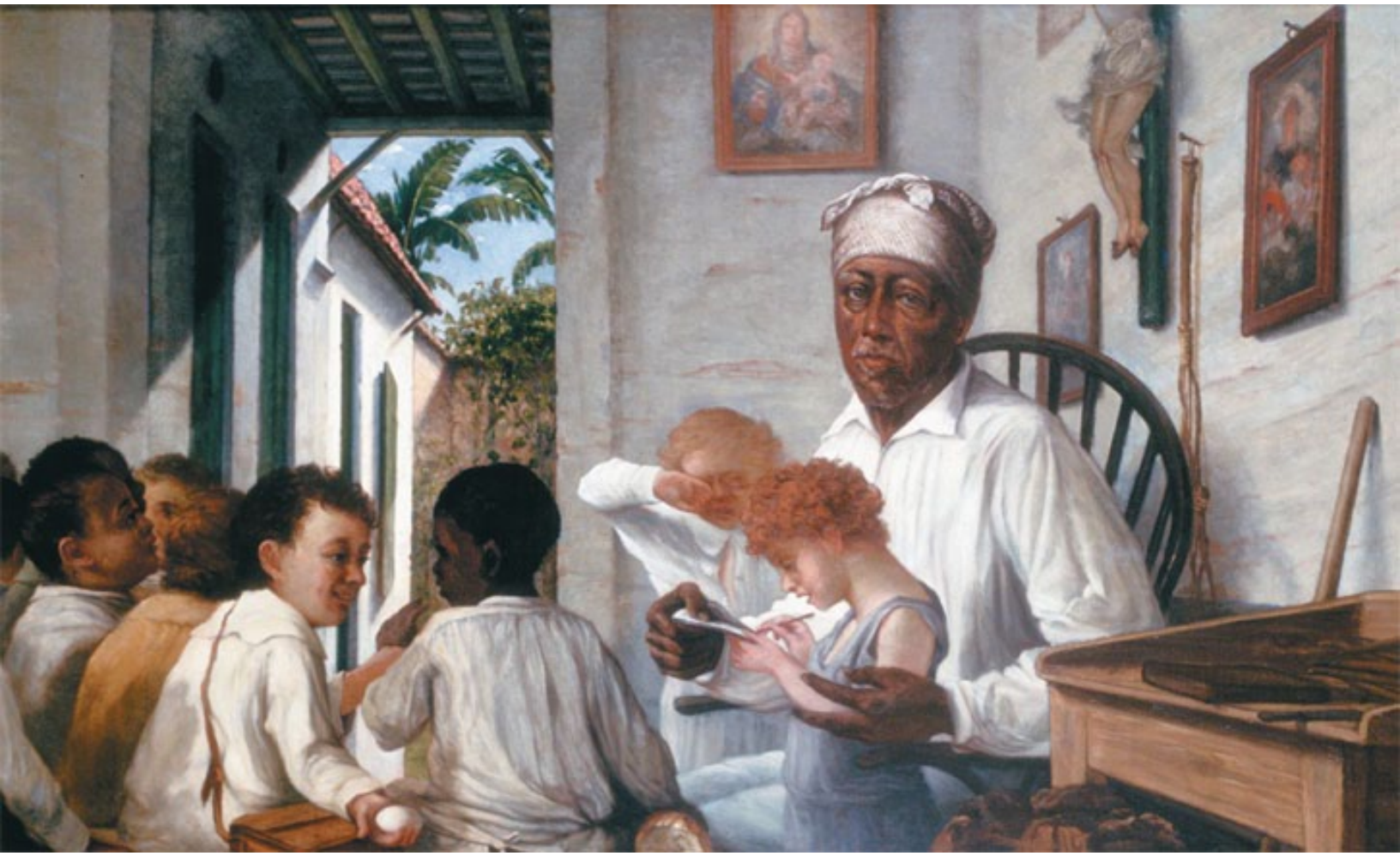
IMAGE FILES 009: RAMÓN MIRANDA BELTRÁN


IS CHICAGO KILLING PUBLIC EDUCATION ?

For this issue of *Image Files* I am illustrating sections from Endnotes's "The Holding Pattern" that I found useful in understanding the current austerity struggle. This essay also informs an artwork that will be part of the show *Nice Work if You Can Get It*, curated by *Lorelei Stewart* at Gallery 400 in Chicago. An image of this work, called *To Collapse Invisible Walls*, is shown as the last response to the initial image of the teacher's revolt of 1933 where Chicago teachers carried a banner reading "Is Chicago Killing Public Education?" to the Mayor's office. The second image is a reproduction of the painting *La Escuela del Maestro Cordero* (1890-92) by Francisco Oller. The painting depicts Cordero's house, where he provided free education for children that would not have had access to it otherwise. Cordero worked in the preparation of tobacco to support himself and his school. Oller's painting depicts a barrel filled with tobacco leaves on the right hand corner of the painting next to a table used for its preparation for consumption. Cordero started Puerto Rico's first free school in 1810.

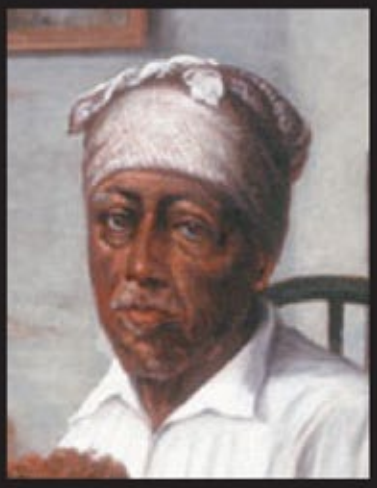
As a Puerto Rican thinking about culture and anarchism, Cordero's work is inspiring. His individual efforts replicated his consciousness, leading to the education of three of Puerto Rico's abolitionists, Román Baldorioty de Castro, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, and José Julián Acosta.

How much faster can change happen if our civil institutions put human welfare in front of the interests of Capital?

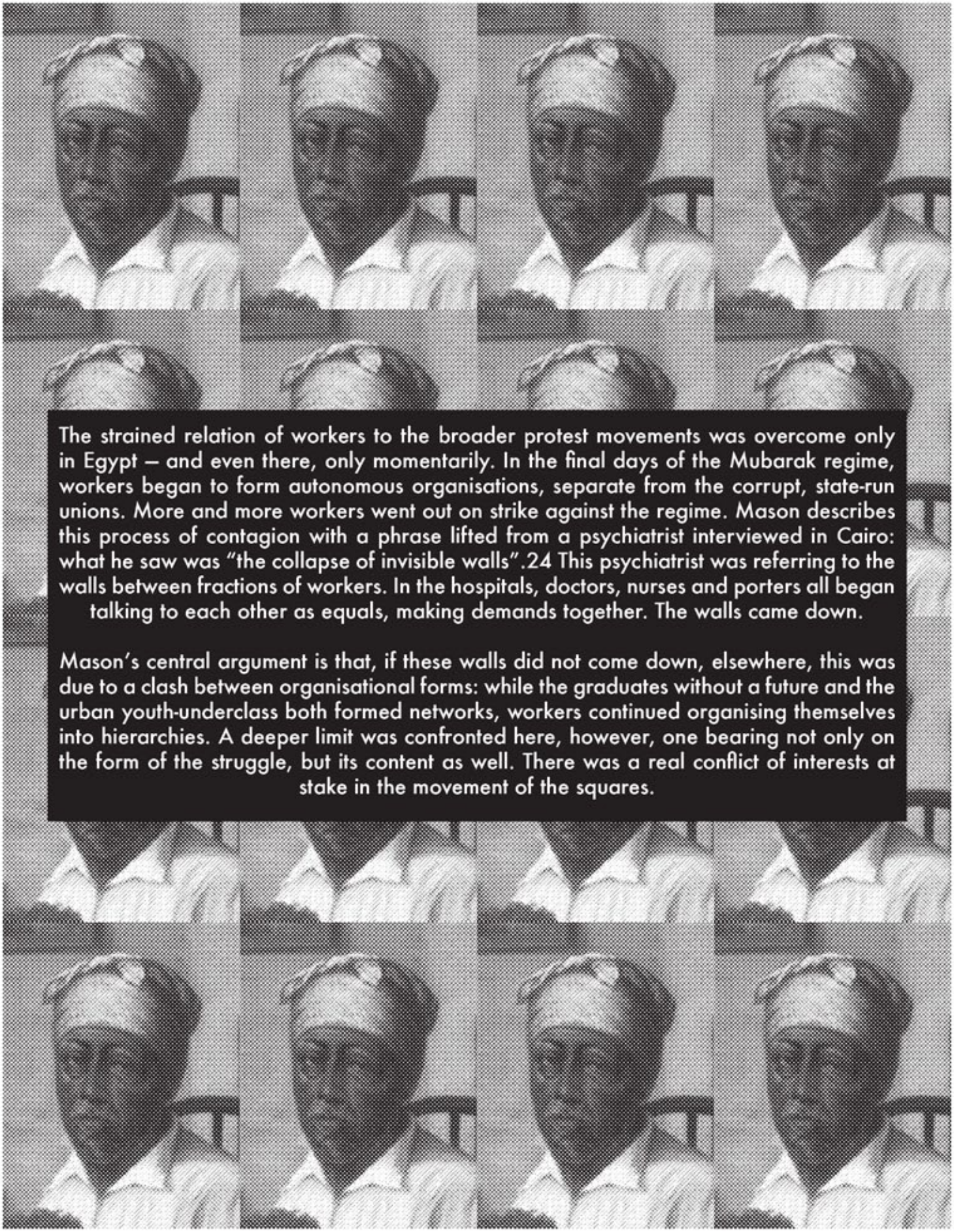


Francisco Oller, *La Escuela del Maestro Cordero* (1890-92)

That's why austerity never means just temporary reductions in social spending in the midst of an economic downturn. On the contrary, social-spending programs have not only been cut back; they are being gutted or done away with entirely. In many countries, the crisis is being used as a lever with which to destroy long-held rights and entitlements, including the right to organise. And everywhere, the crisis has served as an excuse to further centralise power in the hands of technocrats, acting in the service of the most powerful states (the US, Germany). These manoeuvres are not merely cyclical adjustments in response to an economic downturn. They are about restoring profits in the most direct way possible: suppressing wages. The Keynesian notion that, if states were acting rationally, they could somehow convince capital not to press its advantage, in the course of the downturn, is the purest ideology.



The kids are screwed, and that makes a lot of sense: someone had to pay, and it was easier to delete their futures, with a keystroke, than to take away the actual jobs of older workers. In Egypt, today, unemployment is almost 10 times as high for college grads as it is for people who have only gone through elementary school. The crisis played itself out as a generational conflict.

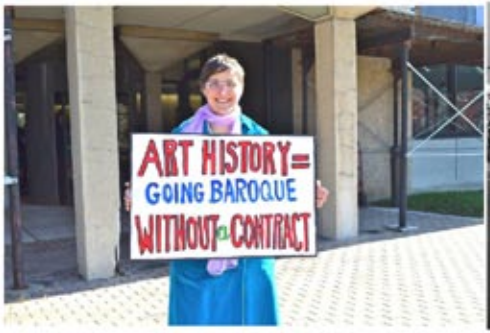


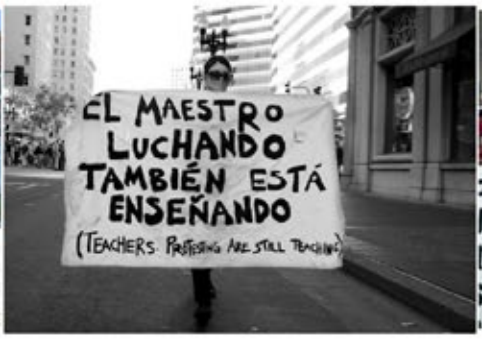
The strained relation of workers to the broader protest movements was overcome only in Egypt – and even there, only momentarily. In the final days of the Mubarak regime, workers began to form autonomous organisations, separate from the corrupt, state-run unions. More and more workers went out on strike against the regime. Mason describes this process of contagion with a phrase lifted from a psychiatrist interviewed in Cairo: what he saw was "the collapse of invisible walls".24 This psychiatrist was referring to the walls between fractions of workers. In the hospitals, doctors, nurses and porters all began talking to each other as equals, making demands together. The walls came down.

Mason's central argument is that, if these walls did not come down, elsewhere, this was due to a clash between organisational forms: while the graduates without a future and the urban youth-underclass both formed networks, workers continued organising themselves into hierarchies. A deeper limit was confronted here, however, one bearing not only on the form of the struggle, but its content as well. There was a real conflict of interests at stake in the movement of the squares.

Modernisation is, in part, a project of eradicating patronage arrangements. By centralising the state, increasing tax efficiency, and replacing direct transfers to constituents with infrastructural investment and targeted subsidies, modernisation supposedly forces everyone to secure incomes, not by state capture, but rather by competing in markets. Of course, modernisation remains woefully incomplete, in this sense. The incompleteness of the modernising project was one of the main targets of neoliberal programs of structural adjustment. But far from implying an end to corruption, the modernisation of the state – now in a neoliberal guise – actually exacerbated it. In the context of a sagging world economy, neoliberal reforms had little chance of expanding participation in markets, in virtuous cycles of growth (that was especially true, since neoliberalism was associated with a decline in public investments in infrastructure, without which modern economic growth is all but impossible).

What neoliberalism achieved, then, was to make corruption more discreet, while funnelling it towards the upper echelons of society. Corruption is now less ubiquitous but involves much larger sums of money. The small-scale bribery of officials has been supplanted by the large-scale bribery of corrupt privatisation deals and public investment projects – which flow to the wealthiest clients. The family members of dictators, Gamal Mubarak above all, have become prime targets of popular hatred, for that reason. The massive payouts they receive look all the more egregious now that (1) the state is supposed to be eradicating corruption, and (2) those lower down are no longer in on the game. This is why neoliberalism is about inequity: when old forms of patronage are undone with the promise that new sources of wealth will come to replace them, the failure of that promise reveals the new as a version of the old patronage, only now more egregious, more unfair.



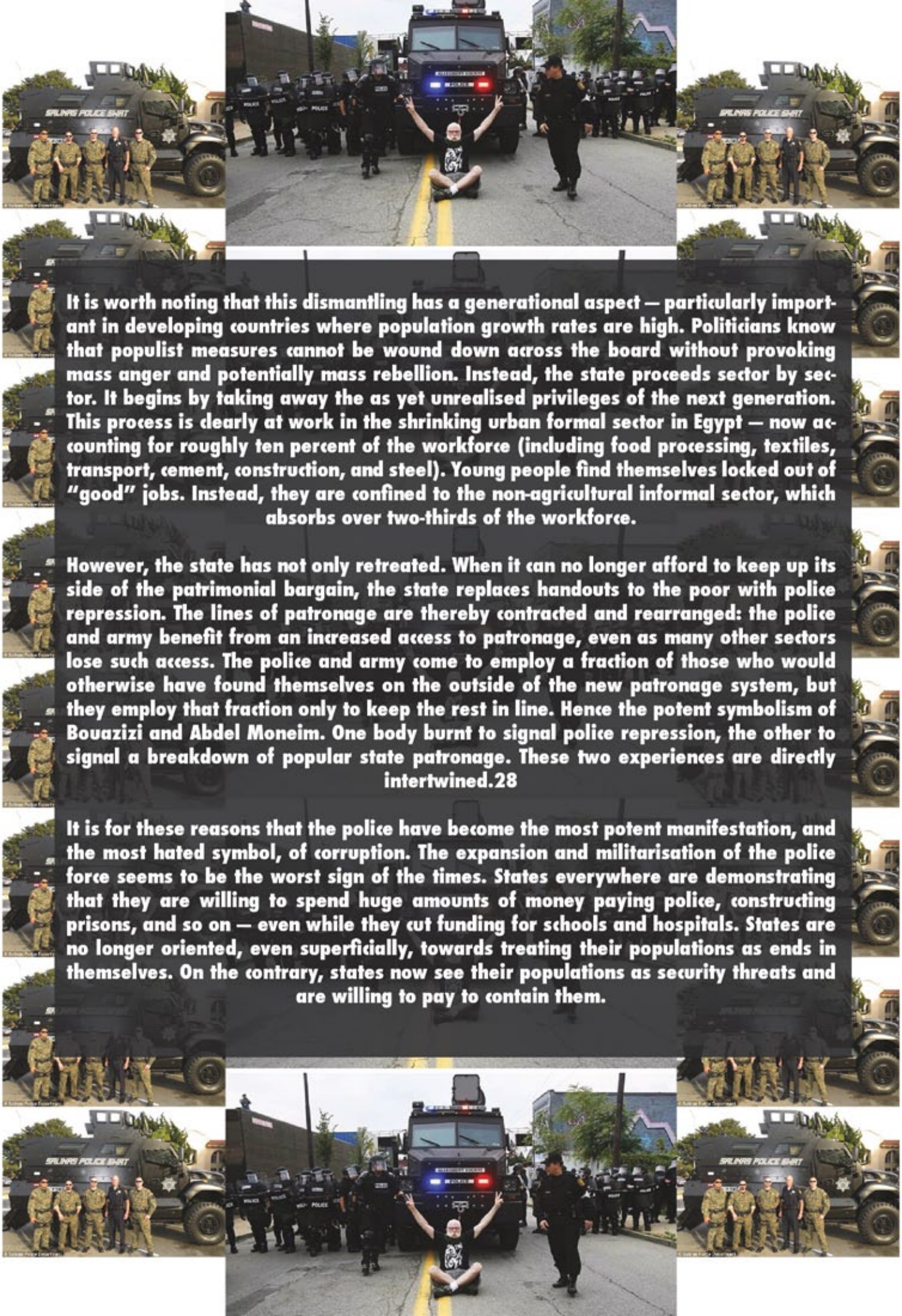


In opposing these different manifestations of corruption, the occupiers of the squares seemed to be promoting two somewhat divergent ideas.

1) The rich should be made to feel the pain of the crisis, and of the austerity that followed. After all, neoliberal ideologues argued that everyone should take "personal responsibility" for themselves and their actions; in that sense, everyone should aspire to be petty bourgeois. The target of this discourse were the unions, as well as anyone drawing state benefits. As we saw above, however, the biggest handouts went not to the unions or the ultra-poor, but quite visibly to the ultra-rich. They made out like bandits, while everyone else suffered, through not only economic crisis, but also austerity. To get money out of politics would mean: to force the ultra-rich to take responsibility for their own actions.

2) At the same time, to the extent that venal politicians were cutting supports for the poor while handing out money to the rich, the occupiers demanded, not a levelling of the playing field, but rather, its tilting in their favour. State patronage should be directed away from fat cats and towards populist constituents ("the nation"). Occupiers thus demanded a popular bailout, both out of a sense of what is frequently called "social justice" and also because, like good Keynesian economists, they hoped that a popular bailout would restore the economy to health.

Behind this second demand rests a truth that has become increasingly obvious: a large portion of the population has been left out of the economic growth of the past few decades, and there is no plan to bring them back in. Throughout low-income countries, direct state patronage to the poor – a crucial foundation of the clientelist state – has gradually eroded, while privatisation deals benefit a slim layer of the elite. The limited partnership, in which the poor had been able to enjoy some of the gains of the nationalist project, is being dismantled.



It is worth noting that this dismantling has a generational aspect — particularly important in developing countries where population growth rates are high. Politicians know that populist measures cannot be wound down across the board without provoking mass anger and potentially mass rebellion. Instead, the state proceeds sector by sector. It begins by taking away the as yet unrealised privileges of the next generation. This process is clearly at work in the shrinking urban formal sector in Egypt — now accounting for roughly ten percent of the workforce (including food processing, textiles, transport, cement, construction, and steel). Young people find themselves locked out of "good" jobs. Instead, they are confined to the non-agricultural informal sector, which absorbs over two-thirds of the workforce.

However, the state has not only retreated. When it can no longer afford to keep up its side of the patrimonial bargain, the state replaces handouts to the poor with police repression. The lines of patronage are thereby contracted and rearranged: the police and army benefit from an increased access to patronage, even as many other sectors lose such access. The police and army come to employ a fraction of those who would otherwise have found themselves on the outside of the new patronage system, but they employ that fraction only to keep the rest in line. Hence the potent symbolism of Bouazizi and Abdel Moneim. One body burnt to signal police repression, the other to signal a breakdown of popular state patronage. These two experiences are directly intertwined.28

It is for these reasons that the police have become the most potent manifestation, and the most hated symbol, of corruption. The expansion and militarisation of the police force seems to be the worst sign of the times. States everywhere are demonstrating that they are willing to spend huge amounts of money paying police, constructing prisons, and so on — even while they cut funding for schools and hospitals. States are no longer oriented, even superficially, towards treating their populations as ends in themselves. On the contrary, states now see their populations as security threats and are willing to pay to contain them.

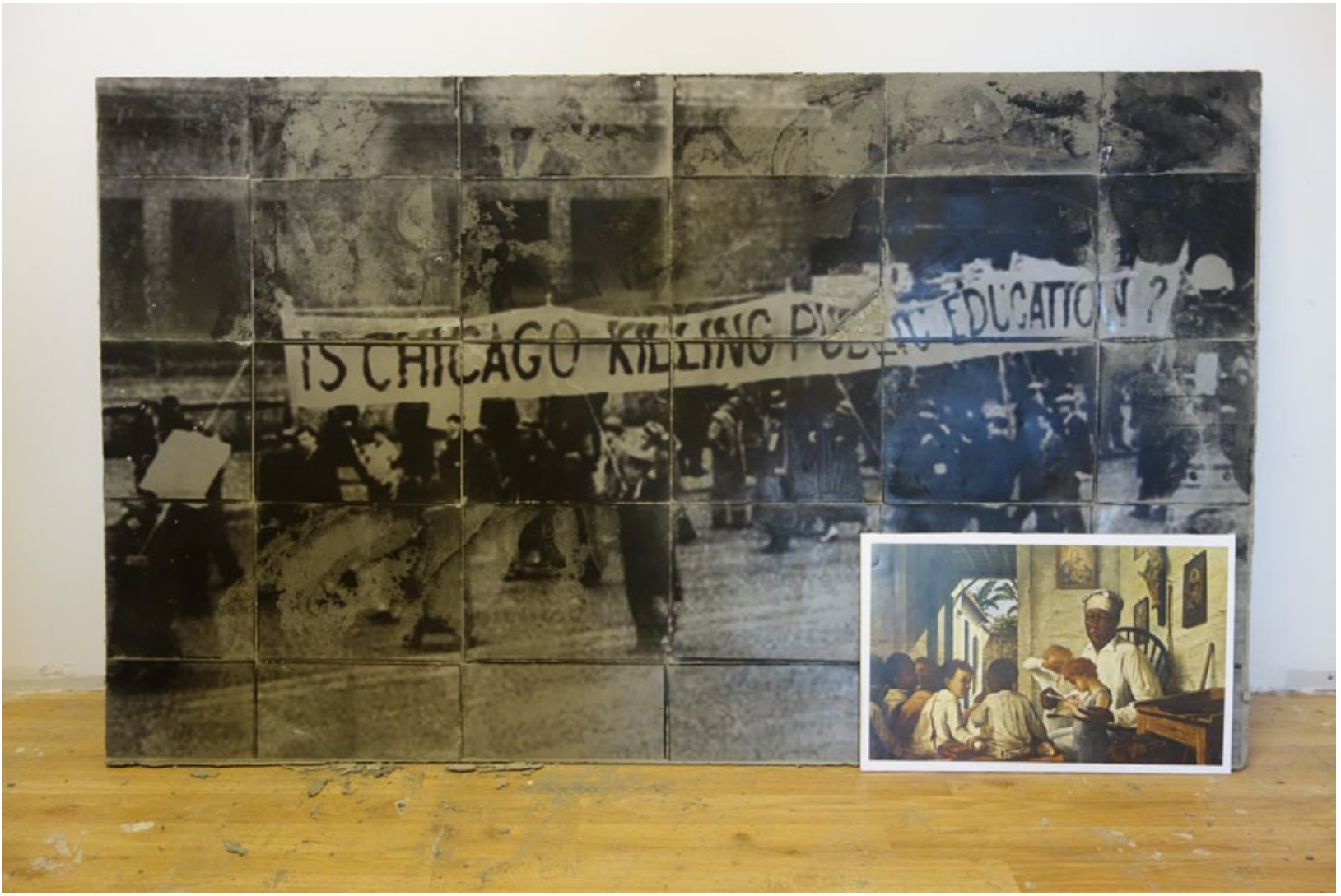
What comes next? It is impossible to say in advance. What we know is that, at least for the moment, we live and fight within the holding pattern. The crisis has been stalled. In order to make the crisis stall, the state has been forced to undertake extraordinary actions. It is hard to deny that state interventions, over the past few years, have seemed like a last ditch effort. Interest rates are bottoming out at zero percent. The government is spending billions of dollars, every month, just in order to convince capital to invest in a trickle. For how long? And yet, for this long, at least, state interventions have worked. The crisis has been petrified. And its petrification has been the petrification of the struggle.

Indeed, since the crisis has been stalled, the class struggle remains that of the most eager and the worst off. Everyone else hopes that, if they keep their heads down, they will survive until the real recovery begins. Meanwhile, those engaged in struggle are themselves mostly lost in false hopes of their own: they hope that the state can be convinced to act rationally, to undertake a more radical Keynesian stimulus. The protesters hope that capitalism can be forced to rid itself of cronies and act in the interest of the nation. Unlikely to abandon this perspective – as long as it seems remotely plausible – anti-austerity struggles are themselves stuck in a holding pattern. They confront the objectivity of the crisis only in the state's impassiveness in response to their demands.

We see three scenarios, going forward:

1) The holding pattern could be maintained for a while longer, so that a second wave of struggle, like the 2011–13 wave, might emerge within its confines. That second wave may remain tepid, like its predecessor often was. But it is also possible that it could become stronger, on the basis of real bonds that have been created over the past few years. If that happens, we could see the resurgence of a radical democratic movement, more popular than that of the anti-globalisation era. This movement would not necessarily focus on square occupations; it may announce itself by means of some other tactic, impossible to foresee. Such a movement, were it able to find a leverage point, might be able to renegotiate the terms on which the crisis is being managed. For example, protesters may be able to foist the fallout of the crisis on to the super rich: with a new Tobin Tax, progressive income taxes, or limitations on CEO pay. Perhaps rioters will form substantial organisations, which are able to press for the end of arbitrary police violence and a partial de-militarisation of police forces. Maybe Arab states can be made to raise public employment levels, in order to absorb a backlog of unemployed university graduates. In any case, all of these demands, even if they were achieved, would be like forming a workers' council on the deck of the Titanic. They would be self-managing a sinking ship (though, admittedly, since the icebergs are melting, what that ship would hit is as yet unknown).

2) The holding pattern could be maintained for a while longer, but the second wave of struggle, within its confines, could look radically different than the first one. Perhaps – taking their cue from the movement of squares – proletarians will see an opening for a new, more or less informal, rank-and-file unionism. This unionism, if it infected the huge mass of unorganised, private-sector service workers, could radically transform the terms within which the crisis is managed. It might be possible, on that basis, to approach the composition problem from the other way around. Fast food workers are currently striking in the United States, demanding a doubling of their wages. What if they succeed and that success acts as a signal for the rest of the class to pour out onto the streets? It is important to remember that a massive shift in the terms of the class struggle does not always correspond to a rise in the intensity of the crisis. The objective and subjective moments of the class relation do not necessarily move in sync.



Ramón Miranda Beltrán, *To Collapse Invisible Walls,* 2014

LINKS

http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-holding-pattern

http://www.80grados.net/el-paro-magisterial-y-los-tres-mosqueteros/

https://occupywallst.org/article/seeing-red-chicago-teachers-strike-elevates-anti-p/

http://occupiedchicagotribune.org/2012/09/seeing-red/

http://obrag.org/?p=51794

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2527699/California-police-department-gets-650-000-37-000lb-armored-military-truck.html

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