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Introduction: Interpreting the Global Economy through Local Anger

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ABSTRACT: During the 1980s and 1990s, violent events occurred in the streets of many African and Middle Eastern countries. Each event had its own logic and saw the intervention of actors with differing profiles. What they had in common was that they all took place in the context of the implementation of a neoliberal political economy. The anger these policies aroused was first expressed by people who were not necessarily rebelling against the adjustments themselves, or against the underlying ideologies or the institutions that imposed them, but rather against their practical manifestations in everyday life. This special issue invites reflections on these revolts and what they teach us about the neoliberal turn in Africa and the Middle East.

The echoes between the present and the recent past are as important for the genesis of this work as they are for those that read it. They must not prevent us from investigating the specifics of these uprisings, with a particular emphasis on the intersection between a global political economy and local challenges, while understanding them through their particular circumstances. This issue aims to stimulate a more general reflection on popular feelings and social responses in the face of neoliberalism.

On 18 January 1977, multiple fires broke out in Cairo. Egypt was beset by protests, a day after the Prime Minister had announced the end of government

subsidies for consumer goods in order to obtain aid from international financial institutions. On 29 December 1983, protests began at the weekly Douz market in southern Tunisia. The government had ended offsets for basic products resulting in riots against the price increase, which soon spread to the rest of the country. After eight days of conflict between rioters and the military, the official toll was eighty-four dead and more than 900 injured. On 10 March 1994, a few days after the devaluation of the CFA franc and the country's engagement in a round of negotiations with international financial institutions, students in Niamey, Niger, vented their anger at the deterioration in their living conditions. The Nigerien police entered the university campus with brute force. A student was struck in the face by a teargas canister and died the following day.

While each of these violent events had its own logic and resulted in the intervention of different types of actors, what they had in common was that they all took place in the context of the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, generally referred to as structural adjustment reforms. The establishment of this new "financial orthodoxy" as a planning and measurement tool for public policies emerged gradually in a succession of shifts beginning in the early 1970s, most obviously on the initiative of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the conditions that were attached to their loans. This new political economy coincided with the end of the post-war economic boom and the beginning of an increasingly significant market integration that was characterized in particular by the entry into the global system of newly industrialized countries following the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1973. While the ideas behind neoliberal globalization date back to the Mont Pellerin Society and Friedrich Hayek's teachings in the 1940s, the economic rules came to be defined and implemented first in Latin America in the 1970s. In Africa and Asia, too, one of the principal manifestations of this development can be seen in the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which sought to rebalance public accounts by reducing government expenditure, to stimulate business by modifying institutional constraints, and to even out trade balances by lifting protectionist barriers.

These programmes were designed in line with technical and technocratic approaches that the IMF and the World Bank had been fine-tuning since their formation.¹ They were intended to address accumulating national debts in developing countries. Lured into petrodollar-backed spending sprees by the sudden availability of credit from private banks and caught out by rising inflation globally, African and Asian states were at the mercy of the Bretton Woods institutions' open economy dictates. This adjustment policy has gone through several phases, from the most brutal plans imposed by international financial institutions in the early 1980s, to the "adjustments with a human

1. Henry Hazlitt, *From Bretton Woods to World Inflation* (New York, 1984).

face” recommended by other international agencies from 1987 onwards,² and the World Bank’s new focus on poverty in the 1990s.³ Despite these strategic reorientations and conceptual innovations, SAPs’ main lines – reducing state involvement in social services, liberalizing trade and prices, giving priority to fiscal policy discipline – have remained the key pillars of “good governance” as promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions to date.

Criticism of these programmes spread broadly around the world and is well known. It gained strength, and, under the pressure of militant movements, the IMF’s and SAPs’ responsibility for rising poverty began to be recognized. SAPs were also the trigger for public debate about public services in newly independent states in which education, health, and public transport became neglected as soon as lucrative private markets developed. But anger was first expressed by people who were not necessarily rebelling against structural adjustments, or the ideologies underlying them or the institutions that imposed them, but rather against their practical consequences in everyday life. This issue invites reflections on the eruption of widespread revolts since the 1970s and what they teach us about the neoliberal turn in Africa and the Middle East – and more broadly, the world – as it was experienced by populations.

TOWARDS A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE ADJUSTMENTS

Structural adjustments have been the subject of extensive literature, but to a large extent that literature has remained focused on the logic (and documentation) of international financial institutions, national governments, and private enterprises, even when the point was to deconstruct the logic or subject it to critical interpretation. Some studies have set out to expose the ideological foundations of policies couched in purely technical external terms.⁴ Others have focused on analysing the practices to which the adjustments gave rise, in particular the interactions between the international financial institutions and the national governments of the “adjusted states”. It was often a question of identifying the policy that lay at the heart of the technocratic implementations and showing how they were the sites where relations of power, negotiation, or manipulation were developed.⁵ Most studies analysed the effects of the adjustments on the living conditions of populations that were supposed

2. Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Richard Jolly, and Frances Stuart (eds), *Adjustment with a Human Face: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth* (London, 1987), 2 vols.

3. World Bank, *World Development Report 1990: Poverty* (New York, 1990).

4. See, for example, Béatrice Hibou, *Économie politique du discours de la Banque mondiale en Afrique sub-saharienne. Du catéchisme économique au fait (et méfait) missionnaire*, Études du CERI, no. 39, 1998, and the literature on the “Washington Consensus”.

5. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Boris Samuel, *La production macroéconomique du réel. Formalités et pouvoir au Burkina Faso, en Mauritanie et en Guadeloupe*, (Ph.D., IEP Paris, 2013).

to be the beneficiaries in sectors such as health and education.⁶ Often, the adjustments were subjected to an immanent critique by relying on some of the criteria initially invoked by the international financial institutions to justify their implementation and then showing how they did not work. Naturally, part of this critical literature was written by former promoters of the adjustments who later regretted them – the most celebrated among them being the Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz.⁷ The paradigm shift only occurred once these critics became detached from the issue of structural reforms and macro-economic equilibria and turned towards the “struggle against poverty” in the early 2000s.⁸

This propensity to look at the adjustments through a prism of “logic” or through the lens of those who had initiated them more broadly is prevalent in the literature on neoliberalism. Some of this literature has sought to explain the genesis of neoliberalism through the trajectory of intellectual communities, which played a major role in the development of a liberal counter-reform project starting in the 1930s,⁹ or that of new dominant social classes, who played a decisive role in the implementation of neo-liberalism from the 1970s.¹⁰ In the face of these intellectual histories, others saw neoliberalism as a form of rationality that could be attributed to both intentional and (to a large extent) inadvertent practices. Following Michel Foucault’s analysis of modern forms of interactions between institutions and subjectivity – through what he termed “governmentality” – everyone becomes their own entrepreneur.¹¹ Some studies abandoned the notion of “ideological project” or “conscious world” and focused on the daily practices of individuals who, without necessarily intending to, and for different reasons, participated in neoliberal governmentality. This new governmentality was informed by a collusion of

6. Michael Barratt Brown, *Africa’s Choices: After Thirty Years of the World Bank* (London, 1995); Kevin Danaher, *50 Years Is Enough: The Case Against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund* (Boston, MA, 1994); Marie-France L’Héritau, *Le Fonds monétaire international et les pays du tiers monde*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1990).

7. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York, 2002).

8. See in particular the discussion papers published in 1998 by the Partnerships Group for the World Bank, available online at: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/789141468153858137/text/516050WPoDevoio1oBox342046Bo1PUBLIC1.txt>; last accessed 12 January 2021; and the document that is sometimes considered to be the most important for this reorientation on the part of the World Bank, *World Development Report 2000–2001: Attacking Poverty* (Paris, 2001).

9. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neo-liberal Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Quinn Slobodian, *The Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neo-liberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

10. Grégoire Chamayou, *La société ingouvernable. Une généalogie du libéralisme autoritaire* (Paris, 2018).

11. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale* (Paris, 2010); Wendy Brown, *Les Habits neufs de la politique mondiale. Néolibéralisme et néo-conservatisme* (Paris, 2007); *Idem*, *Undoing the Demos: Neo-liberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York, 2015).

heterogeneous interests rather than a nefarious top-down political programme.¹² Elites in Africa and the Middle East endorsed reforms in order to assert control over state apparatuses that, in turn, fuelled struggles within national political fields.¹³ Most scholarly work, however, remained focused on state administrations and international organizations and ignored the everyday lives and resentments of the population. We believe the shared condition of individuals and the new relations between ideologies and subjectivities must be taken into account in our understanding of the impact of SAPs on people's lives. Hence we use the term "adjusted people", by which we mean there is a range of operations that aim to transform their lives, and that these operations derive from the idea of adjustments to neoliberal policies.

By focusing on the revolts against the SAPs, as well as the absence of revolt, and more generally on the multiple social responses to structural adjustments, such as anger, adaptation, or indifference, we suggest that the perspective should be reversed. The neoliberalization of the world must be understood not only as dispositive of power – whether or not it is considered to be the result of an intentional action – but also through the prism of its popular perception. We want to investigate the ways in which the upheavals brought about by this new liberalization were actually experienced by the people of Africa and the Middle East in their daily and material lives and their shared concepts of fairness and unfairness. Sometimes, these experiences led to the revolts we intend to study here. In addition to moving into the field of (non-)mobilization, this approach also means taking seriously popular representations of economic issues, starting from the notion that populations can be aware of and creative regarding what is actually happening.¹⁴

This perspective goes hand in hand with an approach that traces social adjustment processes in places other than those where they are most clearly revealed. In addition to the proximity of the events themselves, which makes it difficult to access some sources, this explains why the articles often utilize archival material that is not commonly used in social movement studies but that speaks no less of the real, day-to-day situation in a neoliberal context, including the urban zoning plans explored by Leyla Dakhli in Tunisia, the newspaper cartoons in Togo studied by Robin Frisch, and the ethnography of naming everyday objects in Niger, as studied by Vincent Bonnacase. In addition, almost all the contributions in this issue rely on oral history and face the

12. Béatrice Hibou, *La bureaucratisation du monde à l'ère néolibérale* (Paris, 2012).

13. Graham Harrison, *Neo-liberal Africa: The Impact of Global Social Engineering* (London, 2010); Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State* (Bloomington, IN, 1999).

14. Jane Guyer, Kabiru Salami, and Olusanya Akinlade, "Kò s'ówó? Il n'y a pas d'argent!", *Politique africaine*, 124 (2011), p. 48. On this perspective of economic anthropology, see also Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, IL, 2004) and Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

question of the heteroclitic memories of the adjustment period – the “fragments of memories” studied by Nayera Soliman. Collectively, we are dealing with memories that are partial in both senses of the word. As they collide, their relationships are rearranged. Sometimes, traumatic recollections reveal that this moment of revolt was a significant temporal point of reference in shared memories, one that can be compared to – or is even a mirror image of – the earlier time of independence. It is essential not to sustain only the most militant forms of these memories, as Mélanie Henry reminds us, so as not to extrapolate a more extensive ideological opposition to the adjustments or to reduce anger to its most explicitly political form, as it might be expressed in the context of protest organizations or collective mobilizations.¹⁵

Our approach is not unique, but it has mainly been used in other parts of the world that have been subjected to adjustments. In Latin America, for example, the convergence between the installation of authoritarian powers and the implementation of neoliberal policies was sufficiently striking for the historiography to study the links between economic liberalism and political authoritarianism.¹⁶ In these cases, the authorities treated these revolts merely as obstacles along the way, and their wide-scale suppression has often concealed what they introduced and the counter-models that might have been proposed. Pinochet’s Chile, which proved to be fertile ground for the implementation of neoliberal policies following the coup d’état of 11 September 1973, was therefore taken into particular consideration, as was Peru, which saw the development of the first great social uprisings against neoliberal policies in the mid-1970s, followed by bloody repression.¹⁷ Other countries, including Argentina, also inspired important studies on social uprisings outside the most expected political spaces.¹⁸ In his ethnography of riots, Javier Auyero invited us to study the “grey zones”, where nearly invisible relations are

15. On the importance of considering anger outside the space of mobilizations, see Vincent Bonnescase, *Les prix de la colère. Une histoire de la vie chère au Burkina Faso* (Paris, 2019).

16. There is a significant body of work on the influence of the Chicago School and neoliberal experimentation on the subcontinent: Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, *The Internationalization of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States* (Chicago, IL, 2002); Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas and Sarah L. Babb, “The Rebirth of the Liberal Creed: Paths to Neo-liberalism in Four Countries”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 108 (2002), pp. 533–579; Stéphane Boisard and Mariana Heredia, “Laboratoires de la mondialisation économique. Regards croisés sur les dictatures argentine et chilienne des années 1970”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 105 (2010), pp. 109–125.

17. Manuel Gárate Chateau, *La revolución capitalista de Chile (1973–2003)* (Santiago de Chile, 2012); Eugenio Tironi Barrios, *Autoritarismo, modernización y marginalidad. El caso de Chile 1973–1989* (Santiago, 1990).

18. Jane S. Jaquette and Abraham F. Lowenthal, “The Peruvian Experiment in Retrospect”, *World Politics*, 39:2 (1987), pp. 280–296.

born among those who mobilize, or between them and the state.¹⁹ Alongside the scientific literature, there is no shortage of images of Latin American uprisings in the neoliberal era, whether they be the occupations organized by the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement in 1985, the occupation of San Cristobal de las Casas by the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), or Zapatistas as they are more commonly known, on 1 January 1994, or the looting in Argentinian towns in December 2001 following the collapse of numerous banks.

In Africa and the Middle East, repeated social movements, the Arab uprisings, and the recent mobilizations of 2018–2019 in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq have raised the issues of access to public services and high living costs since 2008. These developments have caught social scientists off guard.²⁰ Popular discontent with neo-liberalism has appeared less Marxist in Africa and the Middle East than in other parts of the world. Especially in Latin America, numerous uprisings confronted “capitalism”, “imperialism”, and “international institutions” after the implementation of the first SAPs. The strength of leftist parties, trade unions, and peasants’ movements – as well as the proximity of the United States – played a role in this orientation. By comparison, social anger appeared to be less ideologically grounded in Africa and the Middle East and therefore less oriented against neoliberalization itself. In this respect, Latin America must certainly be regarded as the exception, and attending to the dynamics of popular anger in Africa and the Middle East may actually hold more clues to the nature of popular discontent in most of the world.

The principal work examining this question of anti-adjustment uprisings is John Walton and David Seddon’s edited volume *Free Markets and Food Riots*. Published in 1994, it laid the foundations for a transnational comparison by associating “food riots” with policies advocated by and adopted on the initiative of international financial institutions in the context of the neoliberal turn.²¹ The authors dedicated separate chapters to each of the continents on which these riots occurred and provided a mapping and chronology of these moments of insurrection. Each contribution looked at the protests from a particular angle, particularly by linking structural adjustment to democratization processes in Africa. In the Middle East and North Africa, by contrast, the role of Islamist

19. Javier Auyero, *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of the State* (Cambridge, 2007). On the failure of the Argentinian state, see also Quentin Deforge and Benjamin Lemoine, “Faillite d’État et fragilité juridique. L’Argentine face à l’ordre financier international”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 221–222:1 (2018), pp. 38–63; on the mobilization by the trade unions, see Maurizio Atzeni, *Workplace Conflict: Mobilization and Solidarity in Argentina* (Basingstoke, 2010), ch. 3.

20. Johanna Siméant, “Protester/mobiliser/ne pas consentir. Sur quelques avatars de la sociologie des mobilisations appliquée au continent africain”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 20:2 (2013), pp. 125–143.

21. John K. Walton and David Seddon (eds), *Free Markets and Food Riots* (Oxford [etc.], 1994).

movements is considered central. When applied to the regions we are looking at here, these two interpretative keys have often had the effect of folding the social issue into questions of political and/or religious transformations that are intended to direct people's aspirations towards a "return to traditions". "Modern food riots" are therefore claimed to be episodes that mark a form of nostalgia in the face of the transformations under way in the modern world.²²

The analyses found in Walton and Seddon's book are a product of their time, but for many years they seem to have determined the perspective to be adopted when addressing the question of anti-austerity uprisings and the people involved in them. The outbreak of the Arab revolutions therefore revealed the limited toolkit available to specialists on the region when analysing social movements outside identity- or religion-based distinctions. The protests were seen as a (secular) confrontation between modernists and traditionalists, and between laypersons and religious figures.²³ The history of the uprisings was generally subsumed by these interpretative keys. The abundant literature produced on the uprisings of 2010 and 2011 opened up an extensive area of discussion about the nature of mobilizations in the region and attributed a more important place to the intertwining of political expectations and everyday material aspirations. However, it offered little space to historiography of past mobilizations, in which these uprisings were also anchored. John Chalcraft's 2016 book gave meagre room to the uprisings of the 1980s, which took place in an era he described as "Islamism, Revolution, Uprisings and Liberalism".²⁴ Social issues were subsumed in recurrent discussions that tended to dominate, such as the causes of the "revolutionary emergence", especially the situation of "unemployed graduates" and obstacles to employment; organizational continuities, which focused on the role of trade unions (especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan),²⁵ the new digital activists, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the uprisings; and finally, the disparities between rural and urban worlds, pointing out that the protests were not limited to lower- or middle-class urban sectors of society.²⁶

22. Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East: State, Class, and Economic Development* (Boulder, CO, 1990).

23. Michaëlle L. Browers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge, 2009). The case of Algeria, where social protests preceded a period of violence similar to a long civil war, is a good example of this. Some helpful reflections can be found in Hugh Roberts, "Moral Economy or Moral Polity? The Political Anthropology of Algerian Riots", Crisis States Programme, Working Papers Series no. 1 (London, 2002); *idem*, *The Battlefield. Algeria 1988–2002: Studies in a Broken Polity* (London, 2003).

24. John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2016), ch. 4, 1977–2011.

25. J. Beinín and F. Vairel (eds), *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford, CA, 2013).

26. Habib Ayeub, "Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: The Alfa Grass Revolution", *Review of African Political Economy*, 38 (2011), pp. 467–479; Habib Ayeub and

By studying the social uprisings against structural adjustments in Africa and the Middle East since the mid-1970s, this Special Issue intends to highlight the long-standing reality of discontent with capitalism in this part of world. But we do not simply claim to make a contribution towards filling a gap. We also aim to stimulate a more general reflection on popular feelings and social responses to neoliberalism beyond the locations under consideration. Some anthropologists have argued that Africa offers a privileged vantage point for understanding neoliberalism from a more global perspective, not because the continent was a laboratory for some plan designed from above, but because the way neoliberal experiments were contested there affected how they were later “upgraded” elsewhere.²⁷ There is no doubt that the social responses to structural adjustments can be measured there better than they can elsewhere.²⁸ The contributions in this Special Issue therefore echo other situations that have occurred recently, far from Africa and the Middle East. Was a country such as Greece, which was placed under the tutelage of the IMF and the European Central Bank in 2015, not “adjusted” as other countries further south had been thirty years earlier? Equally, was a problem such as debt – to which H  l  ne Baillot returns in this issue – not more specifically associated with so-called developing countries by international bodies before appearing today as a problem common to (nearly) all countries?²⁹

The echoes between the present and the recent past are important. The underlying resemblances and specificities can be harnessed as a tool for understanding the particular circumstances that gave rise to the revolts we explore in this issue. It is not self-evident that past disorders should be treated as actions taken against the IMF, the World Bank, or the SAPs, just as it is not self-evident that they should be lumped together in the same category. The term “food riots” that Walton and Seddon use in their book was applied too quickly in the media at the time of the uprisings. Although the food issue is at the heart of the conflicts described here, it is, as Charles Tilly wrote, not as the subject of the conflict but as the place for expressing a desire for social justice and dignity.³⁰ Louise Tilly’s work on the ties between conflicts, states, and issues of subsistence clearly shows the complex links among them. In her view, conflicts

Ray Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa: Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia* (London, 2019).

27. See in particular Graham Harrison, *Neo-liberal Africa: The Impact of Global Social Engineering* (London, 2010); Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder, CO, 2011).

28. Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa* (Cambridge, 2004).

29. As shown by David Graeber’s bestseller *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York, 2011).

30. Conflicts “occurred not so much where men were hungry as where they believed that others were unjustly depriving them of food to which they had a moral and political right”, in “Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe”, in Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of Nation States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), pp. 380–455, cit. p. 389.

emerge in the state of tension between the expansion of the market and state centralization.³¹ In the cases that are of interest to us here, new regulation devices were created within the context of adjustment, which apparently dispossesses the state of its functions of providing provisions and regulations. The purpose of our work is therefore to reach a more general understanding of “adjusted societies” and the political economy deployed in them through the protest movements and anger that shook them.

MULTIPLE SOCIAL CONFLICTS WITH A SHARED FOUNDATION

Should we consider the conflicts that took place in the context of structural adjustments in the light of their own particular features? Is each case resistant to our temptation to unify them retrospectively around common categories of analysis? What is the threshold of commonality?

These questions affect the complicated interplay between what really happened; the way events were experienced, written down, remembered, forgotten, and silenced; and how we historians understand these processes. Foucault’s genealogical approach invites us to chart the hidden diachronic and synchronic dispersions of knowledge, to demystify master narratives, and to identify our own place in them.³² Aleatory attention to the apparently irrational actions led us to observe a first principle: the uprisings that are the subject of this work are disparate. There are multiple differences between the protest movements against the high cost of living that broke out in the working-class districts of Egyptian towns in the 1970s (Henry and Soliman); the student protests in Niger (Bonnacase) and the urban riots in Tunisia (Dakhli) in the 1980s; the caustic humour of Togolese cartoonists directed against the government (Frisch) and the more latent criticism of the regime by Ethiopian peasants (Labzaé and Planel); the international debt-cancellation campaign in the 2000s (Baillot); the campaigns to boycott the production of cotton started by Burkinabe peasant farmers (Engels); and the more head-on opposition of Jordanians to the privatization of mining companies in the 2010s (Lacouture). In addition to belonging to different contexts, each of these mobilizations was inspired by different actors who had different

31. Louise Tilly, “Food Entitlement, Famine, and Conflict”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2:1 (1983), pp. 23–57.

32. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, la généalogie l’histoire”, in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1994), p. 1009; Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth, 1991), pp. 76–100: “To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.” (p. 81)

repertoires of contention and gave different meanings both to their uprisings and to the situation that had caused them to revolt.

The same may be said of the heterogeneity that predominates – to varying degrees – within each uprising. As Leyla Dakhli shows, the riots that broke out in Tunis in January 1984 mobilized young people from the areas affected, women dismayed by measures that impacted their ability to manage their daily lives, students and high school pupils accustomed to going out to proclaim their opposition to an authoritarian regime, and militants from the extreme left whose protests were part of a longer tradition. The question of why all these different groups rebelled at the same time elicited an apparently inconsistent array of recriminations and demands; however, these actors came together to produce an uprising that could draw on yet more actors who had demonstrated in Douz and other Tunisian cities in previous months. The heterogeneous nature of social movements is a key point stressed by Michel Dobry in his analysis of political crises: “It is for different ‘reasons’, ‘motives’ or ‘interests’, or better, under the effect of causal series or determinations that are broadly independent of each other that groups or individuals in different locations are encouraged to take up mobilizations started by others, to invest them with different meanings and, by ‘joining the game’, give them different historical trajectories.”³³ One might even say, counter-intuitively and in contrast to certain approaches that focus on the alignment of the frames from which people view their situation,³⁴ that this heterogeneity is one of the important conditions for an uprising to prosper and bring together growing numbers of participants.

Finally, the genealogical method also considers the actors’ self-interpretations. Usually, a struggle for meaning occurs rapidly around the events. It is perceptible in the contrasting insertions in chronologies: for many militants, the 1977 insurrection in Alexandria seemed to be the last in a cycle of decade-long protests against the gradual disintegration of Nasser’s promises, while others (Henry) saw a new form of anger emerging. As a general matter, the uprisings discussed here are often placed “alongside” the normal course of events. They appear as incursions at a particular time that break up the evolution of each of the countries towards economic, social, and institutional reforms and cultural transformations. In some cases, they seem retrospectively to be the symptoms of a social and/or political disturbance that announces more widespread protests. Frequently, they are viewed as benign, episodic outbursts or rebellions that must be overcome in the same way as one overcomes resistance from a piece of machinery that has jammed slightly.

33. Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques. La dynamique des mobilisations multisectorielles* (Paris, 2009), pp. 21–22.

34. David Snow, Burke Rochford, Steven Worden, and Robert Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation”, *American Sociological Review*, 51:4 (1986), pp. 464–481.

A second empirical finding has led us to conclude that when interpretative unity materializes, it is rarely the starting premise. Rather, it is more often constructed within a framework of mobilizations that can themselves lead to interpretative struggles while they are taking place. In this case, we see that rebels are transformed by the rebellion itself, as part of a process that has been well described by historians of uprisings and revolutions.³⁵ The main purpose of this issue, therefore, is what we call “the event”. We have chosen to place the event at the centre of our analysis, because we contend that, through this perspective, we can capture the field of interpretations that the protagonists themselves have opened up, whether meaning is embodied in concrete symbolic action (street demonstrations or clashes) or in more discreet acts of disruption.

Generally, the dissenting populations we deal with here rarely took to the streets explicitly to protest against neoliberalism or SAPs; rather, they came out to protest against their most practical everyday manifestations: price increases; the brutal nature of public sector reforms; the deterioration of school and health systems; clientelism; poor housing; dependence on the prices of raw materials; or an entire series of combined factors that led to a sense of injustice. The heterogeneous motives and interpretations effectively shape a protest space where this feeling of injustice is expressed collectively, whether it be associated with practices of power, a particular social condition, or the development of the economic situation. When taken together – or even separately – all these reasons constitute a red line, an offence to dignity that can serve as a trigger, but also as a binder for what is a fundamentally disparate popular feeling of anger.

Similarly, unity of action has rarely been achieved against the IMF or the World Bank (whose absolute discretion is noteworthy). In the various uprisings we review here, protests have displayed greater unity against the state, which has de facto played an important role in the implementation of the SAPs, or even relied on them to develop new means of indirect government (as Mehdi Labzaé and Sabine Planel, and Bettina Engels, demonstrate in particular on the subject of rural production, and as Robin Frisch’s cartoons also show). The post-colonial context makes it possible to understand this particular relationship with the state. What unites the locations under review is that most of the states are former colonies. The sites are relatively recent independent legal entities, with the exception of Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent Egypt. Post-independence regimes sought to build legitimacy on the idea of popular accountability and an anti-colonial orientation. Sovereignty was thought to have a material component, ensuring dignity for former colonial subjects. SAPs led to dispossession and hit hard the social pact established after independence. Although the reforms tended

35. Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (University Park, PA, 2006).

to dispossess the state of some of its prerogatives, and in particular to erode its role as a protector, the state was (still) found to be responsible for these forced divestments. The state itself took on new contours under SAPs, when read through the lens of these protests: its rules were more abstruse, as were the interests it embodied, when the government authorities formed alliances with those who benefited from the “reforms”, as Robin Frisch shows in the case of Togo. Although it cannot be denied today that liberalization policies accentuated disparities in wealth and access to healthcare, education, and social services, it is vital to underline the extent to which their implementation directly contradicted the principles laid down by the new states following independence, as well as the extent to which such policies caused problems – and offered opportunities – for the countries’ elites and emerging middle classes. However, in a number of cases the principles laid down by new states in the first flush of independence had already been violated by forms of post-colonial state practices themselves. The persistence of social inequalities, the creation of new bourgeoisies, the repression of dissent – there is a whole range of pre-existing resentments and grievances that were exacerbated by the neoliberal turn. This may also explain why this turn appeared as an opportunity for a good part of the post-colonial elites and why the grievances were often framed as a desire to go back to “the good old days”.

Although the interpretations, motivations, and forms of these uprisings were extremely diverse, there are various elements that allow us to restore a common basis and include them in a particular historical moment. On the one hand, these uprisings faced similar realities, such as price increases, unemployment – especially in public services – and hospital and school closures. All these concrete realities were linked to neoliberal policies, albeit this link was not explicitly made by the protesters. The genealogical method allows us to move beyond a nominalist posture that would only consider the categories used by the actors themselves. On the other hand, most of these uprisings were based on the agreed perception that the state was no longer meeting its social obligations. Recourse to E.P. Thompson’s notion of moral economy is decisive here, and a number of articles, especially those by Matthew Lacouture and Mélanie Henry, stress the importance of studying articulations of moral economy from actor perspectives. This leads us to question the common representations of what is fair or unfair, of what united – or failed to unite – people in revolt.³⁶ The emphasis on moral economies makes it possible to demonstrate that the struggle against the IMF may exist *de facto* (for example, when one breaks the application mechanisms of neoliberal policies), even when the rebels’ intention was

36. Edward Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”, *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136. See also Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London, 1978).

not to oppose the IMF. It also makes it possible to show the rationale of the uprising, which is not necessarily the same as that of the international financial institutions or the governments that implement their policies (Bonnecase).

HOW ACTION IS TAKEN: DESCRIBING IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND

Most of the articles collected here use a similar ethnographic method. They deal with events, many of which take place in a relatively short period of time. Throughout the issue, these events are described and reconstructed. Similarly to Alain Dewerpe reflecting on the repression of the demonstration of 8 February 1962 in Paris, we study uprisings and the state violence that gave rise to them so that we can look anew at their genesis. Like him, we believe that these episodes can be “read as disorder, an abnormal or even unacceptable event, a scandal as short as an affair, [that] are part of a practical history of the *raison d’État*”.³⁷ These events leave a trace because they carry collective emotions within them, especially through death, but also through the micro-resistances that can lead to victories. We have brought together specific cases and have assumed the role of historians of events, making it possible to think about more general phenomena that might be called the “*raison d’état* of neo-liberal states”.

This descriptive, events-based approach involves a number of challenges. The first is to understand the moment when widespread anger turns into open revolt. It is often the meeting point between a favourable context for anger, as a result of situations of suffering and injustice that are experienced as such by those who are subject to them, and triggering events and disruptive accidents that cause things to tip over.³⁸ When taken individually, neither of these two terms would be enough to explain the path to revolt. As far as suffering is concerned, it has become commonplace, following the works of E.P. Thompson, to abandon any kind of objective criteria.³⁹ It is not because populations are suffering that they revolt – as if above a certain threshold of unsustainability one necessarily moves to mobilization – but it is possible to go even further: it is no longer enough to feel that suffering is unfair in order to mobilize. This can be seen in the case of Ethiopia, which teaches us that non-mobilization is not the same thing as consent. For historians who

37. Alain Dewerpe, *Charonne, 8 février 1962. Anthropologie historique d’un massacre d’état* (Paris, 2006), p. 16.

38. Edgar Morin, “Pour une sociologie de la crise”, *Communications*, 12 (*La prise de la parole*) (1968), pp. 2–16, p. 5.

39. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd”.

are paying close attention, non-mobilization enables other forms of “low scale criticism” or resistance at an individual level (Labzaé and Planel). In Niger, too, mobilizations against the powers-that-be thinned out when the level of perceived injustice and popular incomprehension regarding the government seemed to reach a peak (Bonnescase).

Situations of perceived suffering and injustice are not inherently enough to trigger events or to explain the passage to an uprising. The assembled articles highlight various forms of these events – some of which are dramatic – that have the effect of mobilizing far more diverse categories of people than had driven them initially, as well as others that appear to be more banal, as when the managers of an organization of manufacturers belittle the material expectations of those doing the manufacturing, who promptly amplify their demands in response (Engels). It is neither a question of attributing a single cause to these events, nor of limiting the study to the effects of violent official responses on the development of a particular uprising. An event should be read from an interactionist standpoint regarding the uprising’s outbreak and process. These interactions may play out at a very small level around a market where the municipal authorities send the police to confront a group of elderly people expressing their anxiety about a price increase (Dakhli), or around a bridge blockade the police consider to be a red line that cannot be crossed, and the protesters an obstacle to overcome (Bonnescase). Power structures may participate in the narrative of an uprising and the actual event that may develop out of this scripting: in Suez in 1977, communist militants, to whom the government – wrongly – attributed central responsibility for the riots, were imprisoned and retrospectively elevated to leadership of the movement, a role they actually took up at a later date (Soliman).

The second challenge that arises out of this descriptive approach is to interpret the ways in which uprisings occur: they can differ from one country to another and even within the same country, depending on the various profiles of the insurgents. We see common features from one article to another. Strikes and protests, for example, are often treated as part of a “repertoire of collective contention”.⁴⁰ One also finds older forms, like riots hatched in more limited social spaces such as a district, while also showing a gradation in the use of violence. Clearly, it is important to ask when and how the specific social and political situation gives way to some other form, or why, in certain situations, riots multiply to the detriment of other more peaceful modes of mobilization:⁴¹ in Niger, violence was apparently a normal recourse to collective action from the standpoint of mobilized individuals who had initially expressed their anger within the legal context (Bonnescase). Finally, we find forms of protest that are specific to certain

40. Charles Tilly, “Les origines du répertoire d’action collective contemporaine en France et en Grande-Bretagne”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 4:1 (1984), pp. 89–108.

41. Alain Bertho, *Le temps des émeutes* (Paris, 2009).

countries or particular socio-professional bodies, such as the boycott of cotton production by Burkinabe farmers (Engels).

The need to take the various forms of rebellion into account goes together with the need to consider everyone's specific forms of participation in an uprising. It is essential to look at the role played by the least visible actors, such as farmers alongside city-dwellers (Engels, Labzaé and Planel); activists from the South next to those from the North in the context of a transnational mobilization (Baillot); and women alongside men. While some of the contributions highlight women's struggles in mobilizations that are essentially managed by men, others illustrate their central role in articulating causes that impact everyday material life or as hardened managers of the household economy, as well as in episodes of direct confrontation with the police (Dakhli, Frisch).⁴² Female activists' invisibility seems to be more apparent in structured movements such as the fight against the privatization of joint property in Jordan (Lacouture) or the international debt cancellation campaign (Baillot).

Thirdly, it is also important to look at the role of people who do not belong to political organizations alongside that of those who do. With regard to some of the paradigms of the sociology of mobilizations, there is critical literature on the academic tendency to overvalue the role of organizations in triggering an uprising, the direction it takes, and the meaning attributed to it.⁴³ The articles in this issue reveal a multitude of configurations: mobilizations that are clearly anchored within an organizational space (such as the debt cancellation campaigns analysed by H el ene Baillot or the defence of a "moral economy of national resources" discussed by Matthew Lacouture); mobilizations in which organizations initially played a leading role before incorporating non-organized individuals (the Association of Nigerian Students at the beginning of the 1990s); mobilizations in which the less visible networks of everyday life were far more important than the organizational base (as was the case with the riots studied by Nayera Soliman, M elanie Henry, and Leyla Dakhli, or the gestures of resistance highlighted by Mehdi Labza e and Sabine Planel); or, finally, mobilizations in which organizations that were supposed to mediatize the expectations of those who were mobilizing served more as a screen than a relay (the National Union of Cotton Producers of which Bettina Engels writes, before other protest organizations became part of the struggle). In all these cases, it is important not to take at face value the words and methods of those who were most visible. The militant space may also be a space for a form of relative subordination, which also plays a role in how an event unfolds and the traces it leaves behind, on which historians later rely when they re-examine what occurred.

42. See also V eronique Gago, *Economies populaires et luttes f eministes. R esister au n eolib eralisme en Am erique du Sud* (Paris, 2020).

43. Jean-Gabriel Contamin, "Cadrages et luttes de sens", in  eric Agrikoliansky (ed.), *Penser les mouvements sociaux. Conflits sociaux et contestations dans les soci et es contemporaines* (Paris, 2010), pp. 55–75.

This goes together with a fourth challenge: what does one decide to include and not to include in these descriptions, and in the political space of dissent in general? This question already exists for contemporaries themselves, none of whom would have necessarily embraced the same idea of what is political. It is also standard practice for representatives of a government or security forces to make distinctions between good protesters who express their anger by lawful means and criminals who profit from social mobilization to commit acts of theft or destruction. However, this distinction tends to be part of the practical modes of repression and ultimately the restoration of the status quo ante.⁴⁴ Some mobilizations may therefore become disfigured – if not actually deliberately erased – by a *raison d'état* that distorts their meaning. For example, the events in Egypt in 1977 turned into attempted destabilization orchestrated by “communists” (Henry, Soliman), while those in Tunisia in 1983–1984 were portrayed as a power grab started by “Islamists” (Dakhli), and in many cases these groups, which were considered as such, were described as the “usual suspects”, to use Matthew Lacouture’s term.

Those who mobilize are also shaped by divisive tactics, however, and each of them will have a more or less extensive understanding of the space of mobilization and the practices that ought to be included within it. In Tunis, in 1984, therefore, not everyone viewed looting shops and homes in the middle-class districts as the equivalent of the destruction of places that had direct associations with the state, such as police stations or local town halls. This selective perception of events – or what was considered to be a part of the event – became stronger with the passage of time. Contemporaries recalled the image of bread riots against the government. The privileged also recalled the revolt by the underclass against inequalities that, at the time, led to “a fear of the rich” (Dakhli). The Togolese cartoons studied by Robin Frisch are also narratives. They show us a representation of power relations at work and blend popular representations of the economy with criticisms of the governing elites. More generally, we see in the articles that the memories that follow events are divided. They are retained in the form of stories that often omit certain elements, such as the community nature of mobilizations, local solidarity, or class struggle. Here, the question of selection is also one for the historian using the genealogical method and trying to adapt her/his narrative strategies to relate past insurrections to present audiences.

This also raises the more general question of how we understand what it means to be “political” in situations of heightened social tensions. Many researchers have suggested extending the meaning of the political to “non-movements” or to the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” as forms of

44. Vincent Bonnacase, “Ce que les ruines racontent d’une insurrection. Morales du vol et de la violence au Burkina Faso pendant les journées insurrectionnelles des 30 et 31 octobre 2014”, *Sociétés politiques comparées*, 38 (2016), pp. 1–36. Available at: http://www.fasopo.org/sites/default/files/varia2_n38.pdf; last accessed 12 January 2021.

everyday activism.⁴⁵ Others invite us to reassess the “weapons of the weak” as tools of resistance in everyday life.⁴⁶ Yet others have focused on seeking politics from below, outside its more expected spaces of expression.⁴⁷ Here, it has not been a question of seeing politics everywhere, let alone one of resistance to SAPs, which would have removed any specific meaning from the notion: if everything is political in the end, nothing is political in particular anymore. To varying degrees, the contributors to this work have made an effort to seek the social responses to structural adjustments beyond their most visible and noisy dimensions. What was important to us was not to separate the clear – and frequently collective – process methods from a wider range of practices used by people to confront what they see as unjust.⁴⁸ The purchase of fertilizers on the black market (Labzaé and Planel) and their diversion for purposes other than those intended by the government (Engels), the way a president is drawn (Frisch), or even the name given to a bottle of beer (Bonnacase) can therefore also speak to us of popular representations of the adjustment policies and an ordinary feeling of discontent towards them that may precede the transition to an uprising.

WHAT REMAINS: IMAGERY, EMOTIONS, AND STORIES

The uprisings studied in this Special Issue have mainly been considered in their contemporary context from the point of view of the actors and those who were involved in them in one way or another. But there is also the question of collective memory that may remain and may still be part of political processes. The issue here is how events live on through the ways different actors continue to grapple with them. William Sewell famously showed that the various means of portraying the taking of the Bastille only a short time after it happened contributed to making it a central event in the revolution. In fact, much can be said in the same vein about how French Republicans picked up the story a century later.⁴⁹ How did the various uprisings studied in this work – and their repressions – continue to mark political trajectories in the countries involved, or even beyond them?

45. Asef Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34 (2002), pp. 1–28, and *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA, 2010).

46. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1985).

47. Jean-François Bayart, Achille Mbembe, and Comi Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire*. Nouvelle édition augmentée (Paris, 2008).

48. Michel Offerlé, “Retour critique sur les répertoires de l’action collective (XVIIIe–XXIe siècles)”, *Politix*, 81:1 (2008), pp. 181–202.

49. William Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille”, *Theory and Society*, 25 (1996), pp. 841–881.

Firstly, the potential of uprisings to be remembered and invoked has not been the same in all cases. There is a striking contrast between the 1977 riots, which have remained a central component of revolutionary memory in Egypt (Henry, Soliman), and those of 1983, which are almost forgotten in recollections of revolutionary Tunisia today (Dakhli). Equally, some elements of an uprising may remain more present in the political imagination than others within the same country, even though the political weight of one over the other may not have been clear for contemporaries at the time of the events.⁵⁰ The more or less significant presence of one element or another is not the same in the minds of individuals, and the notion of collective memory sometimes leads to minimizing the differences in the issue, as Mélanie Henry notes. For example, the communists in Egypt did not view the conflicts around the Arsenal in Alexandria, which has remained a symbol of their struggle, in the same way as others did (Henry). Similarly, in Niger, the death of three young demonstrators in February 1990 at the end of the one-party regime is not appropriated either in the same manner or by the same people in all cases as that of a student death in March 1994 in the early days of democracy, even though the two events were part of the same cycle of mobilizations against the liberalization of education and showed certain similarities from the point of view of a good number of contemporaries (Bonnesse).

It is therefore important to take a fresh look at the practical challenges posed by these contradictions and to ask why some veterans have good reasons to appropriate one element or episode while others recall another. Different mnemonic mobilizations can also lead to conflict between a militant memory backed by shared symbols, on the one hand, and an ordinary memory that is more informed by personal life or that of the predecessors, on the other hand. There may also be discrepancies between an official memory that has been intentionally constructed for political ends and popular memories that are detached from these stakes. Although we reflect on this aspect, it still needs to be pursued further, especially because the general observation from which we started remains an open one. The fact that anti-austerity uprisings since the 1980s have been somewhat devalued in people's memories – as well as in the scientific literature – in comparison with what they might have represented for contemporaries at the time is no trivial matter: the countries concerned have been expressing the same general orientation towards a neo-liberal political economy ever since.

Secondly, if one considers the persistence of a neoliberal political and economic orientation, these various uprisings have, on the whole, been branded a failure. This does not mean they had no political effect. Far from it: for

50. To continue the comparison with the French Revolution, if we follow Sewell, "Historical Events", this was the case with the taking of the Bastille and the taking of the Invalides on the same day.

instance, the uprisings against the privatization of higher education led to a more general opposition to the military regime in Niger, culminating in the transition to democracy. However, the uprisings failed to reverse the social and economic policies that were being driven by international financial institutions. This raises the question of post-insurrection disappointment that some of us touch on: some years after the uprisings in the Arab world and in sub-Saharan Africa – beginning with Burkina Faso in 2014 – melancholia still looms large. How can disenchantment be adapted and transformed, and how can defeats bequeath lessons for the future? Through their hopes and disappointments, the revolts we have looked at carry unmet promises that we can see in today's movements. The problem remains to understand and demonstrate how these emotions and their traces develop when memories of the events may have been obscured.

One essential point emerges from a number of the contributions, however: neoliberal reforms were initially implemented by military regimes before being continued either by democratic or pluralist regimes (in the case of Niger studied by Vincent Bonnacase and that of Togo studied by Robin Frisch), or by revolutionary regimes (as in the case of Ethiopia studied by Mehdi Labzaé and Sabine Panel). Democratic and revolutionary disenchantment goes hand in hand with the retrospective enchantment with past authoritarian regimes – “romanticizing the good old days”, to use the words of Mehdi Labzaé and Sabine Panel. These regimes were associated with a time when the state took more responsibility for its food- and law-related obligations, including when they took a paternalistic form. This modern process of re-enchantment, which has been noted by E.P. Thompson with regard to Tudor England,⁵¹ remains fairly strong in many countries studied here, so that Kountché in Niger, Nasser in Egypt, and Bourguiba in Tunisia enjoy retroactive popularity today. This raises much more than challenges of re-assembled memories or gaps between memory and historical reality: the re-evaluation of authoritarian regimes, which is the flip side of a devaluation of certain democratic and revolutionary experiences, has profound effects even today on the relationships people may have with the institutions or the very idea of democracy. While everywhere in the world democracies may also find themselves under fire when “economic rationality” tells them to go against the wishes of the people, it is important to continue to reflect by looking back on these African and Middle Eastern precedents.

What this means is that the current political stakes of the topic must be underlined. Indeed, we feel obliged to provide a concluding note of self-reflexivity on our choice of subject, if not its direction. We should mention here that the two organizers of this project have participated in anti-austerity

51. E.P. Thompson, “Moral Economy Reviewed”, in *Customs in Common* (London, 1991), pp. 259–35, p. 298.

protests, mainly in Europe, in what was then called the movement against neo-liberalism and alter-globalization. Since the late 1990s, we have witnessed the increasingly repressive response to mobilizations against the G8, G20, and other financial institutions, as well as the enthusiasm these mobilizations generated at international social forums in the South and North alike. It is no small matter for us to work on this issue twenty years later, when rejection of structural adjustments is more broadly shared in Africa and the Middle East, as well as Asia and Latin America. In our opinion, this backdrop of shared political struggles has not been a hindrance to the need to be scientific, but it has certainly encouraged us to put things more directly, to tackle the topic head on, and to keep our academic superegos in check. We hope that our background has honed our hearing to understand what the rebels were whispering as well as shouting. While the processes described in this Special Issue are still under way well beyond Africa and the Middle East, it seems essential to us to break a lance for committed history.