

[In every stranger's eyes](#) [1]

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To Marx, the use-value of a thing was very clear and easy to comprehend: a table made of wood is a table, stands on four legs, and may be used as one. But as a commodity with an exchange-value, the table becomes something strange, "transcendent," and acquires a social character; this Marx called "commodity fetishism," and it is ? at least in part ? the reason a table from Ikea costs £30 while the same table from Heal's may cost five times that. He wrote, "the existence of the things in their capacity as commodities ... has absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom ... (the) definite social relation between men ... (assumes) the fantastic form of a relation between things."

Nearly a century later, critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer developed out of this the idea of "reification," where intangible human relationships are incorrectly treated as independent things, independent of human agency and, rather like the weather, capable of exercising independent influence. This is in plain view when one hears the man on the Clapham omnibus speak about "the economy": he refers to the "credit crunch" as if it were a natural catastrophe, some Nemean lion which only monetary and fiscal policies of the government are powerful enough to tame, rather than as a general reluctance of other individuals to conform with specific patterns of expenditure. Nor is his way of thinking limited to the economy. The relationship between signs, symbols and reality has, to him, everywhere become warped: "all Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange." (Baudrillard, 1994) Which brings us to the greatest reification of them all, the one that inspires the most reliance and expectation, confidence and terror, hope and fear: the State. When everything goes wrong, "it" is there for us.

Unless, of course, "it" was never really there to begin with. Watching the protests on Tahrir Square for the past several weeks, I have been struck by the way in which potent manifestations of state power served only to prove its non-existence. General Dynamics M1 tanks, among the most fearsome land weapons ever designed, appeared stranded and rudderless amidst a sea of human beings, while the screams of fighter jets buzzing the crowd seemed less like banshees and more like the cries of a petulant child, and were not taken seriously. For a few days, the concretized state broke down, allowing us to see through the illusion to view the state as it really is: not a "thing" but many human relationships, with countless components, themes and antagonisms, constituted by each of us, all of us and, frequently, none of us (for example, in bureaucracies) -- a view that undermines, at its most fundamental level, most (if not all) of the justifications for a state to wield substantial coercive power. If it is we who act, it is surely better that we act voluntarily and of our own free will, without compelling or being compelled by others, to the greatest

possible extent.

Because of this, it is a mistake to view the revolution as the key moment in Egypt's struggle for freedom (although it is one historians and revolutionaries themselves will inevitably make): it is the content of the counterrevolution, the reconstitution of a new idea of the state from the ashes of the old, that matters most and will endure longest. If one does not reify the law and the state but recognises them as systems regulating individuals and groups of individuals, a libertarian constitution emerges as the only viable long-term answer: a state that, per Robert Nozick, "treats us as inviolate individuals, who may not be used by others as a means or tools or instruments or resources... (allowing) us, individually or with whom we choose, to choose our life and to realize our ends.... aided by the voluntary cooperation of other individuals possessing the same dignity." And not just Egypt, either: "how dare any state or group of individuals do more. Or less."

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