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# Degeneration and the demos in North Africa: towards a ‘critical’ study of democratisation?

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## ABSTRACT

This article frames the problematic explored in the Special Issue, namely, the Maghreb and North Africa’s ‘crisis of democratization.’ Across cases, the crisis is multi-layered, involving first, counter-revolution since the 2011 (and 2019) uprisings and revolutions; second, the breakup of states, particularly those mired in violence (e.g. Libya); and third, setbacks even among states that have to an extent transcended the democratic threshold (e.g. Tunisia). We lay the groundwork for localized and contextualized exploration of ‘degenerations of democratizations’ playing out in the region. This involves rethinking the teleological ambit of transitology studies as well as the ‘reverse transitology’ scholarship on democratic backsliding. We propose an alternative ‘critical democratization’ frame that emphasizes emancipation and attends to the demos. This people-centered approach is fitting for exploring democratization and its setbacks in the context of popular uprisings and revolution. It allows for investigations of local democratic learning and un-learning; local-global and local-regional interactions; entrenched socioeconomic and military structures and disparities; and popular forces of resistance (*al-hirak*) challenging democratic setbacks. Critical study of democratization necessitates case-by-case explorations probing regional commonalities as well as country-level specificities to investigate how ‘degeneration’ manifests in the Maghreb, North Africa, and the wider Arab region.

**KEYWORDS** Crisis of democratization; democratic degenerations; Arab Spring; North Africa; critical democratization

## Introduction

The plethora of political and academic diagnoses of democratisation in North Africa invites serious consideration of how to study political setbacks in the region. Since the revolutions of 2011 and popular uprisings since, progress as well as regression are observable as democratic practices and institutions

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– and its analytical frameworks – travel from Tunisia to Egypt and Libya and beyond. This article takes up the welcome challenge of how to think differently about North African and Arab democratisation and its many difficulties. With an eye on knowledge-practices and the demos, it proceeds in three parts. The opening section introduces and critiques debates on ‘democratic backsliding’ against the backdrop of a global crisis of democracy. Next, the article wades into an alternative conceptualisation, that of ‘degeneration of democratisation’. Here arises the opportunity to revisit problems of extant approaches to democratisation as they (do not) apply to North Africa. A critique of ‘(reverse) teleology’s’ many shortcomings shows how the approach does not fare well in the Arab setting, where uprisings and revolution pried open democratic apertures in the armour of authoritarianism. Third, the article makes the case for a decolonising approach that adopts tenets of the Frankfurt School, tentatively proposing a ‘critical democratisation’ agenda suitable for the region. It closes by presenting a rough framework to guide future research on democratisation and its degeneration that emphasises the *didactic* and the *emancipatory* to place the ‘demos’ front and centre.

### **Democratic backsliding and its discontents**

The 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions and subsequent uprisings confirmed that North Africa and the Arab world are not ‘exceptional’ outliers to universal yearnings for freedom, equality, and social justice institutionalised in the modern age through democracy. Neither are their troubles with the adoption of democratic governance (elections, constitution-drafting, power-sharing, civilianisation of the military, etc.) unique. The *de rigueur* parlance of ‘democratic backsliding’ offers some clues about how democracies, both new and old, manifest regression rather than progress when it comes to the rule of law, separation of powers, civic freedoms, and limitations on the executive. Nancy Bermeo’s conceptualisation of democratic backsliding as ‘state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy’ (2016, 5) has gained widespread purchase among scholars. She argues that military coups are more likely to be ‘promissory coups’, displacing elected governments with the justification of rescuing democracies and future elections; ‘executive aggrandizement’ is a piecemeal, rather than one-time, takeover of legislative and/or judicial powers; and ‘strategic manipulation’ of elections from the campaign onward is more common than wholesale, dramatic fraud (Bermeo 2016, 8–14). The article sidesteps the Arab world, however, except to (rightly) note that Western nonchalance over the 2013 military coup in Egypt was ‘deeply troubling’ – but Egypt was a ‘nondemocratic regime’ in the first place (Bermeo 2016, 16), presumably outside the scope of democratic backsliding as theory and practice.

Haggard and Kaufman build on Bermeo's (2016) work, stressing the 'incremental' nature of backsliding, more likely in situations of 'social and political polarisation' and weakened legislatures. Their rough framework is taken up by recent work on Tunisia (Huber and Pisciotta 2022). A policy interest in democracy promotion and prescriptive foreign policy and donor strategies of strengthening opposition parties and devising 'early warning systems' (Haggard and Kaufman 2021, 39–40) conveys an almost West-to-the-rest assumption of protecting democratic gains. Not fitting the bill of 'democratic consolidation' before backsliding, North African and Arab cases do not appear in Haggard and Kaufman's discussion.

Other work on backsliding bears little relevance to the Arab world. Her eyes on the US, Pippa Norris's (2017) cautions against declaring a 'backsliding' epidemic among Western democracies, where civil society, media criticism, and solid 'public agreement' on democracy as a form of government persist. Yet her econometric analysis relies on categorizations that relegate all of North Africa to 'autocracy' – except Morocco which is considered a 'hybrid regime' in 2015 (2017, 20). Focusing on international factors (e.g. Levitsky and Way 2006), Samuels (2023) attributes backsliding to decreasing democracy promotion by the US and EU (and the Vatican) with the end of the Cold War. He is correct to point out that the War on Terror worked in the opposite direction of democracy promotion, and that the US has almost unequivocally retreated from supporting 'Arab Spring' democratisation since Sisi, despite Obama's grand pledges (Samuels 2023, 4–5). Yet the Arab world never enjoyed a golden age of democracy promotion by the West, *especially* during the Cold War (Sadiki 2009, 145–198). One might argue that counterterrorism policies further entrenched support for Arab dictators, and that the current de-prioritization of democracy in MENA is more in than out of character with US/EU foreign policy discourse and practice (Youngs 2015; Dandashly 2018). Moreover, caught up in its own democratic backsliding steeper even than that of other democracies (Carothers 2022), US credibility as an international promoter of democracy has dramatically dwindled.

Alternatively, the concern of some social scientists tuned in to policy relevance seems instrumental. Democratic governance might eventually reverse migration to Western countries from the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central America, for instance, argue Goldstone and Diamond (2020). Fewer migrants from these places, may help resuscitate Western democracies torn apart by nationalist populism—only after they benefit from temporary migrant labour from countries with demographic surpluses (Goldstone and Diamond 2020, 867–880)! Hence, distances between some (Western) objectives and (Arab popular) expectations are telling. Pace (2014) argues that the disconnect between the EU's notion of democracy in MENA (fixation on 'stability and security') and the democratic

conceptions of Arabs revolting in 2011 (anti-authoritarianism, collectively overcoming fear), map onto failed European democracy promotion policies in the region. Serious snags in North African democratisation have only widened such interpretation-policymaking gaps. Outside the Arab region, discourses and policies of 'inconsistent' democracy promotion (Gawrich et al. 2010) captivate scholarly inquiry. Top-down tutelage is not only normatively suspect, but can be inefficacious. Korosteleva (2016), for instance, posits that democracy promotion geared at 'social empowerment', cognizant of 'reciprocal learning' between donors (EU) and seemingly intractable targets of assistance (Belarus), can help extend democratisation radars. Viewed as a distinct region and comparatively, then, the Arab setting does not fit easily into prevailing research on backsliding. Clearly democratic setbacks are observable in North Africa over the past ten years. Yet there appears to be a disjuncture between dominant theorising on the topic and the vicissitudes of North African politics, seemingly removed from scholarly debates on the matter.

### ***From 'backsliding' to 'degenerations'***

Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor sing a somewhat different tune. Their recent book (2022) offers a new take on the crisis of democracy afflicting the Western world. Democracies confront problems more fundamental, with longer histories, than the institutionally-minded 'setbacks' the literature acknowledges. For them, it is the erosion of democracy's 'social foundations' in democratic countries over the past fifty years that is to blame for what they consider to be multiple 'degenerations' of political systems putatively ensuring freedom and equality. Compounded degenerations result from and are perpetuated by 'disempowerment of citizens, failures of inclusion, and hyper-partisan and majoritarian' political maneuverings of a select few, nonchalant about the public good (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 3). Since 1975, they argue, capitalism has renewed itself in the form of globalisation, wreaking havoc on citizens' feelings of belonging and relevance to civic and political life. The rush of neoliberal advancements – financial, technological, and otherwise – has not been met with a commensurate recalibration of policy in the political domain. Aggressive individualism has crowded out the solidarity of community vital for maintaining an active and engaged citizenry that can uphold and refresh the democratic system alongside its formal institutions. As a result, citizens in Western democracies are increasingly 'disempowered'; excluded rather than included by webs of formal politics as well as each other; and turned off by the 'hyper-partisan and majoritarian' polarisation in machinations of politicians' and parties' pursuit of narrow interests (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 2–7). Understandings and quests for the 'public interest', necessarily a cornerstone of

democracy, slip away as viciously contentious elections come to define the skeleton of democracy that remains. Populism, fake news, and xenophobia are mere symptoms of these plural 'degenerations' that have brewed for years, the authors contend. Calhoun and his colleagues' account is sobering without ringing submissive. Not all hope is lost. For, society can step in through more conscientious, active, and extra-parliamentary participation – perhaps cobbling together some sort of social democratic, widespread 'Green New Deal'-type movement (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 250, 255). Such 'consorted direct action of the people ... in its multiple incarnations' is for them an aspirational future (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 281). This 'democratic regeneration' can ideally reawaken a civic ethos among publics to halt the decay eating away at their societies, these authors propose.

Calhoun and his co-authors theorise within and for established democracies (the US and UK, and more briefly India) rather than democratising countries (2022, 2). Their narrative of democracy's degenerations revolves around industrialisation and capitalism's monstrous conquests of Western states and societies since the late nineteenth century, re-vamped with the aid of technology and the financial sector. The travails of capitalism are relevant to postcolonial North African and Arab states only indirectly, on the *receiving end* of global capitalist dependency (Amin 1997). Yet the authors' account of democracy's stumbling in its evangelistic sites of origin resonates in some respects with fledgling democratisation of North Africa and the Arab world more broadly. First, they approach democracy as a 'telic' concept, one that is normatively grounded, 'defined by standards that can never be met', (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 19). The lodestars of equality, inclusiveness, civic engagement, and participatory governance gesture perennially to the world's democrats who attempt to enact these ideals. This is a refreshing take. It shies away from minimalist, Schumpeterian notions of (Western liberal) democracy reducible to electoral and procedural benchmarks. It is more suitable to the Arab context whose own route (e.g. 2011 popular revolutions seeking freedom and dignity) and substance (e.g. Islam's permeation in the knowledge and experiential repertoires of Arabs) are regional specificities. Second, the non-linear fluidity of democracy and its travel, even within locales where it is valorised as an almost 'given' light shining from the city upon a hill, is well-taken. American democracy itself, they demonstrate, has progressed in fits and starts (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 49–70). The forging of US democracy has spanned the slave trade, the emancipation of enslaved people, the enfranchisement of women and non-property-owning men, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, second wave feminism, etc. American democracy-making was no simple path, but 'incomplete' from its founding moments, they stress. Such a reminder can help temper expectations of unblemished, comprehensive democratisation that

is complete as soon as a new constitution is ratified (e.g. Tunisia in 2014). Building a democracy involves the combined struggles and efforts of activists, exhortative masses, creative elites, and responsive leaders.

Third, Calhoun and his co-authors emphasise socio-economic inequality wrought by capitalism's many 'disruptions' as an indisputable complement to democracy's political institutions (2022, 134–143). Inclusion and equality, two democratic ideals, are threatened by yawning gaps between the rich and poor even in industrialised democracies, they suggest. This 'maximalist' view of democracy resonates with our own heedfulness of social justice and (more) equitable distribution of resources as a condition of what we call here *sustainable democratisation*. Often regionalised within countries, worsening socio-economic inequality is a common feature among most North African and Arab states. The past last three years since the Covid-19 outbreak illustrate how exacerbated poverty, increased unemployment, and deepening overall precarity has fomented disaffection and unrest in democratising MENA states (Sadiki and Saleh 2022a). Fourth, the nod to solidarity, community making, and the permeation of common values (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 90–100, 130–131) – whose decrepitude they lament in Western democracies and India – speaks to the ubiquity and centrality of informal relations, support networks, and mobilisational strategies across the North African region. Solidarity was an important motivation and resource for protest in the 2011 uprisings. The Arab 'patrimonial state's' decline likely increased reliance on family, tribal, and communal solidarity networks before and since the 2011 Arab uprisings (e.g. Zemni 2017). IMF strictures from Tunisia to Egypt have swallowed up sections of the budget 'cake' available for social welfare programmes (see Human Rights Watch 2022).

### **Resetting the button of North African democratisation?**

How, then, can we as an episteme release the reset button for 'critical democratisation' in North Africa? On the whole, Euro-American transitology may in parts have been exceedingly ensconced in its sense of generalisability and of mission in the world. Most non-Euro-American thought and experience of government are dis-valued as inimical to good government. Pressing the reset button of critical democratisation is primarily about opening up an arch of new possibilities for extracting cross-regional and cross-cultural learning away from one-sided pedagogies of democracy and freedom. Widening the democratic horizon away from individualistic and teleological models may empower Arabs, Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans to enrich democracy with dosages of age-old, sage traditions of learning, being, thinking, feeling and acting invested in values of social justice, communal solidarity, material modesty, and aesthetic experiences. Normatively, these form a motive for any reset, and present pointers to an epistemology of the

trajectories a democratising reset may follow. For our purpose, here, one way of rethinking Arab democratisation is to recast political, cultural and social problems in the Arab region by means of critical epistemology. This approach may be positioned to make sense through interdisciplinary research of the complex legal, moral, cultural, historical, linguistic, and socio-political makeup of postcolonial Arab societies. The pursuit of free, independent and equal realms and modern national identities are all enmeshed with the original quest for autonomous and recognisable indigeneity. Thus, it is not difficult to locate the emancipatory content embedded within such a pursuit, prior to independence. That emancipatory project was never unveiled under the new occupiers of power who guarded and supervised that power by juggling instruments of distribution and coercion, after independence. In this contribution, we attempt to offer critical insights into re-readings of the 'crisis of democratisation' within the Arab region, with special reference to countries, which experienced forms of social unrest / revolt. Democracy and democratisation are both taken as topics for interdisciplinary research with normative standpoints. However, some caveats must be declared from the outset. Democracy and democratisation happen within specific contexts, linguistic, intellectual, cultural, social, political, and temporal and spatial. Problematising democratisation is to question the epistemic imposition of Euro-American categories that tend to (1) oversimplify complex socio-political processes and phenomena; and (2) use foundationalist – as versus nonfoundationalist – epistemology. That is, ways of knowing that ignore possibilities that the 'truths' of the democratisation paradigm may be socially constructed or that upholding them as universally applicable does not recognise difference. Our problematization of 'democratisation' derives from a critique that upholds the notion that there is no such thing as a 'democratic reality' outside knowledge practices, social, political, and linguistic constructs. Is there such a thing as 'objective' truth in democratisation if it happens in the first place to be a Western construct?

What can we glean from postcolonial trials and errors that prevented the coming together of a *demos* for democratisation in Arab countries? First, it is imperative to situate authoritarian rule within its specific contexts, and attendant tests and contests over power. To this end, it is vital to recall the way in which these contexts for decades operationalised a mode of politics bereft of democracy as meaning, much less as practice. The period that separates the region from the rise of texts and debates on democratisation in the 1990s (e.g. Salame 1995) made use of innumerable verities (nationalism and national independence, development, modernisation, socialism, pan-Arabism, Third World-ism, etc.). These became imbricated in ideological, intellectual, political, social, and cultural meaning and knowledge-making via inscription in academic channels or within revolutionary dynamics unknown for genuinely democratic content at the time of their historical



formulation. Second, study of authoritarianism (e.g. Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009) may be useful for comparative politics by contributing to the situating of the form and substance of political organisation within their specific spatialities and temporalities. This brings to light the diversity and heterogeneity of our world. However, exclusive attention to authoritarianism with stress on teleology, and when grounded within Eurocentric knowledge-making, risks being linear and cumulative, noted for Orientalist anachronisms and ‘othering’, where the Arab world is concerned. Such narratives are not conversations amongst equals. They are more often than not insufficiently critical in depictions of Western democracies’ systemic and sometimes even cultural superiority, deserving of universality. The Third-Wave genre (Huntington 1991) illustrates the point.

Following from the above, the analytical utility we cull from Calhoun and his co-authors’ ‘degenerations’ framework comes with a caveat. Our interest is in countries whose experiments with *democratisation* have suffered severe blows, variously incapacitating democratic openings from Morocco to Sudan. Scrutinising the *degeneration of democratisation*, then, is a more apt term, here synonymous with North Africa’s *crisis of democratisation* which we have begun to signal elsewhere (e.g. Sadiki 2020b). This article is in large part motivated by a disaffection with existing terminology and the conceptual wrangling therein. Debates and empirical tests of ‘backsliding’ are steeped in the residue of transitology, which has proven its limitations in grasping democratisation that is, we aver, not even, single, uniform, or fixed, but plural, multi-vocal, and non-linear. The (soft) specificity of Arab cases is our point of departure. Similarities and networking with the rest of the world (enacting protest, waging revolutions, holding elections) cannot mask the socio-economic, political, and cultural particularities of postcolonial (Memmi 2006), dependent, Arabo-Islamic countries weighed down by the ravages of authoritarianism since independence from Western *colons*. Until, that is, the popular 2011 – uprisings that ushered in, to varying degrees, democratic breakthroughs. At the same time, we eschew any ‘exceptionalizing’ tendency that seems to implicitly doom the region to unavoidable ‘authoritarian resilience’ (e.g. Heydemann and Leenders 2011) and instability (Cordesman 2018), couched in ‘Arab Winter’ frames. Influential works exploring the democratisation conundrum arising out of the revolutionary milieu have adopted traditional analytical preferences. Comparative institutional change (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015), the outsize influence of militaries (Stacher 2020), the tumble into instability (Lynch 2016), and revamped authoritarianism (Brynen et al. 2012) are some ‘usual suspects’ of scholarship on North African and Arab scholarships since 2011. Taking contextualisation and critical theorisation seriously, underlying our exploration is the (ontological and epistemological) conviction that democratisation in the (sub)region must be studied within its own history, its own socio-economic, political,

and cultural features. The empirical canvass lends wide variation in the trajectories of democratisation's crisis, given the range of political dynamics (civil war in Libya, military coup in Egypt, 'self-coup' in Tunisia, etc.). For us, interdisciplinarity aids in alleviating some of the drawbacks explored in the transitology-inspired scholarship briefly surveyed above. The focus here is on fledgling democratisers emerging out of revolutions, popular uprisings or intense public protests beginning with Tunisia's revolutionary flare-up in December 2010.

Thomas Carothers (2002) famously declared 'the end of the transition' paradigm twenty years ago. Before that, Valerie Bunce (1995) cautioned against uncritical incorporation of Eastern European transitions from communism to the transitology framework that had emanated from the transformations from bureaucratic authoritarianism in Latin America and Southern Europe in the work of gurus like O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986). Taken-for-granted concepts like 'transition' and 'consolidation' were rendered shaky in this (at the time, new) pattern of twin political-economic changes in Eastern Europe, she argued (Bunce 1995, 124–125). The 'reigning paradigm of democratisation' was thrust into doubt, its predictive capacities wobbly (Bunce 1995, 125–126). This did not stop the application of transitology to Eastern Europe, however. Scholars designated the post-Communist region an exemplar of this comparatively-minded (read: universalising) three-stage theory (e.g. Linz and Stepan 1996). Heavily influenced by an economic modernisation model anchored in 'prerequisites' (Lipset 1959), the democratisation paradigm proffers fixed parameters of a field that has come to encompass the entire globe. Yet Huntingtonian 'Third Wave'-type theories and other variants of transitology are grounded in events taking place in Western and Latin American settings. One upshot is intricate debate on the precise shades of dichotomizing variables that delineate democracies from dictatorships (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010) that give little or no texture to such regimes, stuffing them in easily codified boxes. Can it be that all authoritarianisms *en route* to democracy are easily distinguishable as either single party/personalist or military regimes, as Geddes' (1999) approach, the result of an extended meta-analysis of democratisation studies, would suggest? Brownlee's (2007) argument that Arab regimes such as Egypt's are institutionally wired to preserve authoritarianism and ward off democratisation, should give us similar pause.

This is where the contribution of veteran democratisation theorists such as Whitehead (2002), who stresses the contestability of democratisation and emphasises how the experiences thereof plays out differently across contexts, is especially valuable. In thinking about democratisation, the analyst cannot of course skip over political institutions. The separation of powers, the reach of the military, the enshrinement of political and civic freedoms, or the transparency of elections (e.g. Linderbg 2009) – indicators derived from

the transitology literature and benchmarked by organisations such as Freedom House – remain paramount in understanding and assessing any country or region's pursuit of (or spiralling away from) democratic governance. Our point then is twofold: first, an institutional focus (e.g. LeDuc, Niemi, and Norris 2010) is not enough, as expounded upon above by Calhoun and his colleagues. Democratisation and its degeneration necessarily reflect and are reflected in affective, intellectual, and normative yearnings, stances, and orientations. Second, the always imperfect, often circuitous journey to or from any democratic criterion does not follow a replicable blueprint. It never has – and it certainly will not once the specificities of the North African and Arab region, in this instance, are taken into account.

### ***Against Arab 'exceptionalism'***

Despite missing the mark, the clamouring to explain pronounced 'transitions' to (and from) democracies still inundates scholarship on comparative political change (see also LeDuc et al). We contend here that the linear ambit of these near-universalising conceptualizations spills into research on the problems of democratisation. The existing nomenclature of the complications afflicting democracies involve terms like 'backsliding', and 'authoritarian resurgence' discussed above, but also 'autocratisation' (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). These variously commensurate, synonymous concepts all pose a core problem. Namely, the vestiges of Orientalism taint the discussion of transitions and subsequent difficulties. The (sometimes implicit) default is still authoritarianism. Laggard progress and comparative backwardness are the operative terms of dismissive narratives. Just as Arab democratisation is indefinitely stalled or highly unusual (e.g. Keskes and Martin 2020), so are the region's revolutions 'unfinished' (e.g. World Bank Group 2014). Over a decade after the 2011 revolutions, North Africa and the Arab world remain caught in a discomfiting position. Far from consolidated democracies, their democratisation is not explainable through theories of backsliding. At the same time, an easy insistence on authoritarian comebacks does not account for the qualitative shift in citizen imaginaries, ongoing activisms, and institutional change fomented by popular uprisings. Here, we attempt to shift the conversation. A thorough critique parsing the assumptions and contentions implied in the parlance of democratic stumbling can help clear the conceptual brush before we offer alternative suggestions for thinking about contemporary Arab and North African politics.

Further elaboration on the deficiencies of teleological approaches to democratisation, and democratic backsliding, can elucidate our alternative framework. As a skeptic of teleology put it over a century ago, to assume 'single ends' in nature, let alone human behaviour, is a fallacy (Adler 1904).

Instead, with a constructivist flair he adds that '... the very concept of end is social' (Adler 1904, 279). Thus teleology as the 'science of ends' is a mistaken orientation for understanding how human beings live in the world, continues Adler. If teleology is to be salvaged, it can be useful as an ethical principle of 'finality': recognising and encouraging the development of human beings' respectively 'distinctive sel[ves]' who take their place among fellow humans (Adler 1904, 278–279). Applied to democracy and democratisation, this refutation of teleology's analytical dividends suggests that the 'single end' (of elections, constitutions, two consecutive alternations of power, etc.) is merely constructed by experts and policymakers who deem it so. Adler instead conceives of a plurality of ends, each 'in the society of other ends', particularly in the 'intellectual and volitional' domains (1904, 277). That is, objectives or goals involving ideas and human agency. The telos of democratic institution-building, in the North African context, exists alongside other 'ends' such as human dignity, social and restorative justice, and reproduction of identities long 'otherized' by (post)coloniality. Hence, an important departure point as we broach the issue of North Africa's crisis of democratisation is a recognition of the complexities inherent in political regime dynamics and state-society relations. The impetus and shape of change these countries witness seems to defy simple constructions of either democratisation or its reversals. Even where a feature here and there seems to correspond to predictions of Linz's democratic breakdown, or Bermeo's backsliding, all is not what it seems. Kais Saied may have performed a near-classic auto-coup, ramming in a new constitution and arresting political opponents and critics, including the Speaker of Parliament (Foreign Relations Committee 2023). But what of seeming diplomatic French support for his destruction of democratic institutions (French Embassy 2022)? Or in Libya, what of the CIA's parleying with both General Haftar *and* Prime Minister Dbeibah (Reuters 2023)? Domestic, regional, and international circles of power and influence sometimes overlap, complicating neat transposition of ready-made frameworks derived from other settings.

### ***Reverse teleology?***

It follows from the above that, essentially rooted in transitology, conceptualizations of democratic backsliding and its sister concepts view the (linear) route to democracy in a particular way (e.g. liberalisation, transition, consolidation). Democratisation has its own teleology, its paraphernalia furnished by Third Wave-type (Huntington 1991) theorising. The counter-teleology of democracy-watchers, whether the softer 'backsliding' or the harder-edged 'autocratisation', works in the opposite way. Indeed, prefacing their tripartite classification of (more or less) dramatic moves to autocracy, Lührmann and Lindberg unequivocally declare that 'we study the opposite of

democratisation' (2019, 1099–1100). However, if democratisation is conceived, as it is here, as an open-ended, non-linear, contextualised, variously manifesting set of processes (see Whitehead 2002; Sadiki 2009), what exactly would be its 'opposite'? The scholarly undertaking to refine 'democratic breakdowns' is still mired in the paradigms sketched by pioneers of transitology (e.g. Linz and Stepan 1978). As noted above, one problem of transitology is the assumption that findings in the West or particular regions (e.g. Latin America) form a basis for generalizability in the rest. Geddes once perceptively noted, 'different kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy' (1999, 121). Inescapable variation between authoritarian regimes spills into their respectively winding routes to democracy (if that), she suggests. Generalisations emerging from studies of democratic transition have almost all 'been challenged' (Geddes 1999, 119–121). Arab publics and regimes do not 'do' democratisation in precisely the same way outlined by transitologists (Sadiki 2009). Neither do their (reactive, or counterrevolutionary) authoritarians necessarily behave in accordance with generalised 'backsliding' or 'autocratisation' expectations. Flipped to its mirror image, the staid framework of transitology, awkward even by those who apply it to North Africa, requires rethinking. The current consideration of countries that experienced some version of Arab Spring upheaval tends away from the generalisation imperative. Interdisciplinarity, for instance, a venture into sociology (Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022), aids in resisting the recycling of cookie-cutter frameworks. Our adaptation of 'democratic degeneration', which we expound on below, is far from teleological. It boasts more qualitative, nuanced forays into the travails of democratisation, particularly as relates to values and normative concerns.

(Reverse) teleological transitology rooted in minimalist notions of democracy thus falls short of conceiving the routes, processes, motivations, and ambitions through which democratic transition is pursued and activated. We do not subscribe to entreaties looking to resuscitate transitology in the analysis of Arab democratisation (Mohamedou and Sisk 2017) – or its regressions. If 'democracy' as an end coincides with other sister ends, then democratisation cannot be assumed to follow a single path. Neither, then, do its disruptions and setbacks, what we consider here its degeneration, unfold along a scripted formula. Hence the need for localised, historicised, and contextualised parsing of democratisation's blockages in a sub-region whose (cultural, linguistic, historical) commonalities are flecked with (political, socio-economic) specificity. This exploratory intervention ruminates over degeneration of democratisation with the experiences of North African and Arab countries in mind. Each has been marked by particular revolutionary-counterrevolutionary dynamics in a (loosely) common pursuit of freedom and dignity as democratisation. A balance between identifying regional trends and accounting for intra-regional distinctions is key. The processes

by which degeneration takes place features both immaterial and ideational (e.g. norms and values) elements. Institutional (elections, constitutions, parliaments) and material (socio-economic development) markers do not explain enough.

### ***The enduring hirak – revolutionary movement***

In addition to the clumsy fit of transitology-like explorations of backsliding and degeneration, another feature of North African and Arab politics calls for reflection. Among the specificities of this setting, the revolutionary context may be the most prominent but also the most challenging to address. It behooves all students of the region's democratisation to remember that Tunisia's revolution sparked by Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010, travelling thereafter across North Africa and the wider Arab region, has directly shaped the contours of any and all moves towards democracy since. Ben Ali's furtive exit on January 14, 2011 and Mubarak's resignation, somberly announced secondhand by Vice President Omar Suleiman on January 25, were breathtaking moments. In these game-changing developments, dictators were pushed out by countless Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries who occupied public squares to demand their leaders' departures as a first step to freedom and dignity. The revolutionary mantle was taken up by Libya's *thuwwar* (rebels) who – faced with Qadhafi's threats of genocide – quickly armed themselves and were aided by NATO intervention in expelling their own longstanding leader of the Jamahiriyyah. Morocco's protests erupted in that same month of February 2011, eventually instigating not complete regime change but the drafting of a new constitution and carefully controlled party competition, all decreed and overseen by the adaptable monarch King Mohammed VI. Sudan's own revolution that overthrew Omar Al-Bashir in 2019, caught between the jaws of a tenacious military and the outbreak of war in April 2023, is among the second or third round of Arab Spring-style uprisings. Despite clear incongruities among these cases, they all share in the display of popular agency and public resistance against authoritarianism. Contra Bush's 'Freedom Agenda' that envisioned the region's democratisation via foreign tanks, democratic openings and breakthroughs in North Africa have been spelled r-e-v-o-l-u-t-i-o-n. This point cannot be overstated.

Thus, as we demonstrate below, our adaptation of 'degeneration' is not totalising. Touched (if not transformed) by the popular uprisings of 2011 and since, North African countries exhibit margins of existence carved out by non-systemic, or anti-systemic, forces that strike back against the authoritarian state. Diverse actors and collectivities within society, from Tunis to Cairo, have found and asserted their presence in a manner unthinkable prior to 2011. Arab peoplehood expressed through the *hirak*, travelling

popular mobilisation taking both ruly and un-ruly, civic and violent forms (Sadiki 2016), has not left any of these settings intact. The exercise of popular agency, the consciousness of a self-liberating peoplehood, the activated dreams, expectations, and disparate achievements for freedom, dignity, and social justice auguring well for long-deferred postcolonial independence have indelibly stamped the region. Such experiences, imaginaries, and memories were un-foretold by the paragons of transitology, or the observers of authoritarianism. These are gains that should not be discounted. The search for the demos, the quest for the people, arguably persists at least among some segments of these populaces. Certainly, the transnational Arab *hirak* has invited counterrevolutionary pushback. Anti-authoritarian popular mobilisation has additionally provoked regional (e.g. Gulf) or international (e.g. Russian or American) support for counterrevolutionary forces from Egypt to Libya. Yet the combat, the contest over power, interests, and values, is part of the revolutionary-turned-democratisation story. The mobilisational impulse has not been fully quashed. Even in Syria, ridden by a brutal, internationalised war, flooded by militias and pounded by foreign airstrikes, its population pushed out to neighbouring and more distant countries, engaged activists and citizens cobbled together experiments in local democracy imbued with a civic ethos (Saleh 2018).

It is true that in the Arab Spring precincts, institutional advancements, security equilibria, and social justice dividends of sustainable democratisation have been (for now) circumvented. Yet politics will never go back to the old days of Ben Ali or Mubarak. The 'barrier of fear' broken by the Arab Spring protestors signalled a lasting didactic and affective rupture with the authoritarian past. Even militia violence that infiltrates multi-sided political competition in Libya (Badi 2022) is a far cry from the long, singular reign of Qadhafi. Tempered by consideration of empirical evidence, we do not here champion a naively optimistic outlook for democratisation in the region. But neither should the analytic lens be too black or too pessimistic. The urgency of both theory and practice exhorts us towards tentatively formulations of a 'toolkit' that allows for understanding how degeneration of democratisation occurs. We view our contribution as part of the *ethically imbued* project (e.g. Stern 2019) of pursuing the study of democracy. Everywhere in North Africa, activists and ordinary citizens toil for everyday subsistence but also dignity and the freedom to live as they choose. Poverty, unemployment, imprisonment, violence, and displacement before, during, and since the Arab Spring are not abstract experiences. They are the stuff of human struggles for emancipatory ennoblement that are the right and the hope of all human beings.

Looking downwards, spotlighting the people in resistance, revolt, and refusal, is for us not a theoretical gimmick. It evinces an epistemological undertaking that reflects the substantive contests with routinised authoritarianism acted out by demonstrators on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, protestors in

Morocco's *rif* hinterlands, (some transnational) anti-Sisi activists, and youth mobilisers in Sudan. Some scholars readily 'winterized' the Arab Spring (e.g. King 2020), but an ever-transforming *hirak* perseveres in assorted guises. That the region's democratic openings were propelled by popular revolution and uprisings is a central, not an incidental, attribute of democratisation and its challenges. A credible and conscientious delve into democratisation's floundering in North Africa, then, must simultaneously explicate enduring anti-systemic mobilisation in the region. Beyond simply 'what went wrong', one vital question is also 'what is still going (possibly) right'? The language of *degeneration*, we argue, is flexible enough to account for pockets of anti-authoritarian mobilisation, the mistakes and failures of elite decision-makers, the building pressure of structural inequalities, rampant political disaffection among disheartened publics, and the imbrication of Western powers in the global economic-military architecture in which Arab dictatorship – and its reproduction – are entangled. In the sections below, we seek to chart out some guiding questions that can orient scholarly investigation into the pitfalls *and* tenacious potentialities for North African democratisation.

### ***Exploring 'degeneration' in the study of democratisation***

The provisional framework we offer in this article is based on years of tussling between (decolonising, critical) theory and (dramatic, game-changing) practice. Sadiki (2009) has already argued that scrutiny of Arab democratisation must involve reforms, renewals, and pressures at the level of the state (top-down, from above), society (bottom-up, from below), and international (outside-in, from without) forces within particular structural arrangements. What proved to be the decisive incitement for democratisation over the past decade has been, of course, the bottom-up tsunami of revolutionary popular mobilisation, *al-hirak* discussed at length above. Forgoing reductionist, essentialising culturalist explanations as well as seeking to avoid the universalising pitfalls of transitology, we turn our attention to democratic knowledge. This composite accumulation of civic values, skillsets, attitudes, and orientation begotten by the interface between experiences and political imaginaries remains largely untrodden ground upon which to understand Arab democratisation (Sadiki 2015). Its a localised, indigenous lens also accounts for external (e.g. Western) ideational, political, and economic impacts (Sadiki 2015). Our current examination of what we consider degeneration of democratisation (synonymous with the 'crisis of democratisation') arises from a conception of 'critical democratisation', which we elaborate below.

Hence, degeneration incorporates top-down, bottom-up, regional, and international areas of relevance to guide serious inquiry of the phenomenon.



It privileges global-regional-local dynamics of learning and unlearning (Sadiki 2020a), specifically the normativization and de-normativization of civic values, skills, practices, and attitudes that either nudge or hinder democratisation along these three axes. That is, the orientations and behaviour deemed appropriate for democratic aspirations and reforms within a revolutionary context, characterised by lofty public expectations for institutionalisation of freedom and dignity. Degeneration, a term we adapt and build on from Calhoun and his co-authors, avoids the linear, teleological strictures of (reverse) teleology. It further implies the crumbling of democratisation as a process *from within* state and/or society. In the North African case, not *all* problems afflicting experimentation with democracy arose directly out of the 2011 – revolutions. Some are endemic to the conditions of postcoloniality: social injustice, dependency, corruption. Finally, ‘degeneration’ is more amenable to our added emphases on the didactic and pedagogical – democratic knowledge and its lapses – than is the terminology of democratic backsliding or autocratisation. Interrelated predicaments of social justice, revolutionary fatigue, popular disaffection, elite behaviour vis-a-vis institutions, regional interventions especially by the Gulf states, and Western involvement in the politics and economics of the region, can anchor investigations of North Africa’s degeneration of democratisation since 2011.

### **Approaching democratisation critically**

Our current exploration of democratisation’s wavering in the Arab world emanates from a notion of reflexive democratisation. It offers a corrective to three strands of dominant scholarship on democratisation that have been less than convincing when transplanted to the region. The received wisdom on the *culture, prerequisites/methods*, and related *knowledge-production* for and *about* democratisation, or, *missing* so as to foment ‘backsliding’ or ‘autocratisation’, remains frustratingly ill-equipped to tackle the numerous puzzles of Arab politics. Dramatic progress and regressions over the last twelve years have only added to the explanatory and interpretive woes of social science on the region.

Relying more extensively on data (i.e. World Values Survey results) than Huntington’s (1996) widely-critiqued, culturalist doomsday work *The Clash of Civilizations*, Welzel (2021) for example, nevertheless exhibits significant continuities with such a reductivist, essentialising argument. Dividing the world (not so) neatly into ‘Western’, ‘Eastern’, and ‘Global South’ cultural zones, he suggests that what differentiates successful and stable democratic governance is most readily explained by values. His cultural spin on modernisation theory is that Western countries boast populations with ‘emancipative values’ that ‘idealize *universal* human freedoms and combine a *libertarian* emphasis on individual choice with an *egalitarian* emphasis on equality of

opportunities' (Welzel 2021, 994, emphasis in the original). Europe's Enlightenment history, combined with advances in material living conditions (see also Inglehart 2018), journeyed to North America, setting off a chain of 'cognitive mobilization'. Western publics basically came to value freedom in ways that less evolved, non-Western publics, have yet to achieve. While 'emancipative values' are spreading (slowly) across the globe, 'a firmly encultured emphasis on emancipative values still remains a Western singularity', insists Welzel (2021, 1000). Without these values, he goes on, 'people lack the moral stature to resist authoritarian propaganda' (Welzel 2021, 1005). Non-Western publics, as in Russia or China, are beguiled into adopting ideologies that lean tribal and are 'explicitly anti-Western constructions of cultural identity' (Welzel 2021, 1006). Welzel's meant-to-be-reassuring conclusion is that Western cultures form a values-based bulwark against democratic backsliding. How different is this 'cultural theory of autocracy-vs-democracy', as he puts it, from antiquated stereotypes of 'Oriental despotism' roundly rebuffed by the entire canon of postcolonial theory (e.g. Said 1978, 32–33)? To so firmly assert that some parts of the world are simply doomed to acquiescence of authoritarian rule demonstrates exactly the essentialising traps that culturalist theories set for themselves. Excised are, for instance, Arab (or non-Western) resistance struggles against autocrats. Utterly neglected is the socio-cultural trauma of colonialism that sought to snuff out local traditions and identities. Conveniently overlooked is the enmeshment of Arab authoritarianism in the webs of Western economic directives (e.g. IMF and World Bank prescriptions) and military-political impositions (e.g. American wars and bases in the region, US and EU support for Arab dictators despite 'democracy promotion' projects) that reproduce global hierarchies. Appetites for emancipation begin and end in the West, analyses like Welzel's intone. Democracy is an inevitably Western undertaking. All other experiments will remain mere shadows of the origin, the ideal.

Our pointed attention to Welzel's argument should not be read as a substantive entertainment of its theoretical or empirical insights. Rather, we are highlighting certain kinds of culturalist arguments that linger in the field. If such logics cast aside reasonable hope for Arab (or non-Western) democratisation, they also flaunt ready-made explanations for backsliding or what we term here degeneration. Cultural reasoning distorts (or seems to categorically scorn) autochthonous traditions and experiences. Thus, culturalism as a framework for democratisation dovetails with the prerequisites/methods (modernisation, or three-stage transitology) pathways we have critiqued above. It also (often implicitly) upholds (initially Western) knowledge-practices as necessary for societies to transition to democracy. That is, democracy as theory and experience travels from Europe, to Southern Europe and Latin America, to Eastern Europe, in uni-directional (and deflated, according to Welzel) fashion. Here is where our emphasis on the centrality of local

knowledge (Sadiki 2015) is paramount. What is missing in prevailing accounts of democratisation is attention to the didactic, the pedagogical. How do people (masses and elites) learn through their local traditions and experiences, the stocks of civic values, orientations, and practices, conducive to constructing democracy? How do Arab encounters with Western powers (Sajed 2013), their collective memories and social imaginaries scarred by the cultural and physical violence of European colonialism (and American imperialism), shape their unsteady strides toward emancipation?

Some examples are fodder for preliminary thought experiments. O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) and later, Przeworski's (1991) more economic, discussions of 'hardliners', 'soft-liners', and 'moderates', who are more or less amenable to handing over power within bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, for instance, overlook the didactic element. The challenge is not only to label categories of elites. By digging deeper, we can explore how hardliners do not *unlearn* particular authoritarian practices, values, and orientations (singularity of power, exclusionary behaviour, corruption), or how they do not *learn* their democratic analogues (pluralism, power-sharing, etc.). What types of skills and values are the 'moderates' learning and unlearning? Adopting the knowledge framework opens up new lines of inquiry, posing pressing pedagogical questions. It rebuffs the assumption that people (elites or ordinary citizens) are inherently 'hardliners' or 'moderates' incapable of either progressive or regressive adaptation or change. Democratisation does not just magically happen through some undecipherable, serendipitous balance or tension between variously inclined elites. Taking on questions of women's civic and political representation, Cornwall and Goetz (2005), in another example, are skeptical that expanding democratic spaces (formal or informal) are adequate 'political apprenticeships' necessarily nurturing the democratic acumen of female activists. Exploring what we consider democratic unlearning alongside the democratic learning that transpires through such experiences is one way to evaluate the precise values and practices (not) given up (sexism, clientelism, patronage) in parallel with those gained (political engagement, inclusiveness, interest in social justice). The gradations of democratic change as pedagogical encounters can thus slowly appear in focus. Shortcomings and deficiencies, too, can become visible. Wading into knowledge waters helps us interrogate the kinds of processes, never linear, never completely predictable or uniform, through which democratic change – or degeneration – takes place. As social scientists whose positionality lends the privilege of familiarity with both Arab and Western knowledge pools, our task is to begin scouring the vast terrain of theoretical and practical knowledge that might bridge Western scholarship with North African/Arab erudition and know-how.

In a setting that is revolutionary, postcolonial, (somewhat) tribal, and (relatively) religious, where and how do narratives and lived ordeals of

democracy's global 'travels' fall short? We contend that a learning and unlearning frame (Sadiki 2020a) can kick-start this investigation. People, from passionate protestors to party leaders to parliamentarians and presidents, must *learn* to translate the revolutionary aims and slogans into concrete practices, institutionally and extra-institutionally, in ways amenable to democracy. *Unlearning* of values, orientations, and practices that seeped into society and politics from decades of authoritarian rule is a simultaneous challenge. We began to explore these parallel processes in a recent Special Feature of the Annals of the Japanese Association for Middle East Studies published in 2020. Ideological and religious inclinations and dispositions cannot be disregarded as a factor in either democratic learning or unlearning. In Egypt, rocky revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics prodded the Muslim Brotherhood towards political moderation and inclusiveness, sometimes based on ideological (rather than secular-rational) logics, argues Moussa (2020). Internalised practices of exclusion and disengagement from politics hammered into fearful citizens in Assadist Syria may circumscribe the reach of *learned* inclusiveness and moderation among revolutionary activists (Saleh 2020). In Iraq, Kadhem and Khudhair al-Ramahi (2020) propose, protest itself can become a manifestation and site of democratic learning for activists undeterred by international interventions and regional rivalries that foster values and practices (e.g. sectarianised party politics) inimical to democracy.

Hence, the individual-collective agency we associate with learning forever grapples with national, regional, and international patterns of distribution and influence. The margins for democratic learning are to an extent shaped, but not predetermined by, forces and formations difficult to budge. From civilianisation of the military, to the mandate of wealth redistribution, to the pressing need for widespread political engagement by citizens, Arabs must grapple with immense structural constraints (e.g. economic and political dependency) in ongoing, non-linear processes of democratic learning. North African and Arab democracy is not going to arrive via O'Donnell's conclusions, Latin American history, or Eastern European post-communist transitions. The local knowledge dimension is part and parcel of internal (decolonising) knowledge-making. Civic or democratic socialisation (used here interchangeably) cannot be gained merely in the language of others. The *sine que non* of emancipation requires knowledge emancipation, in other words. Decolonisation (Shepard 2008) is still very much in order, whether we aim to dissect trajectories of democratisation or its degeneration. Emancipation will not simply arrive in Egypt or Tunisia because Western donors pour money into NGOs. Certainly, the past several years should have disabused any observer or policymaker of this fantasy. Instead, delving deeply into experiential knowledge is vital. How and why did the emancipatory train of the Arab revolutions veer off track? Universalising, linear formulas will not suffice. (For instance, linking the 'existential security'

of economic well-being to benchmarks of advancing towards 'free choice, environmental protection, gender equality, and the tolerance of gays' as in Inglehart's (2018, see Ch. 1) simplified concoction seemingly straight out of the Western cultural transformation timeline.) Fine-grained, grounded theory-type case study analysis can help us grasp these baffling phenomena. As we elaborate below, the artificially enforced gap between economic and political needs and aspirations looms large in how North African democratisation has tripped up over in recent years. This separation is often backed up by proceduralist theorising and measurement of democracy. Such metrics may not, Koelble and Lipuma (2008) note, carry over well to postcolonial contexts such as India and South Africa. In North Africa, the economics-politics split compounds failures to equalise citizens through civilianisation of power, and to de-fang privatised or factionalised monopolisation of violence.

### ***A research agenda: towards 'critical democratisation'***

The relevance of the Frankfurt School cannot be stressed enough when reconsidering transitology. In particular, this relevance owes a great deal to what critical theorists call the negative knowledge accruing from appreciating the structural and intellectual lineage of transitology, partly a quasi-'factory' (Adorno 1975) for the reproduction of the Euro-American project. When you stand in Cairo, Tunis or Damascus, the lens through which you see the world is coloured by a history of colonialism and Orientalism. Both have roots in the massification of Euro-American culture's material and intellectual products, values and modes of socio-political organisation rooted in Western capitalism and politics, technological innovation and an overall project of modernity and modernism. The obsession with sameness, as posed by the early minds of the Frankfurt school, may be linked to the dissolution of specificity in the face of literally 'waves' of transitology in which the Middle Eastern Other is rendered passive (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]). Mass transitology is here lightly likened to a brand of 'mass culture'. It has indelibly impacted how students of the Arab world write the travel of democracy as idealised and framed by the ex-colonizers into political, economic, social and cultural settings inhabited by the ex-colonised. This form of ideational domination has had a twofold result. First, it has limited the horizon of how to manage good government outside Euro-American intellectual parameters and standards. Second, it has partly contributed to a kind of intellectual inactivity on the part of knowledge makers who seem largely averse to producing intellectual parity with either Latin-American or Euro-American transitology. The Arab region is neither a mass of people, land or culture, nor is it unthinking. If remapping transitology is apropos, then it must be informed by interdisciplinarity, as this article has attempted by adapting of the notion of 'degeneration', but also by multiple non-

Western knowledge practices. For, transitology is the sum of constructs that accrue from the knowledge-making, standards, values and ideologies reflecting Western experiences. The power relations and attendant structures of such massified knowledge must not be under-estimated in a world where the positionality of Euro-American transitologists cannot be always assumed to be objective, much less geared towards 'emancipation' or 'enlightenment' (civilising missions) of the Arab/North African Other. The emancipatory project advanced by the Frankfurt school must be refashioned to speak to overcoming hegemony of all 'isms' that deny intellectual parity. The school's enlightenment critique is worthy. It has the potential to relaunch the study of democratisation along the following two lines:

- (1) Critical engagement and discourse (a la Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), and whatever it entails in terms of equal deliberation and ideational exchange) with Western and Latin American transitology;
- (2) Creative intellectual struggle via the pursuit of a pedagogy of critical democratisation that taps into local knowledge repertoires of the Arab and Middle Eastern regions.

### ***Reflexive democratisation***

Throughout this article, we have suggested that treatment of North Africa's 'degeneration of democratisation' entails reassessments and enhanced understandings of democratisation in the Middle Eastern and Arab setting. The above section suggested analytical tenets from the Frankfurt school useful in setting a new agenda for critically studying North African and Arab democratisation. In this vein, some scholars have worked to re-read the Western canon for radical, unabashedly normative reinterpretations of democracy. Reflexivity within democracy is one such important contribution. Working off the evolution of John Dewey's writings, Honneth and Farrell (1998) put forth an understanding of democracy that is 'reflexive' in its constant pursuit of equality-based cooperation. Ideally, democracy's procedures are substantively related to the makeup and interactions within the political community as such. Each citizen must buy in to the democratic system and the required political participation in public life that can only result from some level of 'fair and just' administration of social life, as Honneth and Farrell explain Dewey's thinking on democracy (1998, 776–777).

Extended further, this argument implies that those mired in deprivation and misery, marginalisation and exclusion, may simply shrug off the imperative for deliberation and collective problem-solving at the crux of democracy. The social conditions of John Dewey's conceptualisation of

democracy with its active 'public' that incorporates equally all citizens, then, stands in contrast to overly presumptive liberal notions of ready-made republican communities, and its abstracted proceduralism that sidestep questions of socio-economic distribution, suggest Honneth and Farrell. Whether or not more just 'distribution' is separate from or subsumed under a wide-ranging conception of 'recognition' is a matter of extensive debate between Axel Honneth fellow critical (and feminist) theorist Nancy Fraser (see Fraser and Honneth 2003). However it relates to other dimensions of social justice, the point here is the emphasis on distribution as an equaliser of a (potential) public in a democracy. All citizens must enjoy the freedom of choice to work in occupations of their choosing, so that the 'consciousness of communal cooperation' indispensable to the functioning of democratic procedures can arise (Honneth and Farrell 1998, 777). This touchstone 'cooperation' reflects an understanding of socio-economic justice as 'an internal component of every genuine idea of democracy' (Honneth and Farrell 1998, 779). Inclusion and participation premised at least in part on socio-economic levelling both manifests and reinforces the ethical component of Dewey's instructional views on democratic governance and citizenship (Honneth and Farrell 1998, 780).

Like Calhoun and his co-authors discussed above, this duo concerns itself with qualitative recalibrations of democracy's thought-practices in Western settings. Our preoccupation, of course, is with countries in the throes of nascent *democratisation*, and its woeful disruptions. The advances and retreats within processes of (more or less) dramatic political change towards freedom and dignity provoked by popular protest and revolution are of interest to us. We do not, moreover, adhere to an excessive edification of 'rational' debate for problem-solving among equal citizens as the basis of a Habermasian public sphere-type participation which Honneth and Farrell recognise in Dewey's work (1998, 778). Revolutions and their aftermaths, indeed bottom-up strivings for democracy, are intensely emotional affairs. They add affective layers to the churning trauma, polarisation, and disagreement that permeates postcolonial Arab and North African societies. Of import here is how this re-reading of Dewey injects both proceduralism (focus on democratic institutions and formal practices) and republicanism ('intersubjective' makeup and of the political community) with a healthy dose of ethical texture salient to the North African revolutionary context. The refusal to delink the socio-economic from the political is apt. Full and equal participation, whether within or without formal democratic institutions, cannot take place when some citizens live without freedom from fear, or freedom from want. Freedom and dignity, so intertwined in the vocalised imaginaries of Arab Spring protestors, are not reducible to constitutional guarantees of (civic, political, social, cultural) rights. Nor are they assured through election laws, no matter how progressive in their multi-partism or gender parity. For

those suffering in the cesspools of Tunisia's southern or interior peripheries, the vote does not much equalise their positioning vis-a-vis the developed coast. Basking in the superior status afforded by military membership, are not Egyptian army officials (and their prerogatives) oxymoronically 'more equal' than their fellow citizens? And so on.

The understanding of critical democratisation espoused here, then, stands on two pillars of democratic learning-unlearning. The first is emancipation, as expressed in revolutionary discourses and practices across the Arab Spring geography. Liberation from the despotism and corruption (*al-istibdad wa-l-fasad*), the deprivation and marginalisation, of postcolonial authoritarian regimes is the penultimate reference point from which to assess and understand North African democratisation, particularly since 2011. (This is not to neglect the interface between 'the politics of bread' and the 'politics of the vote' in decades of prior Arab uprisings and activisms (Sadiki 2000)). We consider institutional and societal moves towards such socio-political emancipation, that is, as coeval with democratisation. Second and relatedly, democratisation entails a localised and contextualised construction of the *demos* as (relatively) full and engaged citizenship made possible by moves towards inclusion and equality, both civic-political and socio-economic. The reflexive democratisation route revolves around the question of *learning* how to equip people with this multi-faceted equality. How can elites and publics learn to stand politically as equal citizens, such that they all belong to the *demos*? Arab authoritarianism has since its postcolonial inception done exactly the opposite: it is a negation of empowerment that is equalisation.

Degeneration of democratisation, then, works in the opposite direction. Identifiable as distance from emancipation, it reproduces the status of *denizens* rather than the full citizens comprising the *demos*. It retains a kind of partiality: bias towards a region, a party, an ideology, a collectivity (e.g. military). In the North African and Arab setting, the overarching problem is that the *demos* has never been – it always has to *become*. Not only are ideals of democracy deferred (in Calhoun's telic fashion), but citizenship itself is also deferred. North Africans and Arabs are caught in more than the disempowering ramifications of capitalism that dismantle the gains of a more progressive and egalitarian age. There is no such idealised starting point in the postcolonial Arab experience. In stressing the centrality of emancipation and the actualisation of the *demos*, we tilt towards the agency, of forces and voices across all sectors, organisations, and memberships within society, that can engineer advances. What are the (affective, intellectual, institutional, organisational) instruments, values, and skillsets for *learning* how to be a citizen and protecting the citizenship of others? What are the tools for *unlearning* how to be a denizen, submissiveness to military rule, violence as governance praxis, singularity of power, or the tutelage of the quintessential 'strong man'? This daunting cluster of research questions about *knowledge* underpins the investigation



of democratisation's degeneration. It avoids resorting to the almost-clichéd 'authoritarian upgrading' in the post-2011 era. (*Who* exactly are upgraded? Is it the army, an ethnicity, a region, or an ideological tendency?) North African and Arab revolutions are the contest and the test, daring to demand dignity and freedom for all. Democratisation's unravelling begins when the *all* is abandoned for narrowed partisan, primordial, clientelist, or ideologized politics. In degeneration, the *demos* is left behind as a project and an ideal.

Degeneration of North African and Arab democratisation is thus critical theory-inflected. Its hallmarks are maneuvers away from emancipatory values: in political discourse, policy-making, development programmes, institutional design, and inter-regional or international diplomacy. Democratisation will not be furthered with a multitude of 'unequal equals' in whose hands are conflated the means of reproducing themselves economically as well as politically. Social and restorative justice are preconditions for equal citizenship through which the *demos* is constructed. Decreasing voter turnout in Tunisia, from 53% to less than 12% of registered voters between 2011 and 2022, attests at least in part to the hollowness of elections when (socio-economic and political) equality slips further away by the year. Repeated election delays in Libya indicate, among other things, that voting in the absence of human security for all is a dubious prospect. In our provisional thinking about degeneration of democratisation we avoid typologising (e.g. Wunsch and Blanchard 2022) or binarising democratic progress and regress. Instead, we aim to move the conversation towards a focus on the people, with a moral (civic-democratic), agentic (learning/unlearning) and critical (emancipatory) edge.

### ***Conclusions: looking ahead***

Our focus in this article has been on the knowledge-practices of studying democratisation and its degeneration. We have not unpacked here the substantive and empirical setbacks that have befallen, in various forms, all North African countries belonging to the Arab Spring geography. The impetus for pondering a new or modified research agenda stems from what we have argued are the limits of scholarly treatments of democratic change and its reversals in the region. Transitology's teleology, turned on its head for purposes of examining 'backsliding' or 'autocratisation', does not seem to fare well. Scholars are confronted with the urgent normative-epistemological challenges of socio-political change at this grim phase in North African and Arab dreams and struggles for democracy. Attention to the people and their emancipation for the equalisation of the *demos* is key, we suggest. So is foregrounding discourses and practices that move outside the purview of formal political institutions. We intend this intervention in part as a contribution to the decolonisation of knowledge on North African democratisation

and politics. At this prolonged 'negative moment', present conflicts roost within the nests of 'unresolved' problems of the past, as Mbembe (2015) memorably put it. Postcolonial authoritarianism, entrenched social inequality, and stolen citizenship have spurred new challenges by and between North African publics. Research on democratisation must similarly question tired theories and unwieldy frameworks.

The pedagogical and didactic values, practices, and skillsets comprising the twin processes of democratic learning and un-learning, are fertile ground for further theoretical development to be 'tested' by rigorous empirical research. Resilience of the structures and relations upholding international capitalism and US militarism does not preclude the democratic learning and unlearning that can and does occur within and between Arab publics. External actors, too, play a role. Mutual learning can in theory take place between North African civil society activists, for instance, and donors from the European Union (see Sadiki and Saleh 2022b). New research projects such as SHAPEDEM-EU (2023) pursue lines of inquiry that emphasise just this 'didactic' element, of added benefit to both studies and (policy-making or civil society) practices of Arab democratisation. A return to Arab authoritarianism as usual is not an option for either publics or the researchers investigating. Emancipation with all its political and socio-economic furnishings may for some be a dream deferred, but it is not vanquished. Military rule, violent conflict, sham elections, executive centralisation, constrained freedoms, poverty and inequality, and disengaged publics are not inevitable or default features of North African politics. The anti-authoritarian *hirak* reinventing itself across time and space, from Tunis to Algiers, confirms that visions of emancipation, even when they diverge, are alive and well. Academic complacency has no place in the dynamism of the present juncture. Can we as scholars display the moral perspicacity, intellectual creativity, research reflexivity, and practical awareness to join this *hirak* against authoritarianism? That is, to argue in favour of a reset of the democratising spirit, thought and practice.

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