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# The privilege of revolution:

## Gender, class, space, and affect in Egypt

### ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I challenge assumptions about political transformation by contrasting women's experiences at home during the Egyptian revolution with the image of the iconic male revolutionary in Tahrir Square. I call attention to the way that revolution is experienced and undertaken in domestic spaces, through different forms of affect, in ways deeply inflected by gender and class. [*Egypt, revolution, gender, class, space, affect, generation*]

**T**he iconic image of the revolutionary, in the Egyptian uprising as in others, is that of a young man. In visual representations, especially photographs, he is typically raising a fist, throwing a rock, or standing in front of tanks in some famous focal space in a major city. The revolutionary is defiant, at times angry, and at times exuberant. He is not at home getting the children dressed, for example, or sitting both bored and anxious watching the news on television, or hobbling with a cane over to the phone to place a call checking up on the grandchildren. Are these spaces and these kinds of emotions and actions, ubiquitous in Egypt last spring during what nearly all Egyptians call a "revolution,"<sup>1</sup> somehow not "revolutionary"? The dominance of the iconic image of the young man defiant in urban space not only occludes other experiences of the uprising in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East but also affects understanding of the links between political agency, space, and affect more broadly.

I was in Cairo on Friday, January 28, 2011, the first Friday after the start of the Egyptian revolution. The revolutionaries had denominated the day "Friday of Anger" and called for mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square after prayers in the mosque. Fridays are quiet days in Cairo, a time when city dwellers get a break from the traffic, noise, and crowds. But this particular Friday morning, the silence was full of anticipation, as many people were glued to the television, waiting to see what showdown might occur on the streets once the mosques let out. I sat with my neighbor Mona in her kitchen, meticulously rolling stuffed cabbage for a birthday party we were having that night for our children, who shared a birthday week. Amal, the housekeeper, was preparing macaroni casserole. We talked about being nervous and afraid (*qalqana, khayfa*), as we struggled to hear whether the preacher from the nearby mosque was giving the men a revolutionary pep talk or whether he had been one of the ones ordered or paid by the government to instruct the men to go home. Soon we heard male

voices rising in an anti-Mubarak chant, filtering down the adjacent block. Mona and I ran out to the balcony, as did many, mostly female, neighbors on balconies up and down the street. As the men passed under the balcony, Mona, giddy and nervous, said, "I've never seen such a thing in all my life in this neighborhood. I never imagined this would happen." After the men disappeared down the street, we went back to the kitchen and continued rolling the cabbage.

Mona and I both supported the revolution. She and her husband had been imprisoned (her husband also tortured) for their student activism in the 1970s, and, in the 15 years I had known her, practically every mutual conversation was marked by her exasperation with the political and economic situation in the country. She was especially angry about the dramatic decline in the state education system and the hundreds of hours she had to spend tutoring and worrying about her daughter because of it. Since beginning fieldwork in the mid-1990s for a book on cultural production, the state, and nationalism (Winegar 2006), through my yearlong research sabbatical just prior to the revolution for a book on state and NGO cultural development programs for poor and working-class youth, I had collected haunting testimonies of people's experiences of life in the increasingly harsh economic circumstances and political oppression of the authoritarian neoliberalism that came to define the Mubarak era.

Yet here Mona and I were, on what was sure to be a defining day in Egypt's nascent revolt, cooking in the kitchen. My husband was out of town, and so I was alone with my four-year-old son and unable to join the protesters, and Mona's health did not permit her to march long distances or stand for long times in a crowd. As we silently rolled the rice into the cabbage leaves, I sensed that we were both feeling very guilty for having a party on this important day. I asked her, "Isn't it *haram* [bad, shameful] that there's a revolution outside and we are sitting in here making stuffed cabbage [*mahshi*]?" She nodded, "Yes, but we invited everyone. We told the kids. They're expecting a party." As we continued on to making the cakes, Amal, the housekeeper, commented on the events outside: "People should just see to themselves and get back to their work." She was smoking more than usual, asking Mona to get her extra amounts of anxiety medications, and very worried about her natal family in a town south of Cairo.

Amal, Mona, and I spent the day in increasing tension, as reports on al-Jazeera suggested brewing violence, and the regime shut down our phones and Internet. But we also spent the day making the home seem as "normal" as possible. We cooked, cleaned, and prepared for a party for the kids as if it were any other Friday family gathering. But Amal, who was required to do this work for her pay, was also nervous that the revolution would negatively affect her and her family's economic well-being. Meanwhile, Mona and I, significantly better off, were worried that the

revolution might not succeed and Mubarak might remain in power. That night, family and neighbors gathered to sing "Happy Birthday," and the kids blew out candles against the backdrop of a large flat-screen television showing violent images from Tahrir.

As the days wore on and the uprising escalated, Mona and I (and other family members of hers who could not, for a variety of reasons, go to Tahrir) became increasingly obsessed with al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya television. Day care centers and schools across the country were closed. My son was practically bouncing off the walls being stuck inside with non-children's television on nearly 18 hours a day. When the phones came back on, my first call was to a friend in another part of the city. With her government job on hiatus and kids' schools closed, she complained about feeling *zahqana*—a word that means "fed up." I concurred that all of us in our building were also *zahqanin* (a phrase also used in the Palestinian intifada; see Allen 2008). Another friend had a tearful breakdown when I visited her, crying that she could not stand the paralysis of being cooped up at home and unable to fully join the protesters on the streets.

What can this narrative reveal about women and the revolution in Egypt? Early on in the uprising, many of us foreign academics and journalists in Cairo started to receive e-mail inquiries from abroad asking us, "Where are the women in the revolution?" We always have to struggle between our suspicion of these kinds of questions, loaded as they are with very particular presumptions about and desires for women in the region, and our own feminist interest in women's activities (Naber 2011). I did not answer many of these inquiries because I could not go to Tahrir during those early days with a young child. Both the general threat of violence and the antiforeigner rhetoric in the state media meant that it would not be safe for me to bring him to the square. But the experience of sitting inside scared, excited, and frustrated while taking care of children was the more common experience of women during the revolution and one that, to my knowledge, has not been reported in the media. It was an experience dominated by managing everyday life in a Cairo neighborhood, a life that was deeply marked by gender, class, age, space, and persistent nervousness and exasperation.

Although the "real" events of revolution may seem to happen in places like Tahrir, fieldwork on major political change can and should also take place in the home. At home, there is an opportunity to track more closely how day-to-day practices can support or impede such change. These practices, far from public centers of protest, are not as dramatic and moving as the fervent, demonstrative, and, at times, celebratory calls for dignity, social justice, and freedom that ring out in places like Tahrir. But everyday domestic experiences are crucial for the public staging of claims to these abstract principles and their potential (always partial) realization in the aftermath of dramatic events.

My point is not simply that women's work is important to managing tension in conflict and to undertaking revolution worldwide (e.g., Aretxaga 1997; de Volo 2001; Peteet 1991; Ring 2006). Asma Mahfouz, Nawara Negm, Isra Abdel Fattah, Gigi Ibrahim, and countless other women activists rallied people to Tahrir. Women in Egypt also cooked for their neighborhood watch committees, donated medical supplies and food to the people in Tahrir, and encouraged friends and relatives who were able to go downtown to do so (Winegar 2011). They also cooked for their male relatives who were demonstrating, took care of the children whose schools were closed, managed the household budget after banks closed and people were not paid, and stood in long lines for food in anticipation of shortages. Perhaps the most famous martyr of the revolution was Sally Zahran, who, many say, died after jumping off her balcony in a provincial southern town because her mother, afraid for her daughter's life, prevented her from going out and joining demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> But even if one looks for female activists in Tahrir or brings to light the agency (and tragedy) of women's work in their homes and neighborhoods, one still is not adequately addressing the assumptions about revolution, political agency, space, and affect that are expressed in the iconic image of the revolutionary. What does it mean to say that the true locus of transformative politics is an urban square, filled with fervently determined young people—mostly men with some women?

To be the iconic revolutionary in Tahrir, one either had to be poor, without anything to lose, or privileged in certain ways. One usually did not have children to provide for (an older male role) or was not tasked with caring for them in the home (a female role, usually filled by mothers and older sisters). It helped if one had a salaried job at a place that was closed because of the revolution (as did government workers and some private-sector workers, mainly in companies). People whose income depended on more informal employment (e.g., housekeepers, vegetable sellers, cab drivers, handymen, day laborers) often were not willing to risk losing potential pay by protesting for hours in Tahrir. If not among the eldest males in the household, one generally had to have one's family's permission to go to Tahrir, which was most easily (though not always) given to young men, who—in Egypt as elsewhere—are the ones seen to be responsible for fighting for the nation but whose power is still circumscribed by gerontocratic patriarchy. One had to also have the health and stamina to endure hours in the square and attacks by the regime, which, given the 30-year decimation of the public health care system under Mubarak, often meant the youth or the upper classes who could afford quality health care. One had to also live in Cairo or have the capital (both economic and cultural) to get to Cairo and to stay there.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the women I knew had difficulty getting to Tahrir for any number of these reasons, and, in some cases,

the resulting exasperation contributed to them wanting the revolution to end—whatever the outcome. Amal, the housekeeper, completely dependent on noncontractual labor and supporting her poor family in the province, wanted events in Tahrir to stop and things to go back to “normal.” Once the phones and Internet were turned back on, I reconnected with many of the young unmarried women in their twenties with whom I had been working before the revolution began. Without exception, they expressed relief that they were moving about the city again. A few said with frustration or understanding that their parents had not let them out of the house for fear they would be hurt in what was termed the “social chaos” (*fawda*) of those first 18 days. Despite the claims (generally but not exclusively true) that there was no sexual harassment in Tahrir, many families were afraid of gender-based violence in the streets of the city. These young women expressed being fed up (“without fresh air,” said one; “physically sick of the TV,” said another). They spent the 18 days nervous for their country and for their friends or family members (often male) in Tahrir. These experiences (in part) led some of them to oppose the revolution. Anxiety and being “fed up” led all of them to want it to end quickly. Women with young children, who had been stuck at home, reflected long and hard on the risks of revolution to the maintenance of daily life—on the necessities of feeding a family and caring for a home with a husband who was alive, not martyred.

My own spouse was finally able to get back to Cairo as transport lines began to reopen. My relief at his safe arrival and at having a parenting partner again quickly turned to exhilaration as, a mere two hours later, Mubarak's departure from office was announced on television. We rushed to Tahrir, one family among thousands who were now able to go there as families without fear. The following day, the square took on an even more family-oriented festival atmosphere, complete with treats for the kids—popcorn, little flags, face painting, and homemade pop-up dolls (made to resemble reviled Mubarak-regime figures). People were celebrating Mubarak's departure, but many were also celebrating their first outing in weeks, especially with family.

Now the festival atmosphere in Tahrir has dissipated and a “politics of disappointment” has emerged, which comes in part from framing the revolution as a youth-led teleological process (Greenberg n.d.). One wonders how disappointment will be experienced by those women who were nervous and fed up and who did not have the privilege of going to Tahrir. As I finish this commentary, once again in the United States, Mona tells me how excited she is that teachers are planning a nationwide strike demanding meaningful reform, but our Skype conversation is interrupted when she gets a phone call from her daughter. Mona pleads with her not to spend the night at her friend's house and return home at dawn, because “at that time,

there's absolutely no one on the streets. It's not good." She hangs up and complains to me about the continued lack of basic security after the revolution; the police are still not back on the streets in full force, in part because their racketeering and brutal treatment of the citizenry in the Mubarak years (and after) have made them the target of revolutionary reform. If the teachers strike, schools will be closed just as they were during the 18 days. The strike demands are crucial, but a shutdown will have complicated effects at home. The women and men who could not go to Tahrir constitute the hidden majority, which will ideally continue the revolution in the coming years. Focusing only on the iconic revolutionary—and, by extension, iconic notions of revolution—means missing the myriad, everyday ways that social transformation is experienced, enabled, and perhaps impeded, always in relationship to space, gender, and class.

## Notes

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1. I use the word *revolution* to describe the ongoing process of transformation in Egypt because it is the most apt translation of the word *thawra*, which is used by Egyptians and most people in the Middle East to describe recent events. It is far too early to render analytic judgment on whether this process constitutes a revolution in any of the myriad meanings of the word debated in political theory.

2. The circumstances surrounding Sally Zahran's death (whether suicide or the result of a blow to the head in Tahrir) are hotly debated, as is the question of whether she wore the headscarf. These contests reveal her to be a particularly productive cultural icon, with which different groups debate and advance agendas (Armbrust in press). In my view, Sally Zahran is memorialized more as a martyr than as a revolutionary; furthermore, her gender destabilizes any straightforward canonization in the revolutionary lexicon.

3. Or to another city: There were very important public demonstrations in other urban areas, notably Alexandria and Suez.

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