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Author

Cusi, Michele

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A mosque in Aleppo
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FIRST, THEY CAME FOR THE CLOCKS: UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH TEMPORAL FRAMEWORKS

MICHELE CUSI

*“When we revolt it’s not for a particular culture.
We revolt simply because, for many reasons,
we can no longer breathe.” -Frantz Fanon*

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CLOCK TOWER

April 18th, 2011. Thousands of mourners filed through the streets of Syria’s ancient city of Homs, in a funeral procession dedicated to those murdered by the Assad regime during a peaceful protest.¹ Only a few months into the Syrian Revolution, this cycle of protests, murders, funerals, leading to more protests, became an all too familiar pattern for the Syrian people. Yet on this day, something new occurred. Through the confetti of rice and roses blessed upon the funeral from the balconies of locals overlooking the procession, a loud call was echoed through the streets: “To the clock, to the clock!”² Syrians of all ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds marched to the New Clock Square chanting “One, One, One, The Syrian People are One!”³ By that evening the largest demonstration

since the inception of the revolution had peacefully formed, with the clock tower looming above the revolutionary masses. With police surrounding them, tens of thousands of Syrians began organizing themselves: distributing supplies, erecting encampments, building barricades and praying as a united, hopeful community.⁴

This newly emancipated space was painfully short lived, as a massacre would promptly ensue; yet for the scope of this piece, the brief liberation of the clock tower symbolizes the particular revolutionary dimension I will investigate: Time. When conceptualizing the violence of an oppressor, much focus is given to the material, corporal and psychological elements of that power; yet I will emphasize the temporal dimension of both oppressive,

¹ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

MICHELE CUSI is a Dean's List and honors recipient majoring in Politics and Sociology at The University of California, Santa Cruz. He would like to thank Professor Thomas Serres for his unwavering academic and intellectual support, as well as Nicholas San Agustin for his commentary, and lastly Susan Landry for her humbling patience.

Michele can be contacted via email: micheleкуси@gmail.com.

and creative power. After a brief overview of the theoretical underpinning of critical temporality studies, and Syria's recent history, this paper will analyze Syria's path from subjugation, revolution, into civil war through a temporal lense. I argue that in contrast to Assad's catastrophic present, the Syrian revolution evoked an alternate, revolutionary temporality. One fueled by a messianic impulse to reclaim the past in order to create a new future.

For the scope of this essay I define temporality as the way in which individuals experience time; how diverse conceptions of time produce competing political and social narratives. This essay's structure will reflect these competing temporalities. After an investigation into the theoretical background of temporality itself, each section will harmonize the works of political theorists with the events unfolding during the Syrian Revolution, and ensuing civil war. In doing so I hope to contribute to the growing literature on temporality, emphasizing the concurrent existence of multiple temporalities within the nascent Syrian Revolution.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: MARX, FOUCAULT, BENJAMIN, ANDERSON

Destroying a coercive, oppressive regime necessitates the appropriation of the present moment from its grasp. Marx reflects this by proclaiming that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."⁵ The past, to Marx, is often utilized as a tool to maintain control over the present.

As history is written by the rulers, they manipulate the past to highlight the values that maintain their legitimacy, and propel their ideologies. In doing so, we are left with a present moment that is bounded and stifled. Opportunities and memories that may ignite change and creativity are relegated to the shadows of the past. Therefore, a successful revolution must untangle the present from the tentacles of the manufactured past. In doing so, the present is transformed from a state apparatus of control, into a timeless moment ripe for revolution.

Foucault similarly understood how power over time was central to any disciplining regime.⁶ Control over a subject's time allows for incessant surveillance and discipline. Rhythms are imposed, time is monetized, evaluated, and constantly manipulated; producing a self-disciplined worker operating according to the progress oriented needs of the state.⁷ Time is thus a crucial site of contestation between revolutionaries and regimes, who controls time has the power to alter people's subjective experience with life and their place within history.

In his thesis "On the Concept of History" Walter Benjamin highlights how "exploding of the continuum of history" is central to any successful revolution.⁸ Bourgeois regimes, Benjamin argues, conceptualize time as an inherently quantitative element; as time passes it accumulates upon the time before it. Calendars, clocks, and holidays embody this linear understanding of time, placing the future, present, and past as passively advancing or receding "through a

⁵ Karl Marx, "The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in vol.1 of Selected works in three volumes Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1969), 1.

⁶ Michel Foucault, Michel Foucault: Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974 (London: Picador, 2006), 47.

⁷ Ibid, 47.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History, Translated by Dennis Redmond (2011), XV.

homogenous empty time.”⁹ Within this temporal framework capitalist ideals of “progress” and accumulation are enshrined as self-evident endeavours. Benjamin critiqued this conception of progress, and the corresponding empty homogenous temporality that supported it. To revolt, he claimed, is to replace this linear conception of time with a messianic power, one that had the ability to activate the past and reclaim the here-now or *Jetztzeit*.¹⁰

Benedict Anderson expanded this idea, claiming that the very notion of nationhood is dependent on a shared history conceived across “homogenous empty time.”¹¹ A nation’s economic, social, and political development is inextricably tied to this quantitative and cumulative temporality. Thus, any attempt to subvert the existing socio-political order, must be grounded in an alternative temporal logic.

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: KINGDOM OF SILENCE

Syria has long been called the “Kingdom of Silence;” its citizens politically muzzled stifled due to the terror imposed upon its inhabitants through decades of ruthless oppression.¹² More than thirty years prior to the 2011 revolution, Bashar al Assad’s father, Hafez, traumatized the nation by unleashing an apocalypse upon the city of Hama.¹³ After two years of opposition to his Ba’athist party by Islamic groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, including an assassination attempt on his life, Hafez understood he was losing grip over his country.¹⁴ When an uprising in Hama began

to solidify, Hafez decided to lay siege on the city. Within a few weeks over 20,000 citizens had been murdered through a campaign of organized, military bombardments that devastated the city, leaving only dust and fragmented memories of a revolutionary spark.¹⁵ This massacre was not simply a retributory act, it functioned as a promise to other Syrians to expect similar brutality in the face of opposition. By imposing an apocalypse upon the revolutionary forces inside of Hama, the regime regained control of the present. That is, by forcing the inhabitants and revolutionaries to live within an apocalyptic present, Hafez effectively destroyed the ability of the uprising to instill courage and sacrifice into its adherents. One cannot philosophize about the possibilities the future holds, when faced with a calamity of this magnitude. The only thing left to do is survive. Investigating the Hama Massacre serves dual purposes for this temporal investigation. It contextualizes the psychological conditions of Syrians prior to the 2011 uprising, and functions as a framework for understanding the temporal impacts of Bashar’s violent repression of the 2011 revolution.

After Hafez’s death in 2000, a collective gasp gripped the nation, citizens prepared for a violent conflict over the perceived vacuum of power.¹⁶ Yet what followed can only be described in hindsight as a painfully hopeful, short lived period, remembered as the Damascus Spring. Within a few months of Bashar al Assad’s reign ninety nine brave and influential individuals wrote a declaration insisting on the introduction

⁹ Ibid, XIII.

¹⁰ Ibid, XIV.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 24.

¹² Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, viii.

¹³ Charles Tripp, *The power and the people: Paths of resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 54.

¹⁴ David Kenner, “Massacre City,” *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2011, foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/05/massacre-city-2/.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 15.

of a pluralist political system and the rule of law.¹⁷ This was echoed by a more formalized declaration brought forth by one thousand academics and intellectuals, restating the need for a pluralist democracy as well as the dissolution of the state of emergency that had been set in place since the 1960s.¹⁸ This courageous attempt to initiate peaceful political transformation without demanding direct regime change was met with cautious optimism. Assad's response was promising. He released political prisoners, permitted civil society organizations to form, and allowed for the creation of diverse political parties; he went as far as allowing an independent satirical newspaper to circulate.¹⁹ These reforms however, were fleeting.²⁰ By 2002 Assad had launched a smear campaign to discredit the energetic flourishing of ideas as examples of foreign interference.²¹ Leaders of the new political parties were jailed, and all reforms were retracted in the name of political and economic stability.²² It became all too clear to the Syrian people that Bashar, like his father, would rely on the regime's security apparatus as the primary means of engaging with the dissenting population.²³ While the Damascus Spring faded without producing lasting material change, it planted the creative seeds that would blossom into a revolution a decade later.

IV. TEMPORALITY I: AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING & PERPETUAL CATASTROPHE

Assad's Syria was driven by a narrative of progress supported through a discourse of development and modernization which is inherently linked to the conception of time as a purely quantitative process.²⁴ Therefore the revolutionary momentum threatening his sovereignty must be analyzed as an attempt to destroy his "progressive" timeline, in favor of a new qualitative temporality freed from the violence of the past.

Two concepts are central to understanding the timeline that Syria operated within before the revolution broke out. The first is Steven Heydemann's concept of authoritarian upgrading, followed by Ophir's analysis of catastrophization. At its core, authoritarian upgrading outlines the process by which oppressive regimes "upgrade" their governmentality in response to the changing political, economic, and social factors.²⁵ Faced with globalized markets, and liberal democracy's hegemonic control over the "appropriate" form of government, many regimes restructured their foreign relations in order to remain internationally legitimate.²⁶ Yet, they did so without sacrificing the surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms that defined their grip on power. Assad's regime reflected this desire by implementing neoliberal

¹⁷ "The Damascus Spring," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 1, 2012, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Z. Hu, "Why Bashar al-Assad is still in power," Al Jazeera, October 4, 2016.

²⁰ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 20.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "The Damascus Spring," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 1, 2012.

²³ W.R Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-precivil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>.

²⁴ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 16.

²⁵ Steven Heydemann, "Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world," *Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution* (2007), 1.

²⁶ Ibid, 3.

reforms early in his reign. He privatized state owned farmland, food production, finance industries, and welcomed foreign investment into the economy.²⁷ Yet, Assad's upgraded economic reforms lacked a corresponding upgraded political relationship with his subjects.²⁸ This led to the immediate expulsion of peasants from their homes, and raised prices for everyday staples by reducing subsidies for food and oil.²⁹ The situation further deteriorated when a disastrous drought in 2006 forced almost a million people from their lands.³⁰ Continued neoliberal reforms concentrated the wealth of the famished country in the hands of the sectarian elites, while discarding more than a third of the population into poverty.³¹ Lack of affordable housing relegated millions to live in peripheries plagued with water and food shortages, while foreign capital transformed rich neighborhoods into bourgeois playgrounds plastered with hotels, malls, and auto dealerships.³² By 2011 youth unemployment stood at a daunting 48 percent, with higher numbers for females, and even higher so for rural Syrians.³³ Inherent in authoritarian upgrading and neoliberal restructuring is a particular conception of time that emphasises cumulative "progress." The past is depicted as backward, while the present is disciplined to develop a future which reflects the regime's bourgeois desires.

The secondary influence on Syria's pre-revolution temporality was the catastrophization of the present. This

concept has been studied at length by Adi Ophir. He explains how catastrophization can be deployed as a governmentality that leverages the prevention of a catastrophe as a means to control the populace. This strategy suspends the threat of a catastrophe over civilians, causing them to live in a state of perpetual fear (examples range from post 9-11 U.S., to post arab spring Algeria).³⁴ In the Syrian case, the memory of the Hama Massacre loomed over Syrians. The mere thought that the brutality of the Hama massacre could be repeated was weaponized to stifle any political challenge. Catastrophization carries with it an inherent temporal framework. The past is seen through the state's very narrow filter, while the future is guaranteed only by strict adherence to the state's agenda of development and progress, any deviation risks unleashing the suspended catastrophe. These features outline Syria's temporality in the decades before the revolution. Neoliberal rationality, brought on by Assad's "upgraded" regime, and suspended catastrophe paired with violent political suppression produced a quantitative temporality whose vision of the future is framed within ideals of progress and development.

V. TEMPORALITY II: MESSIANIC POWER

In the final days of 2010, a Tunisian man with nothing left to lose set himself afire to protest the routine, violent humiliation of his

²⁷ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 31.

²⁸ Z. Hu, "Why Bashar al-Assad is still in power," *Al Jazeera*, October 4, 2016.

²⁹ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 31.

³⁰ W.R Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2013.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁴ Adi Ophir, *The Politics of Catastrophization: Emergency and Exception*. D. Fassin, M. Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 62.

fellow citizens by the hands of the Tunisian police.³⁵ There was nothing particularly unique about the actions of the police, as violent police repression had long been a characteristic of many Arab regimes.³⁶ Yet, on that day Mohamed Bouazizi lit a humble flame and ignited both himself and the Arab Spring. Bouazizi rejected his situation. His sacrificial act was the only means he had left to oppose his catastrophic present; in doing so he regained control, if briefly, of his timeline. This revolutionary act shifted something in the regional psyche. Arabs of diverse backgrounds felt united by the possibility to impose their will on the present moment and tear their timeline from the grips of the state. When Assad's security forces tortured a group of teenage boys for graffitiing anti-regime slogans on a wall in the city of Daraa, the Syrian people had found their martyrs, and the revolution began.³⁷

Within this first year of the revolution two competing temporalities were suspended in time. The initial, messianic impulse, which sought to avenge ancestral battles by creating a new future; and the reactionary apocalyptic present brought on by the brutality of the Assad regime's bombardment. The messianic power that Benjamin prescribed relies on the complete repudiation of the empty homogenous present.³⁸ A revolutionary force can only attain its envisioned future through the destruction of the present. This moment of

rupture can be understood as a zero-hour.³⁹ The empty homogenous temporality that exploited and conformed humanity, is replaced with here-and-now or *Jetztzeit*.⁴⁰ This *Jetztzeit* temporality is intimately tied to the past. The unanswered cries of past generations fuel the messianic spirit, which seeks redemption through continuing the "fight for the oppressed past."⁴¹

This redemptive, messianic temporality was directly embodied by Syrian revolutionaries. Like Marx, Benjamin and Foucault they understood the significance of temporal renewal in any successful revolution. To fundamentally break from Assad's regime a revolutionary temporality must be fostered. Syrian's nascent revolution found art to be among the most powerful ways to contest Assad's regime. Between graffiti, poems and films, Syrians imagined a new temporality through creative artifacts.⁴² The art collective ABOUNADDARA understood that within the present exists multiple temporalities, each offering new opportunities of meaning and corresponding political action. They describe their videos as "cinematic bullets" that juxtapose the past and present within one piece of art. Sounds from the revolutionary present superimposed upon images from the past. Charif Kiwan, one of two founders, explains how "the idea of a dialectical image, as expressed by Walter Benjamin, [is] an image that makes possible an encounter between past and present

³⁵ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 35.

³⁶ Steven Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 62.

³⁷ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 38.

³⁸ Anson Rabinbach, "Between enlightenment and apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and modern German Jewish messianism," *New German Critique* 34, (1985): 81.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, Translated by Dennis Redmond (2011), XIV.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, XVII.

⁴¹ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "ABOUNADDARA's Take on Images in the Syrian Revolution: A Conversation between Charif Kiwan and Akram Zaatari (Part One)," *Jadaliyya*. July 10, 2017..

⁴² *Ibid*.

while opening new perspectives."⁴³ This direct influence from Benjamin's messianic power emphasizes how Syrians' envisioned a renewed experience with the past in order to build a new temporality, and thus a new society.

The Syrian Revolution was marked by a non-violent cooperation between ethnic, religious, and political lines in the face of continued state violence.⁴⁴ The brief liberation of the New Clock Square in Homs symbolizes the impact that a revolution has on temporality. It was not merely a physical space that was freed, but the very quantitative time that the regime was predicated upon was replaced by a qualitative moment. Singing, praying, cheering, all these festive actions serve to undermine the timeframe Assad's regime operated within. Grassroots organization began blossoming across the country, combining insights from across the political spectrum. Beyond organizing protests, barricades, health services and documenting the violence, these groups' cross-sectarian solidarity proved to be the greatest threat to Assad.⁴⁵ His techniques of fueling ethnic and religious division were challenged by a collectively ruled, decentralized movement.⁴⁶

As momentum spread across the country, Assad continually responded through violence, only invigorating the revolution's will. Why then, did Assad foment the revolution? His general popularity at the onset of the revolution may have allowed him to mitigate the uprisings through a series of reforms. Yet, in light of the Arab Spring sweeping the region, and

the fate of his fellow tyrants in Egypt and Tunisia, Assad decided to take his father's route of action: release an apocalyptic present.⁴⁷

VI. TEMPORALITY III: APOCALYPSE HERE AND NOW

The qualitative pace of the revolution subverted the quantitative pace of pre-revolutionary Syria. Assad, therefore, contested the temporal shift by imposing a catastrophic present upon the population. Much like the Hama Massacre of 1982, Bashar hoped that overwhelming his citizens in the absurdity of mass violence the democratic momentum would be halted; he was right.⁴⁸ In his study on counterinsurgency, David Galula emphasizes the ways in which the commanding party can depoliticize the rebel's motivations. Assad did so by transforming a revolutionary war into a civil war. Galula writes "As the war lasts, the war itself becomes the central issue and the ideological advantage of the insurgents decrease considerably."⁴⁹ His use of violence cannot be understood as a foolish last resort, but an organized strategy to push the revolutionary movement to militarize, and thus delegitimize itself. Along with sustained violence, Assad released many violent Islamist prisoners, organized false flag attacks, and made a concerted effort to deploy his most ruthless soldiers against the non-violent protesters.⁵⁰ This ruptured cross-sectarian coalitions and transformed the revolutionary movement from a peaceful affair into a violent, armed insurgency,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁷ Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 62.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 59. See also: W.R Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2013.

⁴⁹ David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Vol. 478), (Rand Corporation, 2002): 246.

⁵⁰ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 45-48.

legitimizing his regime's brutality.⁵¹

Ophir's political examination of catastrophes reveals how a nation's temporality can be distorted through a catastrophic event. A catastrophe, he explains, "transforms both time and space... time is marked by a clear and painful differentiation of a terrible present from a relatively peaceful past."⁵² By transforming the revolution into a Civil War, Assad was able to suspend the movement's temporality. The violence inflicted upon the Syrian population was beyond reasonable comprehension. Despite the miserable past they lived within prior to the revolution, air strikes, chemical attacks, and continued bombardment ruptured the revolutionary momentum of the uprising. This combined with the militarization of the revolution left many citizens praying for the stability of the past, evaporating any organized attempt to imagine a liberated future.

VII. TEMPORALITY IV: RETURN TO CATASTROPHE

Faced with Assad's apocalyptic present the revolution's aspirations of democracy faded.⁵³ The country backslid into its disciplinary, homogenous empty time, and much like the pre-revolutionary regime, the threat of continued catastrophe disciplined the populace. Assad was able to reinvigorate his progress oriented temporality by promising to return the country to normalcy. This was an attempt to return the nation to the temporal rhythm before the revolution; that is, a progress oriented, quantitative

temporality entrenched in security and development narratives. In doing so, his regime leveraged the pandemonium unleashed on Syria as a catalyst to emerge once again as another upgraded version of itself.⁵⁴ Assad maintained that his regime was an agent of economic stability, blaming a singular economist, Abdullah Dardari, for the country's poverty.⁵⁵ The "upgraded" regime took control of the present, reproducing the catastrophic continuum inherent in his regime's governmentality. Through the process of "upgrading" Assad is able to promise reforms, and cast challenges to his regime as violent terrorists hell bent on violence.⁵⁶ With the war dragging on and his superficial willingness to end it; Assad was able to depict himself as the sole actor capable of saving Syria, obscuring his direct role in fomenting violence.

VIII. CONCLUSION: "ORIGIN IS THE GOAL" -KARL KRAUS

Interpreting the Syrian Revolution through a temporal lense illuminates how time can be both a weapon for domination, as well as a tool for liberation. While the Syrian uprising was thwarted the temporal rupture catalyzed by the revolution fuels the next messianic impulse. When citizens collectively break the temporal continuum of "progress" they transcend from mere objects, to subjects of history. While the Syrian Civil War may have destroyed the revolutionary zeitgeist of 2011, Syrians' memories are alive with the possibility of a liberated future. Rather than a dead

⁵¹ Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, 24, no. 4 (2017): 62.

⁵² Ophir, *The Politics of Catastrophization: Emergency and Exception*. D. Fassin, M. Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, 61.

⁵³ Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, 24, no. 4 (2017): 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 62.

⁵⁶ Z. Hu, "Why Bashar al-Assad is still in power," *Al Jazeera*, October 4, 2016.

history, Messianic temporality allows for the past to be an active participant of the future. Whether it be the lost souls of the Hama Massacre, or the more recent victims of Assad's regime, these atrocities fuel the generational battles against oppression and humiliation. In contrast to the logic of cumulative temporalities, the future is never inherent. This ambiguity is the source of hope, for one day the liberated present will create a future that redeems the past.