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Marx's Lesson for the **Muslim Brothers**

By SHERI BERMAN Published: August 10, 2013

KARL MARX wrote that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce. He had in mind the Revolution of 1848, when a democratic uprising against the French monarchy collapsed into a Bonapartist dictatorship just as the French Revolution had six decades earlier.



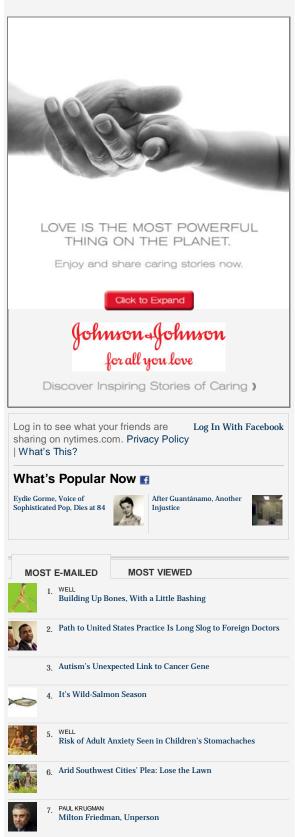
Lincoln Agnew

■ Enlarge This Image In 1848, workers joined with liberals in a democratic revolt to overthrow the French monarchy. However, almost as soon as the old order collapsed, the opposition fell apart, as liberals grew increasingly

alarmed by what they saw as "radical" working class demands. Conservatives were able to co-opt fearful liberals and reinstall new forms of dictatorship.

Those same patterns are playing out in **Egypt** today — with liberals and authoritarians playing themselves, and Islamists playing the role of socialists. Once again, an inexperienced and impatient mass movement has overreached after gaining power. Once again, liberals have been frightened by the changes their former partners want to enact and have come crawling back to the old regime for protection. And as in 1848, authoritarians have been happy to take back the reins of power.

If Egypt's army continues its crackdown and



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liberals continue to support it, they will be playing right into the hands of Marx's contemporary successors. "Islamists of the world, unite!" they might say; "you have nothing to lose but your chains." And, unfortunately, they will be right.

It should come as no surprise that Egyptian liberals would implore the military to begin a coup to end the country's first experiment with democracy just two years after they joined hands with Islamists to oust an authoritarian regime. In the early stages of a country's political development, liberals and democrats often don't agree on anything other than the desirability of getting rid of the ancien régime.

Establishing a stable democracy is a two-stage process. First you get rid of the old regime, then you build a durable democratic replacement. Because the first stage is dramatic, many people think the game is over when the dictator has gone. But the second stage is more difficult. There are many examples of broad coalitions coming together to oust dictators but relatively few of them stayed together and agreed on what the new regime should look like. Opposition movements tend to lose steam, falling prey to internal squabbles and the resurgent forces of the old regime.

The year 1848, the original "springtime of the peoples," was the first time that an organized workers' movement had appeared on the political scene, and its demands frightened liberals. The middle class wanted economic liberalization; many workers demanded more radical economic and social change. Liberals favored a limited opening of the political system, while workers' groups wanted full democratization and the power that came with it. When it became clear that workers and socialists might win, liberals balked, and many of them turned back to the conservatives, seeing the restoration of authoritarianism as the lesser of two evils.

This is almost exactly what is playing out in

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Egypt now. Years of authoritarian rule meant that political and social institutions allowing the peaceful articulation of popular dissent were systematically suppressed. And the state deliberately deepened social divisions. So when democratization came, long-dormant distrust and animosity exploded in extremist rhetoric, mass protests and violence. These things always frighten liberals, who favor order and moderation and dislike radical social experiments. This was true in Europe in 1789 and 1848, and it's true of Egyptian liberals today.

The problem is how liberals react to such fears. During the late 20th-century transitions to democracy in Southern and Eastern Europe, extremism and religion weren't major factors. Different groups were thus able to agree on the rules of the game. Also, it was not the first try at democracy in most European countries, and the European Union was there to help. But in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world, the threat of extremism terrifies liberals, and thanks to years of authoritarianism, there isn't a culture of compromise, nor is there a strong democratic neighbor to guide them.

The 1848 fiasco strengthened the radical elements of the socialist movement at the expense of the moderates and created a poisonous and enduring rift between liberals and workers. After liberals abandoned democracy, moderate socialists looked like suckers and radicals advocating a nondemocratic strategy grew stronger. In 1850, Marx and Engels reminded the London Communist League that they had predicted that a party representing the German liberal bourgeoisie "would soon come to power and would immediately turn its newly won power against the workers. You have seen how this forecast came true." They went on to warn, "To be able forcefully and threateningly to oppose this party, whose betrayal of the workers will begin with the very first hour of victory, the workers must be armed and organized." This is not the lesson anybody wants Islamists to

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learn now.

The mistake that liberals made in 19th-century Europe was to see all socialists as fanatics. But while some socialists were extremists, others were opposed to violence and dedicated to democracy. Those socialists — who later became Europe's social democrats rather than communists — wanted social and economic reforms, but not ones that were mortal threats to capitalism or democracy. Yet, for too long, European liberals were unwilling to recognize those differences; they opposed full democratization and worked actively to repress the entire movement. The results were disastrous.

Radical, violent and nondemocratic elements within the socialist movement began to ask why workers should participate in a system unwilling to accept the possibility of their victory. And when socialists became the largest political force across Europe, liberals accepted unsavory bargains with conservatives to keep the Left out of power. As a result, European societies became increasingly divided and conflict ridden.

Egypt's liberals are repeating those mistakes today. Once again, they see their opponents as zealots determined to abolish everything liberals value. But just as not all socialists were proto-Stalinists, not all Islamists want to implement a theocratic regime. There are moderate Islamists today who are willing to play by the rules of the game, and they should be encouraged to do so.

Islamism is still the largest and best-organized popular political force in Egypt, and it is vital that the Egyptian Army and its liberal allies let Islamists know there is a place for them in the region's democratic future. If all Islamists are demonized, the divisions within Egyptian society will grow, the moderate Islamists will become marginalized, and Egypt's political future will be troubled.

A century after 1848, social democrats, liberals

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and even moderate conservatives finally came together to create robust democracies across Western Europe — an outcome that could and should have happened earlier and with less violence. Middle Eastern liberals must learn from Europe's turbulent history instead of blindly repeating it.

A <u>professor</u> of political science at Barnard College and the author of "The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century."

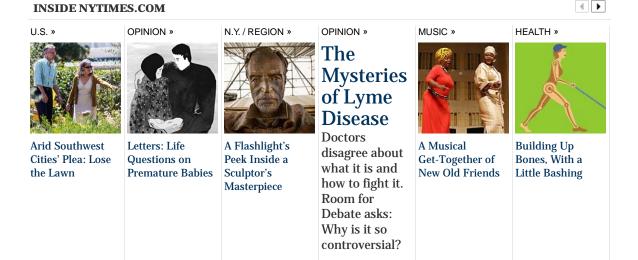
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