

# 'Taming' Arab social movements: Exporting neoliberal governmentality

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## Abstract

In the wake of the recent Arab revolutions, the European Union (EU) has sought to provide genuine and substantial support to a range of Arab social movements in the region's emerging polities. Yet the EU's recent democracy-promotion efforts represent a puzzle for earlier critical approaches to the relationship between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which argue for the existence of hegemonic patronage linkages. We argue, however, that the EU's attempts at democracy promotion in the MENA region may be understood through a governmentality framework, despite the limitations of such an approach. Specifically, the EU is actively promoting neoliberal policies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in order to foster a mode of subjectivity that is conducive to the EU's own norms and interests. What we observe are not just innocent attempts at democracy promotion, but a form of politics and economics that seeks to subject the agency on the 'Arab street' to EU standards. We conclude by going over the radical plurality of the Arab street, and show how it was in fact earlier neoliberal reforms by their former regimes that created the conditions of possibility for the recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

## Keywords

Arab Spring, Egypt, European Union, governmentality, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Tunisia

The bourgeoisie ... compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (Marx and Engels, 1848/1997: 88)

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## Introduction

In the wake of the recent Arab revolutions, the European Union (EU) has provided genuine and material support to various Arab social movements and the emerging political order. Its newly established SPRING Programme committed €65m of assistance in 2011, with a further €285m earmarked for 2012. The Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility, also established in response to the Arab Spring, has a €22m budget for the 2011–2013 period. Tunisia, for example, has received €100m of assistance to support the government's economic recovery programme, with funds totalling €4.5m being allocated to civil society and non-state actors (EuropeAid, 2011). Whether it has adopted a political-economic approach (Hinnebusch, 2011; Tadros, 2012; Wallerstein, 1974), an identity-based discourse approach in the context of colonial history (Said, 1979) or a comparative politics perspective (Bellin, 2004), the literature has tended to argue that the EU states have sought to maintain a hegemonic relationship with the authoritarian state structures of the Arab world in order to perpetuate the hierarchical relationship between the global North and the South. With the Arab Spring, however, it seems that many European states, in and through the EU, have taken an unprecedented stance against the crumbling authoritarian structures of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and have taken material and concrete steps in order to support the ongoing political transformations in its societies along democratic lines. This is a puzzle that seems to contradict the aforementioned literature, which underlines the traditional Western patronage of the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region.

Our central question is what explains the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring, which has consisted of an embrace of democracy in the region, an insistence on political reforms, an extensive focus on and prioritization of socio-economic reforms, and an emphasis on the role of civil society? We contend that the EU's enthusiasm and support for the ongoing political transformations of the Arab Spring can best be understood through a framework based on the concept of governmentality. In doing so, we limit our analysis to Tunisia and Egypt, the two countries on which the EU has focused much of its attention, given the greater uncertainty of the trajectories of the revolts that are still ongoing in other countries – as, for example, in Syria. Moreover, unlike Libya, the societies of Egypt and Tunisia have already experienced variants of neoliberalism that were actively produced by local elites and policymakers in cooperation with international donors and investors (Ayebe, 2011; Joya, 2011). Both societies are marked by particular conditions, such as the existence of a burgeoning civil society and a middle class, upon which the techniques of neoliberal governmentality might be more conveniently applied by the EU (Joseph, 2010: 235). The lack of such conditions elsewhere in the Arab world may also explain why the EU opted to support the idea of military intervention in Libya and has so far failed to make any useful contribution to efforts to resolve the ongoing armed conflict in Syria. The EU continues, however, to be actively involved in many projects in Tunisia and Egypt today, promoting a certain form of polity where politically democracy is procedural, the economy is neoliberal, and culturally actors are encouraged to be 'entrepreneurial' and 'competitive'. What we are observing, therefore, is the application of neoliberal governmentality, a form of political technology that attempts to subject the agency on the Arab street to EU norms and standards.

In arguing that the EU is promoting neoliberal values, we are aware of the longer history that neoliberal policies have in the region. The recent decades of neoliberal policies in the region have featured as their main proponents and beneficiaries the USA, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the authoritarian regimes of the region, and the client classes (Beinin, 2009; Farah, 2009; Wurzel, 2009). Dixon (2011: 315) argues that the current moment of political transformation and crisis may result in one last, strong push for neoliberal policies. Neoliberal policies

in the region were often implemented by the authoritarian regimes themselves, who handpicked the class that would benefit from the policies being promoted. The post-2004 cabinet in Egypt, where this handpicked class was transformed from being 'clients' of the state to its 'creditors' and took prominent decisionmaking positions, was an exception to the general pattern of neoliberal structuring that remained under the control of a strong state (Joya, 2011: 370–372; Wurzel, 2009: 115–117). Therefore, while the most recent engagement of the EU does not imply the end of more disciplinary forms of neoliberalism, it does signal the growth of a more 'bottom up' method, with individual-level penetration.

Historically, the USA has been one of the main proponents of neoliberal policies in the MENA region. The billion-dollar debt relief promised by US President Barack Obama in May 2011, however, has been the subject of extended debates in the US Congress, arising out of the scepticism surrounding the electoral victories of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia, which was exacerbated by the expulsion of American nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers from Egypt, as well as the embassy attacks of September 2012 (*Guardian*, 2012; *National*, 2011; *New York Times*, 2012a, 2012b). Thus, it may indeed be the case that the involvement of the USA will continue to be concentrated in the areas of military and security aid, with the EU taking the lead in terms of bottom-up, societal-level engagement.

## Theoretical framework

The EU's engagement with the Arab Spring is a question of some theoretical and practical importance in international relations. We argue that the EU's international engagement, directed toward the micro level, focused on the moulding of subjects and centred on a bottom-up approach, cannot be accounted for by mainstream international relations approaches. A realist perspective on the Arab Spring, for example, would argue that the West should engage with the emerging governments in the transition and support them because of the West's own security interests (Walt, 2011). A liberal approach to the Arab Spring would wholeheartedly embrace the endeavours of the EU because of the benefits that democratization and open borders should bring to international order (Pace, 2009: 46). However, it does not problematize the ways in which the liberal individual is (re)produced and the liberal system is grounded at the micro level. Besides realism and liberalism, many authors have argued that a hierarchical perspective towards international relations needs to be applied in analyses of the MENA region (Hinnebusch, 2011; Wallerstein, 1974). Unlike the homogeneously anarchic world of realism or the optimism of liberalism, world-systems theory presents us with a view of the international that reflects a global division of labour into three politico-economic regions: the centre, the periphery and the semi-periphery. Neo-Gramscians have further underlined the ways in which the contemporary ruling elite produces the hegemony across today's neoliberal historical bloc (Gill, 2003; Plehwe et al., 2006). The peripheral elites become clients of the hegemonic patron, divorced from and in an antagonistic relationship with their own constituencies, who further benefit the interests of the core in the periphery. Applying this framework to the case of the MENA region, Hinnebusch (2011: 216, 223) observes that, contrary to the balancing predictions of realism, the region's former authoritarian regimes entered into a patron-client relationship with the West rather than bandwagoning with the core. World-systems theory and neo-Gramscian theories conceptualize neoliberalism as a uniform ideology emanating from the core (Europe and North America) that is promoted and policed by the hegemon. This macro-level conceptualization of hierarchy that sees a clientelistic relationship and counter-hegemonic resistance as the only two possibilities is unable to capture the complex ways in which multiple actors of the Arab Spring have engaged with the so-called core. The EU's

most recent engagement with the MENA region is demonstrative of the attempt to foster a particular mode of subjectivity at the micro level. Based on our theoretical orientation, we view neoliberalism as ‘a heterogeneous set of governmental practices which formulate different responses to the problem of rule’, while the contemporary world order is largely shaped by ‘disciplinary forms of neoliberalism’ (Weidner, 2009: 390). Thus, a governmental approach centres on the relationship between subjectivity and forms of government.

In neoliberal discourse, subjectivities are shaped by an economic rationality of entrepreneurship and competition, in and through which individuals govern themselves. In this governmental framework, what gets counted as democracy, it turns out, is a highly liberal interpretation of democracy, one that excludes egalitarian, normative and social dimensions of political government. The emphasis on the production of certain subjects, who are expected to self-govern, goes to the heart of EU’s engagement with the actors of the Arab Spring, as the latter is shaped by extensive engagement with and empowerment of entrepreneurial initiatives in both civil society and the economy. In other words, the EU has chosen to look for new local subjectivities with which to establish alternative ties to those of clientelism involving local elites. Furthermore, it has chosen to support a bottom-up empowerment that apparently challenges the hierarchical relations underlined by the global division of labour and movement of capital.

### **Governmentalizing Arab societies**

The concept of governmentality was developed by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to explain the shift from a classical and welfare liberal to a neoliberal economic rationality (see Foucault, 1991, 2008, 2010; see also Dean, 1999). In order to analyse a shift that began in the 1930s and intensified in the aftermath of the 1950s, Foucault used the term ‘governmentality’ ‘in the broad sense of “the conduct of conduct”’ and thereby provided ‘an important conceptual framework for studying the mechanisms and processes by which different projects of government are assembled and put to work in order to govern different aspects of social reality’ (Weidner, 2009: 389). In other words, as an interpretive framework, governmentality looks away from the centre and the state as the usual suspect sites of power, to understand the ways in which techniques of government work at the micro level in producing subjects (Kurki, 2011: 352). Governmentality involves a wide range of political rationalities and governmental technologies in order to foster and produce a mode of subjectivity that is self-disciplining and self-governing.

Neoliberal governmentality is immanently connected to the production of a neoliberal subjectivity that differs from that of the classical liberal subject. In other words, whereas the liberal homo economicus was a rational actor who had to be left alone to pursue his own interests in a way that converged with the interests of others, the neoliberal homo economicus is a subjectivity of human capital and as such must be invested in if it is to achieve its full potential (Rose, 1996: 154–155; Weidner, 2009: 401–402). This potential is realized in the ‘entrepreneurial individual’ who is guided by the principles of the competitive marketplace, and who has accepted the extension of these principles into all spheres of social life (Kurki, 2011: 353).

Foucault’s exploration of the moulding of neoliberal subjectivities has had several applications to the international realm. A global take on governmentality has been advanced by Italian Marxists, most notably in Hardt and Negri’s (2001) *Empire*, where it is argued that governmentality is now a global rationality that penetrates every society. In a very different sense, the ‘global governance’ school, a form of liberal school in international relations theory, takes into consideration the governance of local populations from a ‘problem-solving’ perspective in order

to make local ‘good governance’ possible in global capitalism. In this liberal school, ‘governance is promoted as a means of improving economic performance rather than as a goal in itself’ (Tadros, 2012: 63). While recognizing these connections to other paradigms, our perspective focuses on subject production as a key point of departure, as outlined in Foucault’s writings.

Building on Foucault’s later work, Rose and Kurki emphasize that governmentality points to the ways in which ‘humans have to be molded to be free’ (Kurki, 2011: 353; see also Rose, 1996: 155). It is through being defined not only as a rational subject but also as a subject that is a realist responding to changes in his or her environment that the neoliberal individual becomes ‘immanently governable’ (Weidner, 2009: 402). The neoliberal subject’s realistic response to the changing environment makes governance a matter that can be horizontally, socially and therefore much more extensively executed. What is at stake is ‘actively mold[ing] the self-understanding, the desires, and the actions of the “free” individual’ (Kurki, 2011: 353). In other words, it is only when the subjectivity of the entrepreneur self, who is creative, adaptable and free in the right ways, is produced that self-government becomes both possible and desirable. The self that can and is allowed to self-govern is expected to do so in particular ways.

Kurki’s (2010) application of the framework of governmentality to the EU’s global democracy promotion demonstrates both the connection and the tension between the neoliberal definition and moulding of self-governing subjects and the democratic emancipatory maxim of self-determination. Guided by the rationality of the economy, neoliberal governmentality shapes individuals and the sphere of the social and political through particular understandings of competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Inhabiting the rationality of economics and the sphere of civil society, these subjects enter the realm of politics to hold the state accountable and to operate within the limits of a neoliberal framework. Insofar as the subjects are self-governing, they do not need the excess of the state’s disciplinary power (Rose, 1996: 154–159).

Governmentality techniques may fail when there is no liberal capitalist social base on which policymakers might draw in order to encourage the self-regulation of populations. There is thus a discrepancy ‘between a society having its own conditions for governmentality and a society having governmentality thrust upon it by outside institutions and organizations’ (Joseph, 2010: 233). The penetration of neoliberal policies into the MENA region dates back to the Arab defeat of 1967, the oil crisis of 1973, the subsequent economic crisis in which the developmentalist states of the period found themselves, and the resulting retreat from economic nationalism (Beinin, 2009: 19; Bogaert, 2011: 710; Farah, 2009: 20–23). The USA and the UK were the first proponents of neoliberal policies in the MENA region. The socio-economic restructuring they championed was operationalized to a significant degree through the aid conditionality or debt-relief programmes of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Beinin, 2009: 20; Farah, 2009: 42; Wurzel, 2009: 97). Policies that aimed at extensive privatization and significant deregulation were implemented, which resulted in income gaps, declining wages, increased unemployment, job insecurity, removal of subsidies and an increase in domestic debt in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia (Beinin, 2009: 20; Farah, 2009: 44–47; Joya, 2011: 367–369; Kandil, 2012: 208). In Egypt, such policies also resulted in the formation of a class of crony capitalists, who went from being the beneficiaries of the state’s neoliberal policies to its patrons and policymakers with the formation of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif’s cabinet in 2004 (Kandil, 2012). Yet the top–down way in which neoliberal policies were in most cases implemented by authoritarian regimes, who handpicked new classes of beneficiaries, might hint at the limits of further impositions of neoliberal governmentality – in other words, the challenges that may arise when the previously top–down neoliberal approach meets with its bottom–up counterpart. Moreover, there are social limits to the effectiveness of

strategies that reflect a Western imaginary, as indeed there are limits to the power of international institutions in the first place (Kandil, 2012). It is important not to lose sight of already existing structures of domination at the domestic level through which neoliberal promotion takes place. Accordingly, we keep in mind that exportation of neoliberal governmentality is made possible by an a priori hierarchical relation between Europe and the countries of the MENA region. Consequently, the imposition of neoliberal politics will naturally encounter its own limits when it is exported to different societies with different historical heritages and social structures.

In the following section, we analyse the empirics of the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring, guided by the interpretive framework of Foucauldian governmentality.<sup>1</sup> We first focus on how the EU targets civil society actors and NGOs in its engagement with the Arab Spring. Rather than state-to-state relations, the EU selects – through tenders and grants – particular civil society actors with which it will work in a given setting, and these actors are then empowered by grants and invited to conferences to become policy partners with their host governments. We argue that the EU's partnership with Arab civil societies and its attempt to strengthen them follows the logic of neoliberal governmentality for two reasons. First, the particular civil society organizations that are empowered are those that adhere to liberal values, rather than, say, egalitarian, Islamic or welfarist organizations (Pace, 2009: 46). Second, in and through this selection, the EU attempts to create links with civil society groups that will then go on to discipline the government. Following an analysis of the EU's emphasis on civil society, we then look at the economic imaginary of the EU, and how the Union tries to promote a free market economy along neoliberal lines. This is done through a material emphasis on empowering small and medium-sized businesses in the economy, which are taken as the key actors in the economic sphere. Finally, we focus on the political dimension of the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring by showing how a certain type of democracy is promoted – that is, a procedural democracy that goes along with the aims of fostering a neoliberal polity and excludes other forms of democracy and political orientation, such as social democracy and egalitarian concerns.

### **The EU's engagement with the Arab world: Democracy, development and people**

The EU's engagement with the Arab Spring has included both a revision of formerly existing policy tools and frameworks and the creation of new ones. To date, the policy response includes the joint European Commission and European Parliament communications entitled 'A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' (March 2011), 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood' (May 2011), 'Support for Partnership, Reforms and Inclusive Growth (SPRING)' (September 2011), the 'Special Measure for Poorest Areas in Tunisia' (September 2011), and the establishment of the 'Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility' (September 2011).<sup>2</sup> The Partnership communication declares the EU's support for the aspirations of the Arab Spring and outlines the Union's strategy of engagement through the three elements of democratic transformation, partnership with the people and economic growth (EU Commission, 2011a). The New Response communication concretizes these three elements by enumerating democratic benchmarks, detailing possibilities for trade partnerships and pilot economic programmes, and signalling the forthcoming Civil Society Facility (EU Commission, 2011b). The SPRING Programme communications explicitly articulate the relationship between the three elements of reform by emphasizing the past track record of sectoral reform and economic integration as being more successful than democratization efforts (EU Commission, 2011c, 2011d). The Civil Society

Facility, in turn, demonstrates the EU's commitment to non-state actors as agents of bottom-up transformation who can engage the government in matters of policymaking following essential capacity-building (EU Commission, 2011f). Tunisia has also been chosen as the initial recipient of EU grants, and funds have been allocated to national and international actors within the SPRING and Special Measures programmes and in line with the EU's policy priorities.

The EU's engagement with the Arab Spring draws resources from the larger framework of the EU's Mediterranean regional policy, where there are a variety of actors, including the Arab Spring countries as well as the Caucasian states that 'form a ring around EU member and candidate countries' (Marchetti, 2012: 402). Initiated during the Barcelona Conference of November 1995, the scope of the EU's engagement with its Mediterranean neighbours has changed owing to successive rounds of enlargement and larger regional political transformations, yet the Barcelona Conference's framework of establishing an area of peace, stability and prosperity, agreed to by the 27 participating foreign ministers, has continued to define Euro-Mediterranean relations (Calleja, 2012: 419–421; Marchetti, 2012: 398–400). To reach the desired objectives, the Barcelona Conference also set out three levels of partnership in the areas of politics and security; economy and finance; and social, cultural and human affairs (Marchetti, 2012: 400). This framework policy was succeeded by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (European Commission, 2011a: 14–15). Involving the EU's 16 closest neighbours,<sup>3</sup> the ENP was proposed by the Commission and accepted as an EU framework policy in 2003–2004, aiming at creating a shared area of prosperity, stability and security. It is implemented through bilateral action plans of three to five years, mutually agreed upon by the EU and individual partner governments, while the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) establishes the legal basis for the financial assistance provided through the ENP action plans. The EU's Euro-Mediterranean policy framework also includes the Union for the Mediterranean, launched in Paris in 2008 in an effort to revitalize the Barcelona process. This short mapping of the EU's old and new policy frameworks already shows ruptures and continuities in terms of the Union's engagement with the Arab world. While the three-dimensional aspect of the engagement (political, economic and social) seems to be ongoing, the material prioritization of these dimensions has undergone a paradigm shift, from an emphasis on state-level partnerships to one-on-one partnership between the EU and 'the people' of the Arab Spring countries. Keeping in mind this larger framework of continuity, the next section will turn to an examination of what the foregrounding of a bottom-up civil society approach implies for the underlying understanding and creation of a 'prosperous' and 'democratic' Middle East.

Throughout this article, we conduct a close (cross-)textual analysis of key policy documents of the EU to demonstrate the ways in which they are indicative of neoliberal governmentality. We focus on the three elements emphasized in all pertinent documents, namely, democracy promotion, sustainability, and inclusive growth and contact with people. Special attention will be placed on the particular understandings of civil society and economic growth, as well as on the ways in which political reforms are simultaneously connected to growth and democracy. Finally, we end by illustrating how the EU's democracy promotion is perceived by local actors and how it fails to create like-minded neoliberal subjectivities.

## **Civil society**

Engagement with civil society is subsumed under the third component of the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring: 'partnerships with people'. In descriptions of this component, it is

emphasized that the EU's support for the transformations in Arab Spring countries will not just take the form of partnerships with new governments, but will also include listening to the grievances and proposals voiced by civil society (EU Commission, 2011a: 3). Given the EU's willingness to engage with civil society as partners, through capacity-building and empowerment as well as the existing theoretical and practical debates on the meaning of civil society, this section will first turn to different conceptualizations of civil society. It will then locate the EU's particular understanding of civil society within these competing traditions as a neoliberal one that is characterized by the economic rationalities of competitiveness and entrepreneurship, both in its definitions and in its material engagement.

The definition of civil society has been the subject of considerable contestation from the beginning, and debates have centred around the different answers given to the questions of civil society's independence from the state and its role in general and in democracies in particular. Current debates within this paradigm include centre-left republicanist perspectives that see in civil society the basis for active citizenship, the conservative-right view that focuses on the importance of state actors that turn to civil society to ameliorate 'democratic deficits' and ensure 'stakeholder participation', and lastly the approach of neoliberalism, which sees civil society as taking on some of the roles of the welfare state, as a result of which individuals will be empowered to take on responsibility for their own self-governance (Kumar, 1993). Our governmental framework interprets civil society as 'a concept of governmental technology' (Foucault, 2008: 296). As a governmental technology, civil society is the sphere in which *homo economicus* is fostered. Fostering and inhabited by *homo economicus*, civil society is characterized as autonomous and effective and actively engages in local contexts to induce change. Civil society checks state excess and at the same time engages in service provision. In the context of the EU's engagement with civil society through its global democracy promotion, the crucial position of civil society in fostering both a certain kind of subjectivity and the corresponding political order renders civil society organizations active objects of governance through capacity-building, auditing and overseeing mechanisms (Kurki, 2012: 356–358).

A central question is how exactly does the EU engage with civil society in the context of the Arab Spring? First, the EU has adopted a comprehensive definition of 'non-state actors' (NSAs), a term that it uses interchangeably with 'civil society'. As set out in Article 14 of the ENPI regulation, and referred to by the Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility, the EU defines non-state actors as:

organisations representing national and/or ethnic minorities; local citizens' groups and traders' associations; cooperatives, trade unions, organisations representing economic and social interests. (European Commission, 2011f: 11)

Accordingly, the space of civil society, which is made up in actuality of a multitude of non-state actors, brings together organizations concerned with rights promotion and associations that are engaged in economic-interest promotion and related lobbying activities. By demonstrating the ways in which economic rationality is a 'natural' part of civil society, the above quote clarifies the earlier definition of nongovernmental and civil society organizations as having the potential to 'provide much-needed support for the reforms and involvement in areas close to citizens' concerns such as human rights, the environment, social and economic development' (European Commission, 2011a: 6). There are three priorities for non-state actors according to the EU. The first is capacity-building; the second is increased involvement of non-state actors in the

programming, implementation and monitoring of EU assistance and policies in the region; and the third is promoting the involvement of non-state actors in policy dialogue at the local, national and regional levels (European Commission, 2011f). These three priorities demonstrate a particular conceptualization of civil society in relation to governance. Accordingly, the first component focuses on increasing the operational capacity and professionalism of non-state actors based on a recognized need to ‘streamline ongoing consultations’ and ‘operationalisation of dialogues’, which will enable a scaling up of civil society consultations to the policy level (European Commission, 2011f: 3). In other words, contra to alternative conceptualizations, civil society is not necessarily the sphere of ongoing contestation or consultation through which solidarity or practices of coexistence develop; rather, it is a sphere that is goal-oriented, leading to the creation of certain political forms.

Capacity-building is tied to the second component, which subjugates civil society to EU governance. In and through this second component, civil society organizations are brought up to speed in terms of the relevant ‘EU policy-instruments and programmes’ (European Commission, 2011f: 7). Their increased affinity with and support for the fulfilment of ENP commitments, through ‘monitoring and advocacy activities’, in turn means increased EU aid (European Commission, 2011f: 7). While there is an emphasis on local ownership of the transitional process, the conditionality of EU assistance on civil society subscription to ENP priorities raises questions about ‘localness’. Taken together, these two components paint the picture of a civil society that is being actively supported by the EU in ways that seek to foster the development of certain ‘professional’ capacities. These capacities, in turn, will enable civil society actors to engage efficiently and effectively within the sphere of politics – an engagement that prioritizes ENP commitments to a shared region of security and prosperity. Through mechanisms of aid and conditionality, capacity-building is under the direct supervision of the EU, which desires a self-governing civil society vis-a-vis the ENP commitments.

Some of the material realizations of this discursive construction have already taken place through an initial round of grant-giving in the context of Tunisia. Through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and funding for non-state actors, grant allocations bear witness to the particular conceptualization of the EU and its priorities vis-a-vis civil society (EuropeAid, 2011). The 10 proposals that have been selected within the scope of EIDHR, to which a total of €2m have been allocated, include projects for NGO capacity-strengthening, including the building of NGO capacities for engaging with processes of political reform, constitutional change and electoral monitoring (EuropeAid, 2011: 9). Framed in technical terms, such capacity-building is clearly geared towards creating partners out of NSAs as a step towards the fulfilment of ENP priorities. Furthermore, we can also see the ways in which economic development and civil society are inextricably linked, along with hints of a procedural understanding of democracy. However, to understand how governance is exercised in the realm of civil society, it is important to analyse the economic and the political spheres, and to examine the ways in which all three spheres are interconnected.

## **Economic liberalism**

The homo economicus of neoliberal production is distinct from the individual of classical liberalism. Whereas the latter was an individually producing rational actor who had to be left alone, the former becomes social capital him- or herself. Thus, the individual must be actively invested in and governed to become the embodiment of the entrepreneurial, effective,

productive social capital. The EU's framework of socio-economic reforms extends beyond the liberal conceptualizations of an open market to include an emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises as engines of economic growth.

The EU's policy documents show that the Arab Spring is thought to be 'clearly linked to economic weaknesses' (European Commission, 2011a: 7), and it is argued that any transformation process without socio-economic reforms is bound to fail. EU documents portray the EU's neighbourhood as a place where 'poverty is rife, life expectancy is often low, youth employment is high and the participation of women in political and economic life is low'. The New Response communication sets out the EU's immediate objectives as 'creating jobs, boosting growth, improving social protection and revitalizing sectors affected by recent crises' (European Commission, 2011b: 7). For EU policymakers, economic development is therefore an indispensable priority.

At the centre of the EU's promotion of sustainable and inclusive growth stands 'support to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), vocational and educational training, improving health and education systems and development of poorer regions' (European Commission, 2011a: 3). A recent document by the European Investment Bank (2011: 5) introduces entrepreneurial stories from the region with the following: 'The European Commission too is providing its technical and financial support to help young people start up businesses and to encourage SMEs in the neighbouring Mediterranean countries.' The same document praises the dynamism of SMEs for creating employment and quotes the Bank's vice-president as saying that 'the Euro-Mediterranean economic area is being created above all by the entrepreneurial men and women who seize the opportunities the South has to offer'. Initiated and inhabited by entrepreneurial individuals, SMEs seize upon available resources and create significant returns for less than or the same amount of investment as bigger firms. Unemployed Arab youth, it is suggested, can join the ranks of entrepreneurial individuals through vocational and educational training. Here, the emphasis is on the moulding of the entrepreneurial subjectivity, which does not rely on or expect state aid for personal or collective economic improvement, but rather builds creatively on the vocational and 'educational training' provided. This is what we mean by taming the Arab politics along neoliberal lines.

The SMEs that 'have a critical role to play in job creation' are not limited to the economic sphere and, in fact, 'to thrive, they need a sound regulatory framework, conducive to business and entrepreneurship' (European Commission, 2011a: 7). On the one hand, it is the SMEs that are expected to play a critical role in job creation, not the state. On the other, the state is responsible for the creation, protection and non-violation of the necessary regulatory framework. Thus, as theorized by the governmentality framework, entrepreneurial subjects are fostered through both civil society and vocational and educational training; encouraged to engage in certain forms of economic production; and expected to demand a political form that enables and perpetuates the production of such subjects. This relationship is further emphasized through 'trade and investment', which are the other components of the EU's socio-economic development promotion and which also need 'a sound business climate, which in turn requires a strengthening of the rule of law and the judiciary, tackling corruption and overhauling administrative procedures', if their full potential is to be achieved (European Commission, 2011a: 8). Thus, once again it is a largely procedural understanding of the political that is shaped in accordance with the requirements of 'economic reality'.

As in the case of the Civil Society Facility, Tunisia has been chosen as the first beneficiary of the SPRING Programme; the engagement in the area of employment is executed largely through a €100m contribution to the government's emergency revival programme and the establishment of a 'Special Measure for the Poorest Areas of Tunisia' (European Union, 2011). Whereas the former is

more in line with the EU's former bilateral engagement through governments, the latter is demonstrative of a neoliberal governmentality. The focus on the provision of decent living conditions as a step towards the relaunching of economic activities implies a certain understanding of 'human dignity' that associates it with productivity. Furthermore, the encouragement of microfinance, which encourages individuals to think creatively about the resources they embody as well as those in their surroundings, demonstrates the conceptualization of a particular kind of homo economicus. The encouragement for the expansion of microfinance to rural areas also hints at the expansive logic of governmentality that works at the micro level. Civil society is expected to monitor and advocate for the fulfilment of ENP goals, which include economic growth through open markets, foreign direct investment, SMEs and microfinance. This suggests that civil society is expected to be an actor in the promotion of a certain kind of economy. Making EU assistance conditional on ENP priorities, therefore, changes the terrain of civil society in particular and material ways. Civil society organizations that are committed to social democracy and extensive social and economic redistribution, and that will advocate on behalf of these policy priorities, will therefore be largely excluded.

The socio-economic reforms also raise further questions about how local ownership and self-determination are understood by EU policymakers. The EU Commission's implementing decision on Special Measures for Tunisia aims to prioritize competitive business and SMEs, and to encourage education and training in order to create conditions conducive to private investment (European Commission, 2011e: 1). The decision also refers to the 2007 bilateral strategy, concluded before the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The predetermination and primacy of the economic, manifested also in the continuity, implies serious limits to local ownership, especially with regard to political reform. In other words, what exactly is the meaning of self-determination in a context of institutional pre- and co-determination through the 'technical', economic sphere? It is with these questions in mind that we turn to political reforms.

## **Political life and procedural democracy**

As mentioned earlier, insofar as economics is a set of practices that is crucial in the production of the social and the political, the governmentality approach expects to see manifestations and legitimations of economic practices in the sphere of the political. Neoliberal governmentality is understood as self-governance by particularly moulded subjects. Thus, the state should exercise minimal disciplinary power in the spheres of civil society and economics. Interpreted within the governmentality framework, the democratic reform element of the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring is defined by an embracing of procedural-liberal democracy and cohabits a larger framework of extensive civil society engagement and economic reforms.

Multiple policy documents within the framework of the EU's engagement with the Arab Spring define the events as being of 'historic proportions' and as expressing 'the wish of people in our neighbourhood to enjoy the same freedoms that we take as our right' (European Commission, 2011a: 2). Insofar as the revolts express a desire for 'universal values', the EU declares that it 'cannot be a passive spectator' and 'must wholeheartedly support' this wish. However, this desire and declaration of support is inseparable from the 'risks and uncertainties associated with these transitions' towards full democracy. If the outcomes of the political transitions are far from certain, and if the democratic maxim necessitates taking self-determination seriously, how can the EU mediate the tension between embracing democracy and a concern for the risks and uncertainties? We argue that it seeks to do so primarily through a separation of the 'technical-institutional' and the

'political' aspects of democracy promotion, and by prioritizing certain areas of the former in line with the economic requirements of a free market. Illustrative of this economic and political coupling, the Partnership Document's section on democracy and institution-building starts with the following:

The EU is ready to support the democratic and constitutional reform processes. Judicial reform, enhanced transparency and the fight against corruption are of particular importance in this process, both to encourage foreign and domestic economic investment and to demonstrate to people a visible change in their lives. (European Commission, 2011a: 5)

Even if one chooses not to read too much into the order of the sentence, where the encouraging of economic investment precedes a visible change in people's lives, it is still clear that the constitutional and democratic reforms that are prioritized speak both to economic/market concerns and to the demands for what are interpreted as European/universal freedoms. While judicial reform, enhanced transparency and combatting corruption are usually not included within the signposts of procedural democracy, such as free and fair elections, their direct link to the market suggests a conceptualization that renders them subservient to an economic rationality.

The procedural conceptualization of democracy can be found in the joint communication on 'A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood'. Here it is stated that 'there is no set model or a ready made recipe for political reform', and that there are nonetheless common elements to 'building deep and sustainable democracy' (European Commission, 2011b: 3). These common elements include free and fair elections, freedom of association/expression/assembly, the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary, combatting corruption, and civilian control of the security establishment (European Commission, 2011b: 3). This enumeration once again shows the procedural emphasis, but supplements it with a liberal 'bias' that sees certain fundamental liberal freedoms as belonging to the *sine qua non*s of building a democracy. Recognizing this liberal 'bias' is not to argue either for or against the indispensability of these freedoms for democracy, but rather to note that their prioritization belongs to a certain understanding of democracy at the expense of others.

The strong procedural bias of political reforms becomes fully manifest in the New Response communication, which asks partner countries to develop 'a limited number of short and medium-term priorities, incorporating more precise benchmarks and a clearer sequencing of actions' (European Commission, 2011b: 19). The establishment of priorities through the incorporation of precise benchmarks is expected to 'set the political pace and help both the EU and each neighbour to produce key deliverables'. In other words, the democratic transition needs to be predictable, efficient and measurable. The uncertain transition is therefore to be transformed into a process that can be measured against benchmarks set by the EU, and through concrete deliverables. The understanding of democracy displayed here is clearly at odds with other understandings of democracy – such as radical democracy, which sees politics as consisting of lengthy and open-ended contestations, or social democracy, which is suggestive of social justice, solidarity and egalitarianism.

The EU's emphasis on lessons learnt from its previous engagements provides a further clue about how the EU perceives itself as a successful global democracy promoter. For instance, the SPRING Programme's action fiche refers to the ENP's stock-taking exercise carried out in 2010 with the 'aim to establish partnerships with tangible benefits to both sides' (European Commission, 2011c: 2). Further reference is made to the evaluation undertaken of the cooperation with Tunisia for the 1995–2008 period, from which it is concluded that cooperation in the area of national

development plans and economic growth has been more successful than cooperative activities in the fields of justice, the rule of law and civil society (European Commission, 2011c: 3). In drawing these conclusions, no reference is made to the fact that the period under review is that of Ben Ali's government in Tunisia, known precisely for its prioritization of economic development over and above democratic rights and freedoms in its attempt to project the image of a modern(izing) country (Driss, 2012: 21; Khader, 2012: 34–43).

To sum up, this political engagement on the part of the EU cannot be understood in isolation from the EU's civil society partnerships and socio-economic reforms. Requiring Arab societies to develop clear priorities and to deliver on those priorities according to predetermined benchmarks implies a strong bias towards a procedural understanding of democracy. When examined alongside the temporal prioritization of economic reforms and civil society engagements, policy statements about political reform seem to be ontologically secondary. In other words, democracy promotion is limited to 'institutional-technical' areas and leaves very little room for substantive democratic debate. Instead, one could well be left with a political sphere that is monitored by entrepreneurial and effective civil society actors that report to the EU vis-a-vis democratic deliverables with neoliberal benchmarks. It is in this sense that the EU's engagement is governmentality par excellence and an attempt to tame the Arab street.

## **The response of the Arab street**

This section will accordingly provide a short mapping of various subjectivities that are being formed in the Arab world after the Arab Spring via the EU's engagement. The narration of the Arab Spring often coincides at the conceptual level with the EU's engagement with the events in the region. It focuses on the demand for 'human dignity', which includes political freedom and socio-economic improvement (see e.g. Driss, 2012; Eyadat, 2012; Khader, 2012). However, a closer look reveals how the understanding of political freedom and socio-economic improvement is plural, and that these concepts might be constituted in ways that differ from the European liberal individualistic understanding. The areas subject to such contestation include, but may not be limited to, the role of the state in the economy, the role of religion within the state, and the preferred framework for rights, freedoms and citizenship (Ayeb, 2011; Joya, 2011; Kandil, 2012)

What is most striking is that neoliberal reforms already undertaken by the crumbling anciens régimes of Tunisia and Egypt were in fact a major cause of the revolutions in the first place. A closer look into the Arab social upheavals against the region's authoritarian regimes demonstrates that the Arab Spring has shown the failure of the EU's neoliberal development approach for the southern Mediterranean. Previously viewed as 'economic tigers', Egypt and Tunisia led the revolutionary wave mainly owing to high unemployment, growing inequality and faltering education systems (Behr, 2011: 3). It was the systemic failure of previous neoliberal policies (Bogaert, 2011: 709–710) that brought diverse coalitions onto the street.

What is being challenged is not 'democracy', but rather the essentially contested nature of liberal democracy that is brought to the fore in the Arab street. This is not to argue that there are actors who question whether liberal democracy is the most desirable form of government, but rather to emphasize that those who support democracy can still draw radically different connections between the political, the social and the economic. For example, there may be alternative models of economic development available to Arab societies, aside from those that are being promoted (Halaseh, 2012: 253–274; Tagma, 2011).

Such plurality of subjectivities shows in fact the ways in which the EU's neoliberal agenda is prioritized at the cost of certain existing pluralities on the ground. The preclusion of certain subjectivities, however, is not the only implication that arises out of a consideration of the constitutive meanings present on the Arab street. This also shows that both Tunisia and Egypt have legacies from an overemphasis on economic modernization, sustained through foreign aid, which was insufficiently redistributed but nonetheless created sufficient growth to make it possible to postpone deep political reforms. The EU engagement aims to ameliorate some of these socio-economic inequalities through an extension of the market into the social sphere and rural areas. While the EU cannot (be expected to) propose redistributive measures as an outside actor, it must be cognizant of the fact that the pursuit of neoliberal economics, which have historically tended to exacerbate socio-economic inequalities and create new vulnerabilities, along with the prioritization of neoliberal economic policies in foreign aid allocations, may strike too close a chord to some of the ways in which the dictatorial regimes were understood and opposed by multiple actors. In other words, a continued advocacy by European and more generally Western actors of economic policies that are seen as continuous with previous regimes and that exacerbate socio-economic inequalities, as well as the implementation of these policies by the new governments, might give the impression that the post-uprisings context is one of 'business as usual'. The EU's engagement with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) should sound a cautionary note in this context (Bandelj and Mahutga, 2010; Hamm et al., 2012). In that region, EU-backed neoliberal policies that have eroded both the state and the traditional left have led to the rise of extreme right-wing parties, which combine nationalism and xenophobia with an economic populism that promises to save the people from the liberal policies of Europe and pro-European domestic elites (Hockenos, 2010). The case of the CEE states thus offers important lessons regarding how the 'normative' agenda of the EU that accompanies liberal economic policies might fall into disrepute.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that neoliberal governmentality is an appropriate interpretive framework for understanding EU's engagement with Arab societies in the wake of the political transformations. Neoliberal governmentality entails the restructuring of politics along the lines of 'a market form which serves as the organizational principle for the state and society' (Lemke, 2001: 200). We have demonstrated that the EU continues to actively promote neoliberal policies in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and that these policies seek to foster a mode of subjectivity that is conducive to the EU's norms and objectives. According to Khosrokhavar (2012: 9), with the Arab Spring we have already witnessed the emergence and existence of 'a new subjectivity' in the Arab world and 'a renewed sense of belonging to the dreamed-of middle classes and, beyond that, to a new humanity, inclusive of the West'. Yet, aware that not all subjectivities are entrepreneurial, competitive and/or individualistic in the Arab street, we have also tried to draw attention to the fact that the vast majority of ordinary Arab citizens are being overlooked by the EU during its process of exporting neoliberal governmentality, and the EU may not have a real touch of the Arab street. Such negligence may explain why the EU failed to capture the public mood on the southern shores of the Mediterranean in the first place – the popular discontent that eventually led to the uprisings (Fioramonti, 2012: 24). For Hamid Dabashi (2012: 237), after the Arab Spring, the entire *régime du savoir* we have inherited is useless and counterproductive, since the open-ended succession of revolutions in the Arab world has 'changed the very DNA of the political culture that frames and informs our understanding of the events'. It is thus perhaps time 'to engage in original reflection

on goals and on social, political and economic ethics' that will eventually end the glorification of the West and cease hindering other civilizations from achieving their creative potential (Ramadan, 2012: 18). If not mere optimism, such a development may in time render the concept and practice of governmentality rather superfluous. Hence, from now on, although it may still be a good idea, the application of governmentality outside the Western realm 'has to be done carefully', with particular attention being paid 'to the limits of its usage' (Joseph, 2010: 224).

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## Notes

1. As one reviewer suggested, one may ask what is the 'source' or 'origin' of the EU's neoliberal governmentality. We believe that Commission members, member-states and the European homo economicus are also subject to a broader regime of governmentality. While we would not buy into the global Leviathanesque quality of Hardt and Negri's (2001) *Empire*, there are certainly global forces and structures at play. We would argue that the Reaganomics and Thatcherism of the 1980s certainly had an important role to play in the 'globalization' of neoliberalism, which was later internalized by the EU.
2. See European Commission (2011a–g); European Union (2011).
3. The 16 countries are Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine (European Commission, 2011a: 14).

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