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The spatial underpinnings of the revolutionary protests in Algiers



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Chapô

Since February 22, 2019, when Algerians started to mobilize within the public space, the political scene has been taken over by weekly mass protests, described by the press as “tsunamis”, in the urban centers of the country’s large and smaller cities. Until now, the attention has been on the popular movement’s demands and successive gains, largely ignoring the spatial forms of the mobilization despite this being central to the current rebirth of civil society. Indeed, the daily fight to (re)claim public spaces has been the whole point of this uprising.

Présentation longue

By [Ghaliya N. Djelloul](#) and [Aniss M. Mezoued](#)

By looking at this question through the lens of both sociology and urbanism, we want to analyze the spatial underpinnings of the movement and their effects on public spaces. In other words, how the appropriation of the public space has allowed citizens to open a political window and maintain it to this day, to demand a radical change in the system of governance and the establishment of the rule of law.

This uprising, which was quickly called the “Smile Revolution” for the extraordinary speeding up of time caused by the scale of the marches and the growing number of citizen-led initiatives (associative, artistic, professional, trade unions, local, etc.), allowed the expression of a peaceful political imaginary and the practice of a certain

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Thanks to their practice of an “ethos” and “pathos” of non-violence (Butler, 2017), this “smile revolution” is lowering barriers and multiplying levers to “loosen up” existing structures, allowing for the emergence of a public space. These marching men and women, recovering a sense of dignity by using their civic power, are disarming a regime that until then had engineered uncertainty in the name of stability, and are thus contributing to the (re)creation of a social order. Their mobilization allows civil society to rediscover its capacity to act and transform the course of history by recalling slogans such as: “One hero, the people.”

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**Picture 2: During the marches, protesters sing songs with lyrics that express how young people are suffering and yearning for freedom, and the beat of the drums gives the gatherings a festive and peaceful atmosphere. Among the songs are supporter chants, the national anthem and patriotic songs. © Khadidja Markemal

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There had been weak signs of this social body for some years already (Mezoued, 2016), especially in the art world. But it has really emerged now, allowing people both to rediscover the idea of a public space in the political sense of a place to express and confront ideas (Habermas, 1971), and to reclaim this space in its material dimensions within the city. As the two meanings are strongly linked, our goal in this text is to take a closer look at the spatiality of events in order to highlight the other “coordinates” (Sabourin, 1997) of the mobilization: the time and language of the mass that allow for the production of a “social memory” (Halbwachs, 1938) of this

collective experience. In doing so, we want to understand how this emerging (or rediscovered, or even resurrected) civil society organizes itself to maintain and sustain the mobilization through space and time. The following expression is often used by the movement's participants and commentators: "It is by walking that we learn to make the revolution." Drawing inspiration from this phrase, we'll show how the opening of the public space is a process of continuous learning, produced by practice. It is not a delineated phase or a linear movement, but rather the result of a dynamic tension of entangled space-times.

Motility at the heart of the mobilization

When civil society mobilizes every Friday in the urban centers of many cities throughout the country, "the people" come alive again as a collective body. This is the result of a "cognitive" and "affective" process that takes place during the week, on the internet as in the public space (Landriève, 2017). That's why the daily management of information through the media and social networks is crucial, as it can "modulate" the representation of reality, "to structure how people become aware of specific problems and to give them a political and cultural meaning within an interactive process" (Nedelamann, 1987: 186). It also serves to create a sense of solidarity among the actors that will be "the cement of the mobilization" (Lolive, 1997: 129).

What are the conditions allowing such a movement to be set in motion (the physical ability to access, move and claim spaces) and what forms does this take? Part of the answer can be found by applying to the protesters the concept of "motility" (i.e. the ability and power to move, according to Kaufman, Jemelin, 2008), defined as the mobility potential, i.e. mobility in capacity and in action. Prior to moving, the various factors defining the usual potential for Algerian mobility are, in this case, fundamentally deconstructed and reconstructed. For instance, access to the city center, which is the gathering site, is hampered by public transport being shut down, in particular the metro, as well as by central roads being closed to cars (which is the main mode of transport in Algiers) and then reclaimed by the participants. Cars have to park on the outskirts, forcing protesters to travel long distances before reaching the gathering sites. As a result, physical and/or "resourcefulness" abilities (getting up early, carpooling, taking a taxi, spending the night with friends or family in the city center, etc.) become over-determining compared to other factors such as available

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As a result, a kind of appropriation and skillset for alternative mobilities gets implemented every Friday, all the while defining a new spatiality of the Algerian territory and of its mobilities. Smaller, secondary streets become the entry (and exit) points to the protest areas and serve as modal platforms that combine parking and drop-off stations for carpooling or various drivers. They also cause numerous parking problems and other nuisances (double-parking on both sides of the street, difficulties getting out, etc.). Before February 22, Fridays were steadily organized around the collective prayer, performed by the faithful in their neighborhoods, and it was only afterwards (around 2pm) that streets began filling up. Now, protesters, both men and women, are trying to reach the gathering sites as early as possible to avoid traffic jams. The collective prayer isn't as central to how people structure their day, because of mobility strategies.

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Picture 4: At some point in the day, there are so many protesters that cars can't get around anymore. This picture was taken in one of the perpendicular streets to the main avenues of the city, where the protests are focused. © Khadidja Markemal

Mobility strategies and mobilization facilitators

In the wake of the Hirak^[2] of February 22, people have mobilized, and so have communication services and devices that help increase people's mobility potential and thus facilitate their mobilization. The use of social networks and ICTs has been instrumental in helping protesters self-organize, through existing Facebook groups (Info Traffic Algeria for example) and new ones created specifically for this purpose. Similarly, on-demand mobility services such as Yassir,^[3] which is gradually gaining market shares in the regular and occasional mobility of Algerians, as well as taxis, are

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Another interesting initiative is the “orange vests” who appeared after clashes between police and protesters on the ninth Friday. This group established itself to intervene as mediators between these two bodies - the protesters and the police - precisely to avoid “body-to-body” confrontations.

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Picture 6: Week by week, the mobilization gets organized beforehand: instructions are given to ensure the protests go smoothly and safely for everyone. © Ghaliya Djelloul

It is interesting to note how in Algiers, the urban morphology is also used to deter mobility “towards” (with roadblocks set up every Thursday morning to filter access to the wilayah of Algiers, or by surrounding protesters with a line of vans leading them to gathering places), and to force standstills “in” the spaces of the protest (with groups of police officers forming physical barriers to flank, divide and prevent progress). But the city of Algiers is also used as a resource to overcome obstacles and facilitate the popular movement's mobilization.

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On the other hand, a countermovement is trying daily to break this rhythm with dramatic events (such as arresting figures of the regime), intimidation, repression, rumors and misinformation. Protesters are thus confronted every day with an emotional tug-of-war, and it is thanks to a continuous mobilization during the week - in particular the students' march on Tuesdays - that they can overcome the psychological pressure and prepare to face the struggles and risks of the next Friday march. It is by imagining and projecting themselves into another possible world during the space-time of the Friday protests that Algerian men and women find the cognitive and emotional resources to resist the “path dependency” (North, 1990) of a political routine that had previously discouraged them from participating in public affairs and spaces.

The mobilization, creating new places

The occupation of the city's public space for political protests is nothing new in Algeria. It has its roots in the mobilizations of the late 1980s, which led to the country's early democratization (transition from a single party to a multi-party system) and the slow but gradual gain of rights and freedoms (relative freedoms of the press, of association and of assembly). However, while this early "democratic transition" had been in the works for thirty years, the Black Decade (1990-2000) that followed saw the country fall prey to insecurity and political instability, leading the government to heavily secure the sites of the State's functioning bodies and the public space. This security apparatus had the effect of confiscating the city center and its symbolic locations (Mezoued, 2010) that had until then been the main gathering points of all mobilizations.

As a result, this security system ended up transforming urban practices, lifestyles and ways of appropriating the territory and its locations (Mezoued, 2016b). Indeed, these symbolic places (Martyrs' Square, the steps of the government's palace, Boulevard Zighout Youssef, etc.) have gradually become non-places (Auger, 1992), i.e. spaces that are not appropriated and not experienced by citizens, therefore detached from collective representations.

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**Picture 8: Police barriers block access to the city heights, in particular towards the People's Palace and the Presidency's main offices. This picture was taken by the Telemly at the bottom of the famous "aero-habitat" housing unit. © Yacine Ketfi

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Consequently, the February 22 protest gradually reinvented symbolic places through moments of standstill, occupying spaces during the marches. As a result, the staircase of the Post Office (Grand Poste), the faculty tunnel, Maurice Audin square and the under-construction building of La Parisienne became the new symbolic places of protest, constituting both physical and political public spaces. Protesters tried to reach other areas, including the El Mouradia Palace which is the site of the presidency's main offices in the city's heights, but marchers were blocked in as far away as possible, in other words as low down as possible given the city's topography.

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These new symbolic places are therefore targeted by new confiscations designed to undermine the mobilization. The faculty tunnel, for instance, has been completely barricaded by police vans since the ninth Friday, while the steps of the Post Office have been surrounded by metal fences, under the pretense of construction work, since the thirteenth Friday.

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Picture 10: The confiscation of one of the most symbolic locations of the protest: the Post Office. The staircase was barricaded under the pretense of refurbishing work on the stairs, then blocked off by police vans. © Sofiane Bakouri

In other respects, the relationship between mobility and immobility helps define specific modalities of how public space is appropriated. This is particularly the case of the “feminist square” that was established at the end of the fifth week at the central faculty’s entrance. Leveraging the opening of the public space, this place of expression has attracted a lot of criticism, accused of “separatism” and attempting to disturb the movement’s unity: why indeed isolate themselves in a square instead of participating in the collective march? And why this desire to raise awareness about women’s specific demands? These accusations allowed many to justify violence against feminists.

However, a group called “Algerian women for a change to equality” (Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l’égalité) claims that creating this square was a deliberate strategy to allow women to “gather and walk together,”⁴ to overcome the difficulties they have in meeting (due to specific constraints and obstacles to their mobility practices) all the while remaining “inside” the movement - not outside - given that after one hour, their square sets itself in motion. This way of appropriating the public space underlines their desire, as a minority group, to “form a political body” before joining the march, so as to politicize women’s condition behind a common barrier and slogans.

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“Silmiya” as a necessary condition for the mobilization and its sustainability

What made the Hirak of February 22 so special was its pacific nature, established from the onset with the slogan Silmiya which means “peaceful,” “non-violent.” The various agents of the mobilization capitalized on this and continuously strive to maintain this non-violent character, despite attempts to ignite protests and clash with police – and while some trouble has occurred, it remains marginal given the overwhelmingly peaceful movement throughout the country. Despite the many ideological differences that emerge as the mobilization spreads over time, especially regarding the outcome of the revolution and what forms the political transition could take, the call for Silmiya during the protests and the occupation of public space remains the most consensual element. It is reflected in humorous and self-deprecating ways, drawing on Algerian and international cultural references (TV shows, films, music, etc.) to deconstruct the representations of political violence and keep expanding the “realm of the possible” (Badis, 2019).

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Picture 12: Brooms are one of the symbols used to represent, with humor, the need to clean up the Algerian political class. © Khadidja Markemal

Non-violence is therefore the rule that protesters impose on themselves to allow divergent ideas to coexist in the public space. The slogans “Yetne7aw ga3! Yet7asbou ga3! Netrabaw ga3!”^[5] (They must all go! They must all be judged! We must all learn!) truly express this desire to break with the past, but also to evolve towards a new kind of harmonious cohabitation, where non-violence, which now seemingly serves as a form of “collective therapy” (Carlier, 1995), would finally guarantee the existence of a civil fabric.

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révolution

Algeria

Motility

Discipline

Sciences sociales

Mode de transport

Tous modes de transport

Thématique

Aspirations

Living environments

Civic Action

Reducing inequalities

Cities & Territories

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