happened in her country ever since the beginning of the movements against the government. Mhenni's blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, is written in Arabic, English, and French, so that her activism can reach out to people involved in the long process of the revolution. Texts and pictures displayed in her blog function as a remembrance of the fact the complete change in Tunisia, as well as in some other countries in the Arab world had not happened yet.

The role she plays in the context of the Arab Spring encounters the “exercise of the intellectual function”, benefiting from Gramsci's vocabulary (1971, p. 10). Considering the equation intellectual-society-structure, each of its components should be handled separately. Gramsci states that the intellectuals are the “functionaries” of the complex of superstructures (1971, p. 12), that is, the intellectual attached socially represents the class he or she belongs to. Developing his arguments he posits that the “civil society” and the “political society” are the two major superstructural levels. The former is commonly considered the “private”, whereas the second is regarded as the “State”. Apart from the complexity brought by these two levels, the diffused technology of the new media, that is the internet, should be considered as it enables the intellectual to reach out to the class he or she represents.

Historically saying, the group that “elaborates” Lina Ben Mhenni as an “organic intellectual” has been under a long and consuming dictatorship. Notwithstanding the hands tied in the public scenario, the use of high technology, that is, the new media, especially the internet, could extend to barely everyone. The context of a long dissatisfaction regarding the government, the huge number of unemployed youngsters and the Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide have triggered the revolution. In this scenario Lina Ben Mhenni's blogging activism comes to life.

It must be considered in parenthesis, that it is worth noting that the so-called Arab Spring may elicit from our reflection pre-determined perspectives to the Arabs. Edward Said (1995) accounts a long and extremely relevant discussion about the idea of “orientalizing the Oriental”, that is, the idea of creating “truths” about the Orient. Such reflection makes us stay aloof from the prejudice of saying “now they can become civilized”, which might haunt studies about these recent events. For that matter, one needs to bear in mind the danger of fictionalizing the other. Point taken, herein as previously mentioned the matter of the otherness will not be issued.

The act of blogging exemplified by Lina Ben Mhenni displays how technology can used a means to revolutionize. Conversely, the Arab Spring should not be labelled the a revolution which sprung up due to social networks. The BBC broadcasted a documentary entitled “How the facebook changed the world: the Arab Spring”, claiming that the revolution only happened due to easy access to information regarding the organization of the

revolutionary wave proportioned by the internet networks. Obviously, the use of the new media plays necessarily an extremely important role. However, history frequently seems to carry the same old same old. Although the massive crowds have gathered against the authorities, apparently the popular organizations acquired a more substantial organization when factory councils and workers organized themselves in the revolution process. For that matter, one should bear in mind that the social networks were used as a means to optimize the revolutionary organization which took over the streets in Tunisia, and then spread over the Arab world. It does not mean whatsoever it caused the revolution or that this latter could not do without it.

As known especially considering the events which built the recent history, the road of technology, characterizing the modern illusion of bringing comfort and richness only, has led to a catastrophic horizon from where one could see piles of corpses. In this scenario, the figure of the Lina Ben Mhenni plays the role of representing the interests of those who are in jeopardy, or even more importantly, those under the jurisdiction of institutions that do not represent their interests thoroughly.

From Hannah Arendt's consideration of the phenomenon of Totalitarianism (1966) one could consider that politics ever since the Western world new configuration, i.e. the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted from interests over colonies and the imperialist policy in international relations, has atomized man. One idea found in dictionaries under the entry of "individual" reads that "Every individual has rights which must never be taken away". These rights can certainly be understood as possibility, accessibility, or even *agency*, that is, the power of action and intervention through the mediation of institutions, such as local representatives and political parties for instance. Apparently, the society constituted of mass men, hidden behind the idea of individualism and neo liberalism, may reveal that we are still haunted by the shadow of the totalitarian form of government. Therefore, the intellectual more than ever plays a very important role and must be engaged in society, so that he or she can be listened or read.

The amalgam of literature and criticism written by Walter Benjamin in his *One Way Street* may help us interpret technology in this context of revolution. Historically contextualized by the Weimar Republic the key image of the Benjaminian avant-garde book can be read as a representation of history, accordingly to a linear perspective that holds the idea of a *telos*, i.e. that history comes to an end (what can be seen even on the book cover, judging it in terms of semiotics).<sup>3</sup> The emblematic street which depicts history comes to a conclusion encountering its definition in the barbarism shown in the wars. Cars, vehicles and every automobile that embody the *tekhnē* are altogether either determined to follow the rule of going to one direction only or stop, considering the linear and teleological standpoint. Men and women, conversely, can go backward or forward, cross one side to the other. Accordingly, the path technology has led us to see, that is, the catastrophic horizon of wars and cruelty, may make us think of a pessimistic pre-determination. Nevertheless, it can be taken in two directions, as Lina Ben Mhenni strikingly illustrates. The act of blogging the Arab uprising shows the other side of the road of technology. The course that ironically brought up not only the conquest of the surroundings in order to bring comfort to man, but

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<sup>3</sup> A more substantial interpretation of this book can be found in my Master thesis, entitled "Alegoria redimida em Walter Benjamin", mentioned on the references.

caused the catastrophe to happen, can prove to be useful to revolution, that is, against the rulers. After all, we have the power to reveal technology as a double-edged sword. The idea of technology, now more than ever, entangles itself with one of its etymological meaning, which stems from the Greek *tekhnē*, that is art, craft, *means*. Now, due to history we can understand more thoroughly this last significance. Technology can be used as a means, a means to revolutionize.

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