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6 Violence, Social Actors, and Subjectivation in the Egyptian Revolution

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Abstract
This chapter gives an account of what we call the social actors’ “subjectivation” in the Egyptian Revolution. This notion encompasses their emotions, their strategic calculations, their mood, and their cultural features. Although structural factors like the economy and politics and, in particular, the geopolitics of the region play an important role in most of the Arab societies, too often they are stressed at the expense of the “subjective” state of the social actors. This chapter accounts for the revolution on the basis of the “subjectivation” hypothesis that highlights the interaction between the people and elites.

Keywords: subjectivation, desubjectivation, social actor, subject, emotions

The Arab Revolutions and Subjectivation

The analysis of violence in the Egyptian Revolution gives an account of what we call the social actors’ “subjectivation,” encompassing their emotions, their strategic calculations, their mood, and their cultural features (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). Although structural factors like the economy and politics and in particular the geopolitics of the region play an important role in most of the Arab societies, too often they are stressed at the expense of the “subjective” state of the social actors. This chapter accounts for the revolution on the basis of the “subjectivation” hypothesis that highlights the interaction between the people and elites.
The notion of subjectivation was developed first in psychoanalytical circles in the early 1990s and then taken up by French social scientists in order to reintroduce the notion of the “subject” in social movements. For Touraine, Wieviorka, and Dubet among others who have been working on social movements, subjectivation is a process by which one becomes a subject capable of assuming the role of a social actor within social movements or outside them (Touraine, Wieviorka, and Dubet 1984). The notion intends to bridge the gap between the intimate and the social spheres, the public and the private spheres. It preserves a psychological dimension, notably by introducing the counterconcept of “desubjectivation” based on despair and the inability to assume the role of a social actor within the social framework (Touraine and Khosrokhavar 2000; Touraine 1997, 2013). Touraine’s view of subjectivation is based on a heroic conception of the subject as a person who dissociates herself from others and acts in an atomistic manner in order to fend off the domination of the social system. In this regard subjectivation is an act of insubordination and self-assertion within a social context marked by the hegemony of class, groups, and the state.

In my view, subjectivation is more related to the situation of the individual within a group of street protesters or in other gatherings in which a new type of intersubjective relationship develops that relates the individual to the group through emotions and makes possible a new type of social action by combining them with “on the spot” rationalizations and strategies that did not exist before their encounter. Subjectivation, in this case, is intersubjective by its very nature, in contrast to Touraine’s view. Subjectivation has some affinity with empowerment; but whereas the latter insists on social conditions, the former is more sensitive to the psychological conditions of the individual. When individuals are discouraged, one might talk of “desubjectivation,” that is the loss of the capacity to mobilize one’s mental resources in order to promote social action.

Subjectivation transforms passive moods into active emotions that promote action, in particular, social protest. The origin of this transformation is obscure: rumors circulate that “others” have thrown themselves into the streets and braved the repressive forces of the state. The individual is hesitant at the beginning, and once in the street, the spectacle of a minority engaging in demonstrations encourages her to follow in their footsteps; the shared emotion heightened through slogans creates a collective feeling of shared indignation toward the government. Through subjectivation, what was accepted as a sad fact of life becomes unbearable due to heightened indignation, shared and amplified by the others. One young male participant to Tahrir Square told me:
We all shared a deep discontent toward a regime that did not take us into account but we were passive, we did not react. What pushed me to do so was first the Tunisians who ousted their corrupt president and then, our shared feeling of indignation through the Web and, more important, gathering in Tahrir Square. There happened something that cannot be put easily in words: We became one body through shouting our rage against the regime. The more they tried to intimidate us, the more we became careless about our life. Being together gave us a sense of immunity. I recovered my lost dignity.¹

Subjectivation is a push toward empowerment but it has a unique side, including the feeling of indignation. What did not seem to push toward the public expression of anger and outrage suddenly becomes unacceptable. The cause can be the “others’ action.” The “others” can be the few people who dared come to the street to voice their discontent, but it can also be another society. In the Egyptian case, Tunisia’s ability to put an end to the autocratic rule of Ben Ali through the Jasmin Revolution played a role: the “others” (Tunisians) did it, why can’t Egyptians, the standard bearers of the oldest civilization in the world, achieve what a tiny country was able to perform?

Subjectivation is also based on the “right” to be recognized as a subject (in the Egyptian case, to be a citizen), contrary to the traditional viewpoint that made the individual subservient to the community (the pan-Arabist nation or the Islamist umma in the case of Egypt). The right to express one’s discontent even in a country where the notion of the citizens’ rights is not institutionalized as in the Western countries is a new phenomenon, and to promote this status of citizenship the person views herself as entitled to respect and permitted to revolt if her government does not accept this right. There is a modern side to subjectivation that binds respect to the process of individuation and makes the dignity of the citizen the pillar of his (or her) identity. This young woman who took part in Tahrir Square’s movement expresses it beautifully:

I was a noncitizen, a nonhuman being in a double sense: as an Egyptian and as a woman. I had no dignity. I was nothing, less than nothing. In Tahrir Square I recovered my dignity as much as a citizen as a woman. The others respected me; they did not try to pinch me or rub their body against mine, even when we were close to each other. We found ourselves as moral beings. We were immoral because we were denied our being.

¹ The interviews, unless otherwise stated, were conducted in Cairo in March 2011, two months after the overthrow of Mubarak.
human by the regime. Once together, our aim was at the beginning to overthrow the pharaoh [Mubarak] and then, bit by bit, we became aware of our human values: we helped each other, we helped those who became ill, we organized cultural events, we built a new world in miniature. We recovered our dignity and the more the baltagia [the militia of the regime] tried to threaten us, the less we were afraid, because we had discovered a new identity. We were not violent but did not accept violence on their side. We tried to defend ourselves without becoming violent in a wild manner. We disarmed some baltagia but we did not beat them to death, we just made them flee or brought them to the soldiers who were close by. They let them go. There I felt I was a citizen, nonviolent, respectful of the others, even when they were so mean, like the militia. I became aware of myself as somebody who asked for respect and who was respected as an individual and as a woman. I was sexually respected, not harassed by the men that surrounded me as it often happens in the bus or on the street.

Here subjectivation is also remoralization and a new type of gender behavior. Another protester, Ahad Soueif, thought that being at Tahrir Square enabled the participants to develop a sense of togetherness that made the collective action meaningful: “We had come together, as individuals, millions of us, in a great cooperative effort” (Soueif 2012). A local leader of a minority trade union, a worker probably in his late 30s, has a similar view with a specific reference to his origins and his social struggle:

As a worker I was a minority there. Many were younger than me and we were not numerous. I belong to the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions [EFITU] and not the corrupt Egyptian Trade Union Federation [ETUF]. The others did not understand my feelings, but what united us was stronger than what separated us. Here I was, with my paltry salary, while the others looking for dignity were much better off. But we came to understand that whatever our claims, Mubarak had to go. I became closer to the movement when we found the baltagia in front of us. There, we forgot about our differences and came together without any afterthought. We fought them and there; we found our dignity as citizens, not as a worker or as a student, but simply as a citizen.

Subjectivation means celebrating the new togetherness so that people do not fall into the mundane routines of daily life as commented Israa Abdel-Fattah, a member of the April 6 movement: “We don’t want life to go back to normal until Mubarak leaves” (Sherwood 2011).
Subjectivation involves claiming to be an individualized citizen in a society where citizenship is trampled upon by authoritarian nationalism and fundamentalist or radical Islamism. It opens up the assertion of the self as a person who participates in politics through street protests in which shared emotions of indignation and frontal opposition to the state become the major means to achieve the “civil society” in a subjective manner, without the institutional framework that underpins an objective civil society. In brief, subjectivation makes it possible to be a politically recognized individual in a new framework of a shared community of emotions through which people endeavor to accomplish their desire to be a respected subject. The latter desires to take part in decisions concerning their collective destiny within a society in which this capacity is denied to the individual.

Subjectivation also relates the individual to a “would-be social movement” which develops in a progressive manner through this very process of shared emotions and grievances in a period of effervescence created by putting together the activated emotions of indignation and moral demands. Contrary to the working-class movements in which the economic condition of the workers was the dominant characteristic of their association and protest movements, in the new social movements and particularly in the Egyptian Revolution, the loose association of individuals with disparate social conditions gave birth to collective action against the Mubarak regime. This was made possible through “subjectivation”: the latter compensated for the heterogeneous conditions of the people, creating a unity of emotions autonomous from their “objective” social conditions.

One important dimension of subjectivation is the loss of fear through a complex mechanism that has to do with the transition from passivity to activity and the sense of sharing the same destiny with the others. Becoming fearless is the beginning of the victory, as Ahmad Mahmoud puts it crudely: “I will come every day until he [Mubarak] leaves because now I know that we have won [...] When we stopped being afraid, we knew we would win” (McGreal 2011).

Here we focus on a specific type of subjectivation, namely the one that brought about the Egyptian Revolution and which built up emotions through two major notions laden with strong emotions, namely nonviolence (selmiyah) and dignity (karamah).

Few voices were heard that had doubts about the outcome of the forthcoming revolution. Some belonged to the Mubarak regime, but others felt doubts about a revolution that aimed at ousting the president without any concrete project, as put by this middle-class man in his 50s, a teacher at the university of Cairo:
People want to get rid of Mubarak but instead of planning for the future, they gather at Tahrir Square, hang out, and celebrate being together. This is not a project for a new society. They've gone on a picnic to Tahrir Square – this is their revolution. We have a tourist economy that is already suffering from the unrest. I see a bleak future for these young people. They are idealists and who do not have the slightest idea of what politics is about. I am afraid for the future.

A man in his 40s, who spoke English and refused to tell me what his job was (he was probably a higher-up in the security forces), said: “These young people believe that they can put an end to the rule of the army. They have ousted Mubarak, but the result is chaos. I know this society. After some time people will ask for a strong power and the only institution there is, is the army. Egypt needs a pharaoh; it has been always so, since five thousand years ago.”

At the outset the Arab revolutions promoted nonviolence as a major motto, and they framed their emotions in order to stress their refusal to become violent. This attitude was not due exclusively to the new subjective stance of the revolutionary actors, but also to the invention during the last two decades of what might be called the “subjective civil sphere” or the “emotional civil sphere” in Egyptian society in particular and in most of the Arab world in general (Alexander 2011; Khosrokhavar 2015). In the two decades preceding the Arab uprisings, education became widespread, young girls became a sizeable proportion of the students, social media made headway, and a new “pan-Arabism” developed from below that provided a sense of common culture despite major differences among the new generations of Arabs (Khosrokhavar 2012).

But nonviolence and its status changed drastically during the five years after the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt in January 2011. This period has a history of its own. The challenge is to understand it in terms of a sociology of affects, emotions, and the ad hoc subjective civil sphere, with the end result being the return of authoritarianism and the repression of many social actors who had accomplished the Egyptian Revolution.

Tahrir Square was the birthplace of the Egyptian Revolution, the “topos” where the logic of emotions and the utopia of a new society blended into a dream that could be accomplished on a small scale at that place, the task of the revolution being its extension to all of Egypt (Khosrokhavar 2012).

Tahrir Square was of course not the entire script of the revolution, which also occurred in other major cities (in particular, Alexandria: see Chapter 5) and progressively extended to many parts of Egyptian society. But Tahrir
Square epitomized the revolution, a place where affects and emotions were framed according to the dual principles of nonviolence and dignity and a new “community” was built to respect them. Participants overcame fear of the government by taking part in the demonstrations. Going beyond the “awe” inspired by the state was a collective experience in many uprisings in the Arab world; the so-called awe of the state (haiba al dawla) had been a major obstacle to protest movements in a region where peaceful demonstrations can end up facing violence from the police or the military. The Egyptian Revolution also developed a “spatialized emotion center” in Tahrir Square, a “topos” in which the major sentiments and emotions crystallized in a ritualized fashion, influenced by the characteristics of that square and the socialization process within it, drawing on its history as the venue for nationalism during the Nasser era and the theater of a movement against British colonialism in the late nineteenth century. At Tahrir Square violence was excluded: no violence toward women (the complaints were about the behavior of the security forces outside Tahrir Square), toward the Christians (Copts could celebrate their rituals without any fear of being harassed), toward nonpracticing Muslims. As one student in his mid-20s said few months later:

We wanted to be the mirror of the future Egyptian society. We excluded violence, we tried to be kind toward each other, tolerant. Now, with hindsight, I think that we were too naïve. We thought we could change Egypt by changing our attitudes at Tahrir Square. Still, it was a wonderful experience for me and I developed a new way of looking at myself and at others.

During the occupation Tahrir Square was kept tidy (whereas many streets of Cairo are rather untidy, even dirty). It had a life of its own during the revolution proper and it had its own free hospital, cultural events, theater, music, and more. In the adjacent streets art exhibitions developed, mainly related to the revolution and its glorification. In this community, the feeling of a new life as a pure civil society, outside the realm of the repressive state, was experienced by the people who actively took part in it in the name of subjective dignity (karamah), as opposed to the indignity of state repression. Subjectivation was synonymous with nonviolent, responsible citizenship holding fast to the place and remaining there in a decent manner in order to denounce the Mubarak regime.

Tahrir Square, during the Revolution and for many months afterward, meant an alternative society to the one proposed by the repressive state.
In it religious differences were swept aside between the Muslims and the Christians (Copts) and even those who did not strongly believe in God. This utopian civil sphere became part of the identity of those who thought of the Egyptian Revolution as a radical break with the past, a rebirth of society under the guise of a new government that would not only represent them, but would be consonant with them in their heart and soul in an idealistic manner. Tahrir Square would be the showcase of the future Egyptian society; in it social relations were devoid of violence and based on an empowerment founded on the rejection of political authoritarianism.

This logic of sentiments at Tahrir Square became part and parcel of the period that witnessed the gradual separation between those who believed in this “effervescent community” and the rest of society, exposed to a dire economic situation and for whom Tahrir Square became a stumbling block to a “normal society.” What might be called “Tahrirization” was based on the difference between those who wanted to perpetuate the ideal of the revolution in its global aspects and those who believed that the revolutionary period was over and that, after Mubarak’s ouster, life should get back to normal.

During the Egyptian Revolution proper society, at least in large cities, was mostly opposed to Mubarak. Those who were not politically involved or did not reject Mubarak outright were either overawed by the demonstrations at Tahrir Square or felt somehow “ashamed” to demonstrate for the declining president. His fate was akin to the Shah of Iran in 1979. Even the minority who supported the Shah did not express it openly, either because they did not want to go beyond certain levels or because of the logic of “shame” in front of those who demonstrated massively and were exposed to repression by the police or the military.

This feeling of being a minority with a “nonlegitimate” claim in front of a government that has lost its legitimacy because it has been too repressive and at the same time has lost its capacity to frighten others, is part of the scenario that makes demonstrations in support of this type of government “shameful”: not because it is repressive, but due to the fact that it is not able to show its legitimacy by a show of force and the capacity to intimidate. Those who display their opposition accept risks that are not acceptable to the others (the proponents) and who entertain also a sentiment of guilt in consequence of the indirect interaction with those opponents who demonstrate against the powers that be and who, through their slogans, actions, and gestures make the others feel the burden of a guilty conscience riddled with implicit self-incrimination as being the indirect coauthors of repression.
Sometimes, what occurs in the demonstrations in front of those who do not demonstrate is an “inversion scheme”: those who are protesting have already won legitimacy over those who do not participate in the protest movement and who, because they are either against it or fearful of it, refuse to join the protesters. They feel the pinch of guilt, shame, or at least powerlessness in front of the spectacle of those who demonstrate and dare to question the government. By overcoming fear, those who protest play a role in preventing those who support the government from acting in the public sphere through role inversion: to stand by the government becomes illegitimate.

Tahrir Square underwent the same processes during the heroic period of the revolution proper that lasted eighteen days and was prolonged for many weeks afterwards: legitimacy gained through the daring act of protesting, a feeling of impotence among those who did not share their views, and a capacity to embody the legitimacy of a new order to come that their shouting, cries, slogans, body language and community life in Tahrir Square vindicated. The global media, and in particular Al Jazeera’s large screen at Tahrir Square, convinced those who lived there that they were seen by the world and their legitimacy embodied a theatricality of its own through televisions around the world.

A new sense of “Tahrirization” comes to the fore: what made the demonstrators and those who lived there cling to a new identity made them afterwards unable to open up to a changing situation in the rest of Egyptian society and to perceive the eroding legitimacy of their attitudes and behavior patterns. The period when Tahrir Square became the symbolic embodiment of the Revolution was also the beginning of its decline in terms of empathy toward the rest of the society. The mainly young “netizens,” who wanted social, political and economic change, did not see the degrading situation of an embattled economy based in a large part on tourism that was receding due to the troubles and instability. They were unable to perceive their own gradual loss of legitimacy in the eyes of other citizens. The “real society” was undergoing a deep economic and political crisis, while the so-called Tahrir Square youth became more and more estranged from the daily problems of society.

What once was the theater of the majority’s will for change gradually became the venue where the divide became obvious: on the one hand, the radicalized actors of a mythicized community embodied in the youth of Tahrir Square, and on the other hand, a society that was undergoing disillusion and disenchantment with revolutionary ideals. The young minority were determined to preserve the ideal of a utopian community,
and Tahrir Square turned into a sectarian brotherhood of puritanical believers. The language of the Tahrir Square youth and their mindset was metapolitical, humanitarian or ethical. They harbored a moral attitude toward society, wishing to build up a close-knit community based on ethics rather than politics. Many decades of corrupt and populist leaders had induced a deep distrust toward politics as such. Contrary to classical revolutions, the Tahrir Square youth were not “politcized” but aimed at a metapolitical order that would embody morality and achieve social goals by virtue rather than through the new institutions and political parties that would emerge as a result of the overthrow of the authoritarian government.

The rupture of Tahrir Square youth from the rest of the society resulted from a degrading economy, political instability, and an opaque future, inducing a radical rejection of the revolutionary actors by many citizens who yearned for political stability and economic recovery. The military coup that put an end to the government was in part against the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) government that did not have any project for society except the progressive infiltration of the state by the MB apparatus, and in part against the Tahrir Square youth who had blocked the political situation by their ethereal views and their intransigence toward real politics.

Fragile Affects in the Egyptian Revolution

The so-called January 25 Revolution in Egypt was decisive in making explicit what had been implicit in the daily life of many ordinary citizens: the feeling that the Mubarak government had trampled their dignity. This situation was expressed in a word that found wide currency in Egypt and beyond it, in the Arab world, namely hogra (contempt): the state was contemptuous of its citizens and people endured it due to their fear, resistance (muqawama) being felt as impossible before the revolution. Demonstrations, both by imitation (Tunisia sent the message through its revolution in December 2010) and also by a feeling of being sick and tired, began in Egypt. Helplessness and silent acceptance of contempt were overcome by the sheer social action of protesting in the public sphere. The demonstrations created new social ties that overcame fear. But contrary to the past, when surpassing fear meant exerting “legitimate violence” against the former regime through a logic of honor and counterhumiliation, this time dignity was involved in challenging the state’s contempt. This notion, meaning inalienable rights of citizens who collectively
constitute the sovereign people, was new in the Muslim world, a new culture of pluralism. The notion has religious precedents. In the Quran, we find: “And indeed We have honored ['dignified': *karramna*, the same root as *karam*, *karamah*, (dignity)] the Children of Adam, and We […] have preferred them to many of those whom We have created with a marked preference” (Night Trip, verse 70). In this verse, God dignified Adam's offspring by giving them *karamah*, granting them prominence over the other creatures.

The current meaning of *karamah*, the dignity of a person as a citizen, is related to the individuation process and the recognition of a person as a judicial entity and, even more, an awareness of the inviolable nature of a person that should be recognized in his or her inalienable rights. Human rights groups in the Arab world now christen themselves *karamah*, such as the Alkarama for Human Rights, which denounced and publicized infringements on human rights.

Dignity can be distinguished from traditional honor, which was constantly brandished in the nationalist and Islamist movements in the twentieth century and by autocratic governments claiming that their honor was trampled upon by Western imperialism (nationalists), by the Crusaders (Islamists), and by internal enemies (both nationalists and Islamists). Honor is closely related to sexuality and metaphoric male ascendancy, assumed by the government in societies whose “honor” (*namus, irdh*, denoting the sexual integrity of women) has to be preserved by the state against internal and external devilish adversaries. Arab dictatorships mobilized this sense of threatened honor in order to deny dignity to their citizens.

The Egyptian Revolution at its inception replaced the logic of honor with that of dignity. Honor is, in its nationalist and Islamist embodiment, prone to see violence as necessary for the accomplishment of the community's goals and even desirable. Dignity is intent on preserving peace by avoiding violence. Honor entails dishonor as an irretrievable consequence if the offended honor is not followed by violence. The recurring theme in the movements of 2011 was *selmiyah* (peacefulness, nonviolence) rather than the Islamist cry for vengeance, inciting the people to seek revenge in order to preserve their national or religious honor.

The expressions related to honor and face actually exist in Arabic (and Persian) and are not mere idiomatic English translations. Dignity avoids the face-saving or face-losing dichotomy, opting for a painful face-to-face meeting with the opponent or seductive nonviolence toward the enemy, not fearing to be dishonored by showing one's flexibility and reflexivity. Honor in its face-losing and face-saving versions is incommensurable with dignity.
as an attitude based on the autonomy of the individual and mutual respect, especially between the government and the “governed” (Khosrokhavar 2012). Another feature of honor is that it responds to humiliation through a violent counterhumiliating posture, in need of an aggressive crescendo to prove to oneself one’s capacity for “saving face.” The humiliation issue is of the utmost significance. Dignity does not mean that humiliation is not felt; it signifies that one is able to master humiliation and not allow the logic of wounded honor to take hold of one for the sake of revenge (Scheff 1994).

Dignity makes possible empathy with others, not only those who belong to the same society, but distant others, through genuine feeling of relatedness through the bond of sheer humanity, which is a public sphere extended to the world in a symbolic way. That is what happened in the first months of the revolution in Tahrir Square. Islamist movements in Egypt wanted world public opinion to witness their strength and determination. A middle-aged Salafist told me:

What we want is to be taken into account. For me, these people at Tahrir Square are miscreants, they are not genuine Muslims. I do not believe that the West has sympathy toward us. They are secular; this is their religion. What we want is a Muslim society and they don’t want it. My view is that we should show strength. People at Tahrir Square act as if they were the entire Egypt.

At Tahrir Square, people believed that they could share with world public opinion their own saga and benefit from the world’s sympathy. Socialization at Tahrir Square created in a fragile manner the prerequisite for an open society based on “home-grown” values related to the Arab language (poetry, music, painting playing with the Arabic characters) and democracy, this time not as an imported item from the West but as an ingredient in Egyptian identity.

Subjectivation meant acting according to emotions in a predicament marked by the hostility of external forces and the necessity to build up a new “togetherness” based on mutual respect: women, religious minorities, and secular people were respected, and enthusiasm for a new society was blended with the concrete necessities of daily life in a manner that preserved togetherness for many weeks. Subjectivation made it possible to cope with a hostile environment outside the community and to preserve the coherence of the new “would-be community” in a manner that put the ideal side by side with the real. Tensions were neutralized through irony and
the moments of inaction were filled with music, theater, reading poems and organizing the concrete life of the community (providing medicine to those who had health problems, organizing meals, taking care of those who slept there at night). At Tahrir Square, as Charles Tripp puts it “Foodstalls had sprung up, as had medical stations, debating circles, tents and shelters for those who stayed there the night – one labelled ‘Freedom Motel’ in Arabic and English” (Tripp 2013).

Violence as a Sign of Antagonistic Subjectivities

After the revolution, street violence in different forms spread to many Egyptian towns and cities, an almost daily experience for many revolutionaries. The MB did not show any real capacity to cope with a tense post-revolutionary predicament where expectations were high and the capacity of the political system and the economy to cope with them were at the edge.

During the revolution proper (January 2011), violence was lived as coming from the Mubarak regime and when the militia (*baltagia*) attacked people, people defended themselves, sometimes using “counterviolence” but not taking the initiative to exert violence. The mood was toward irony, dialogue and affective consensus to oust Mubarak. The nature of violence changed during the period when the army took power in order to prepare for the elections. Violence against the Copts but also army violence (or inaction) against those who were violent, the mob, the remnants of the old regime (*fulul*) became a reality of daily life in contrast to the ideals of nonviolence during the January 25 Revolution. After the election of Morsi, violence became more pervasive, primordially not quantitatively but qualitatively, through the disappointment and even despair of the people, particularly the Tahrir Square people or those who had shared their utopia throughout Egypt. In all these processes the subjectivation of violence played a major role: the election of Morsi and the daily demonstrations and protest movements in many parts of Egypt that brought tourism to a halt progressively put an end to the feeling of violence as a *transitory* phenomenon. For many people it became a proof that the revolution had gone wrong. A member of the Tamarrod movement that put an end to Morsi’s presidency in conjunction with the army and many other prominent people (Ahmed al-Tayyeb the head of the Al Azhar, the Coptic Pope Tawadros, the Salafi Nur Party) said of the large demonstrations that put an end to Morsi’s reign by a popular army putsch:
During the [January 25] Revolution we believed that the departure of Mubarak would put an end to violence and chaos. Then the army assured the transition up to the elections under Marshal Tantawi. Morsi was elected and he tried to “brotherize” [ikhwanah] Egyptian society by putting his people into the major posts in the state. He was seeking to put an end to diversity by imposing Muslim Brotherhood. They did not even know how to govern and violence and disorder became paramount. They had to go for the order to be restored. Otherwise Egypt would not have survived and violence would have spread to all aspects of our daily life. (Interview, Cairo, January 2014)

Violence can also be understood as a show of “body politics” where no negotiated solution or institutionalized politics is in sight. In Egypt this body politics became a daily experience between the army, the Tahrir Square youth, the MB supporters, and the security forces. Ideology plays a lesser role than “street politics” grounded in hatred of each other and social tension caused by the incompatibility between moods, emotions and their articulation to the logic of interests: the opposition to the Morsi government became an “existential” dimension of those who believed that the MB was trying to swallow, even devour society and impose its version of Islam on the body social. Dignity was inflamed as opposition to Morsi by large parts of Egyptian society, giving rise to the protest movement Tamarrod a few months before the military coup, backed by a large part of the Egyptian society, at least in major cities.

Violence against Women

Women’s fate was related to the changing situation in the Egyptian Revolution. Moods and emotions were consistent at the outset between men and women but a rift opened after Morsi’s election and the cooling of the initial enthusiasm. On the whole, during the effervescent period at Tahrir Square in Cairo and to a lesser degree in Alexandria, the effusive atmosphere covered up gendered differences, at least among secular youth. Emotions by women and toward them by men can show the change within the “moodology” of the Egyptian Revolution, as a limited case for a more general “moodology” inspired by a sociology of emotions and social action. In Egypt, Asma Mahfouz became one of the few street leaders, a group that included primarily men even before the protest movement that led to the overthrow of Mubarak in January 2011. During the revolution she was active
and was regarded as a protest leader at least as much as she was perceived as a woman first. The fact that many men accepted her prominence tells much about the changes the mood brought about by the revolution. However, this change was as fragile as the “moods” that were part and parcel of it. Once the subjectivation process was brought to a halt, the blurring of lines between men and women was also questioned.

Up to the overthrow of Mubarak’s autocratic government, protest was dominated by the “Tahrir Square youth” type of revolutionary: egalitarian, mostly secular and socially tolerant. Muslims showed their tolerance by celebrating their prayers next to the Christians, who were celebrating theirs. Women more or less mingled with men and their mood was that of egalitarian social actors defending a view of the “self” and “others” based on an implicit gender equality. They shared with men the same aspiration toward a democratic regime, and during this period everyone’s preoccupation was how to deal with a threatening authoritarian regime.

In the second period, from the overthrow of Mubarak to the military coup, there was a dramatic change: the Salafis seriously threatened the emancipation of women. The latter’s number in the parliament dwindled in Egypt to less than 2 percent in the November 2011 elections. These are of course two distinct processes, one is about grassroots social pressure, the other one about electoral representation, but the incapacity to bridge subjectivation to political representation is well illustrated by them.

The gap between the two periods and the marginalization of most of the revolutionary actors in the ensuing political process induced the disarray of the “Tahrir Square youth” type of agents, including women. The democratic dimension of the Egyptian Revolution was overshadowed by the emergence of new actors and by the marginalization of the “revolutionary youth” who pushed toward opening up the mores and the recognition of women’s rights as full-fledged citizens. The frustration led in Egypt to the military coup, with the assistance and approval (at least at the beginning) of part of the Tahrir Square youth, secular women being their staunch supporters.

The Tahrir Square youth’s lack of political organization pushed them toward the sidelines after the ousting of both former regimes. They were marginalized by the fundamentalist (Salafi) and Islamist (Muslim Brotherhood) actors, who were far more organized and able to mobilize their social basis for the polls. The scattered votes of the secular and progressive revolutionaries and their inability to voice their views in a unified manner through new political parties made them vulnerable, women being the most fragile social actors among them. Tahrir Square youth were inclined to reject politics as “filthy” and they preferred moral attitudes to political
ones. Revolutionary women shared these characteristics to an even higher degree. They were less preoccupied with their own lot than with that of the revolution proper and they did not care about creating new types of social organizations that would defend them as women from the Islamist political organizations. The result was the marginalization of revolutionary men and women in the second period of the Arab revolutions. The army as an institution had an antifeminist attitude and did not defend women against traditionalists who rejected their claims for equality. A feminist told me in March 2013, few months before the overthrow of Morsi:

We have had three enemies: the MB, the Salafis and the army. They hate us for different reasons. The army is against us because we put into question the patriarchal order that supports them and to which they owe their clout. They do everything to humiliate us, they believe that we are prostitutes, that we question the social order and, therefore, that we are subversive. They also believe that we are part of a conspiracy by the West to undermine their power and the proof is that we are supported by the international media. I believe that shaking the patriarchal family and order will shake their supremacy and at least in that respect they are right. But many women do not understand our actions and side with traditionalists. This is our drama.

Secular authoritarian governments in the region had introduced legal norms that assured women more equality in families, inheritance, and divorce, making polygamy more difficult. But this was done by the governments, not by women as social actors. When it came to defend the January 25 Revolution, with few notable exceptions, women did not make feminist claims, mostly in order not to weaken a fragile revolutionary movement but partly due to their own lack of commitment to feminism, regarded as a Western attitude.

The division between “Islamist feminists” and “secular feminists” also undermined the cause of women. The Morsi government used this dis-sension to undercut women’s action: when secular women asked for equal rights, the Islamists brandished the complementary gender rights that were in many cases a disguised form of inequality. But Islamist women argued that the complementary issue made change less brutal and men were thus less afraid since it was expressed through an Islamic idiom. In Egypt, secular women contributed to the military coup against the Morsi government, securing a kind of legal equality with men through the new constitution. But the advent of the military was a bad omen for independent political
organizations, the women’s cause becoming marginalized in the face of the formidable repression that paralyzed civil society.

Women were present not only as foot soldiers, but also as leading figures (Naib 2011). Organizationally, however, they were weak and had no say in political matters, due to their lack of close ties with political parties that might defend their cause. Individually strong, collectively weak, the new generation of women was at best fragile in the political aftermath of the Arab Spring, although they were highly visible and conscious of their revolutionary role in bringing down autocracy in the initial street protests.

The scarcity of women as efficient activists in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular (with the exception of Tunisia), is related to patriarchal prejudices, but also to their own inability to build up prominence within political structures and parties. Political leaders do not view them as assets to defend (Al-Malki 2012), since they have not been collectively active within associations and political groupings on the political scene. The number of women in the parliament dwindled after the revolution, and women felt they were losing their gains in legal equality at the hands of the Islamists. Still, there were a few exceptions and a beginning of self-awareness that might bear its fruits in the future (Eriksen 2011).

Violence against women began before the overthrow of the old regime. Women were molested by the regime’s thugs (baltajiya), the army submitted them to virginity tests (Ortiz 2011), and female journalists were mistreated in order to intimidate them, be they from the diaspora or from Egypt. In June 2011, the popular writer Mona Eltahawy brought the issue to light as part of a strategy by the military to prevent women from participating in protest. The case of Samira Ibrahim, the 25-year-old Egyptian human rights activist, became widely known after she filed a legal case against the military. In reaction to the violence against them, women demonstrated, in particular in Cairo, close to Tahrir Square, against military rule and the harsh treatment of female protesters by the security forces. Many men joined them on December 20, 2011 (Johnson and Harding 2011).

In the eyes of the feminist Andrea Khalil,

In the context of the Arab Spring, popular pressures have been applied to the new governments by a wide range of groups of women whose opinions are redefining how constitutional and legal language treats gender in newly debated definitions of national identity. This shift in the women’s rights question from state-defined action to atomized forms of cyber activism and street action is characteristic of the broader shifts in North African popular politics that culminated in the Arab Spring. (Khalil 2014)
This mode of subjectivation, like the one of the Tahrir Square people, had a large impact at the beginning of the revolution. But once Mubarak was removed, it could not be a substitute for politics. Subjectivity was locked in a confined space like Tahrir Square, leaving the political field to the others. It became synonymous with depoliticization.

After the revolution, Salafis pushed to exclude women from the public sphere. Women Salafis became involved in promoting Sharia (Islamic law) and putting pressure on those women who asked for gender equality, tacitly approving violence against activist women. In the mobilization by Tamarrod and the opposition political parties against Morsi’s presidency in 2013, women played a significant role, but they were unable to convert this into political clout. They were overawed by the global movement against Morsi, partly divided between Islamists and secular, dependent on their families, and unable to build up autonomous feminist groups with the exception of small groups of secular women.

Another factor favoring violence against women was their massive appearance in the public sphere during the Arab revolutions. Since Salafis and traditionalists became politicized as well and sought to operate in the same public sphere, their first acts of self-vindication were violence against women who “dared” dispute their primacy by breaking down the barriers with men. Their violence took varied forms, physical, psychological, and moral. The army too, was keen to send women back to their homes in order to violently dispute with men the hegemony in the public sphere. Women activists were troublemakers who disputed the gender frontiers and therefore challenged male tradition.

Postrevolutionary male actors, with the exception of the Tahrir Square youth, usually embraced the reassignment of women to a less visible place, so as to exclusively occupy for themselves the public sphere and give their hegemony a symbolic basis. In Egypt, virginity tests against women, their rape, their mistreatment during and after the demonstrations, all these actions had a common denominator: pushing women back into the private sphere and restoring the old order, threatened by women’s meteoric emergence in Tahrir Square.

All in all, in the “subjective civil sphere” that was built at Tahrir Square, women acted individually and no explicit feminist attitude emerged that could have been institutionalized. They were regarded by the military as wanton and by the Islamists as lewd, having spent time at Tahrir Square, sometimes unaccompanied by a male relative. They were also taken for transgressors as long as they stayed in the public sphere, their long participation signaling their unreliability as submissive females.
Subjectivities of Governmental Violence

Accurately or not, secular people in Egypt believed they were the main actors of the revolutionary wave that overthrew the Mubarak regime. This perception was challenged when they lost the first parliamentary elections to the Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood and, to a lesser degree, the Salafis), in November 2011 and January 2012.

The Freedom and Justice Party (affiliated with the MB) obtained 37.5 percent of the votes, the Al-Nour Party (Salafis) 27.8 percent, and the rest was split among numerous political parties, some belonging to the secular revolutionary trend. The feeling of "symbolic violence" was strong from the moment the Muslim Brotherhood held the majority in parliament and was further intensified with the election of Morsi as president. After Morsi's proposal for a new constitution which from a secular viewpoint betrayed the revolution's ideals, violence against MB became one of the constant features of street protests. In Alexandria, at the end of March 2013, demonstrations protested against the government's crackdown on freedom and mistreatment of opposition activists. In Sidi Gabi, a district in Alexandria, the clashes ended with the two sides throwing Molotov cocktails and stones at each other. On the evening of Friday, March 29, 2013, dozens of protesters skirmished with security forces at the MB headquarters in Zagazig district of Alexandria. Protesters marched to the building, but a large number of MB sympathizers and members were stationed there to protect it.

The movement against President Morsi and the MB radicalized gradually. Also on March 29, a small number of activists marched from Tahrir Square to the High Court in the late afternoon, demanding the fall of Morsi, the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the dismissal of Prosecutor General Talaat Abdallah. At the High Court, altercations broke out when some protesters began chanting for army rule: "The army is ours, the supreme guide [of the MB] is not." Other demonstrators objected to the chants.

Central Security Forces were deployed to the High Court's main lobby in mid-afternoon, reinforcing the already heavy security presence in place since the morning. Hundreds of demonstrators continued to flock to the area, assembling in front of the prosecutor general's office in the court complex. Dozens of protesters had gathered outside the High Court earlier on Friday afternoon in preparation for a protest they called, "We are not to be intimidated." They chanted, "We will not go, he [Morsi] shall go," "The people want to bring down the regime," "I am not a coward, I am not a [Muslim] Brother," "Morsi, leave!" and "Secular, secular – we do not want a Brotherhood [state]" (Egypt Independent 2013). Thus opposition to the Muslim
Brotherhood, President Morsi, and the Islamists by secular forces blended into a single protest movement that ended up with a huge demonstration in July 2013 and gave the opportunity to the army to mount its military coup.

Representatives of twelve youth groups met on Tuesday, March 26, 2013, at the Youth for Justice and Liberty movement headquarters to discuss their Friday plans. They announced that they would perform Friday prayers outside the prosecutor general’s office at the High Court in Cairo. They demanded the dismissal of Prosecutor General Talaat Abdallah, Justice Minister Ahmed Mekki, and Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, after Abdallah issued arrest warrants for five activists accused of inciting clashes near the Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in Moqattam the week before. They also called for the public prosecutor to summon Brotherhood members involved in violent incidents around Moqattam and the Ettehadiya President Palace, and accused the judiciary of bias and unfairness. Radicalization of the secular and leftist political parties demanding an end to the president’s rule and their direct confrontation with the security forces in the name of the revolutionary ideals frequently ended in physical violence.

Violence became the expression of post-revolutionary impatience and radicalism: impatience with the slowness of change, with the nonresponsive attitude of the MB hierarchy and government, with the economic downturn, mainly due to the political instability and social unrest that frightened the tourists. A conspiracy vision of social and political relations became paramount. The uncompromising attitude of the Morsi government was largely shared by the political opposition, the government nominating the members of the MB, since the others refused to accept the posts. Lack of mutual confidence due to the long periods of authoritarian regimes in Egypt but also, in consequence of revolutionary radicalization, made street violence almost inevitable (in particular by groups like the Ultras, made up of football fans, and the Black Bloc, an organization with extreme left leanings). The frontal opposition between the secular and the religious added up to the conflict: each side suspected the other of following hidden agendas. At the first anniversary of the January 25 Revolution, the rupture between the two worldviews was consummated: the time of compromise was over, street violence was becoming common currency, and active disobedience toward the government by the bureaucracy, a fait accompli. Mutual disrespect made toleration impossible, each case giving added arguments for each side to vehemently reject the other. Disrespect for the “rules” became an almost permanent feature of the demonstrations, as security forces acted more or less arbitrarily toward them, bouncing between the sheer absence of police forces and the disproportionate repression of the protesters. The contrast with the mood at Tahrir Square is immense.
Conclusion

One major goal of the Egyptian Revolution was peacefulness or lack of violence (selmiyah). After the revolution, the combination of the Islamists’ electoral victories and the inability of the new political actors to reach a compromise resulted in mutual distrust and demonization, culminating in a military coup. There was a growing sense of impatience with the political stalemate, and Morsi’s inept and sometimes arrogant style of government pushed the opposition toward radicalization. A new attitude among many opposition groups prevailed, regarding violence against the government as legitimate. Some revolutionary youth engaged in street violence that became endemic in some cities. Violence became even bloodier with the military coup, with the prospect of a peaceful transition to democracy dimming after the overthrow of the first democratically elected president, Morsi.

At the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution, almost everywhere dignity of the citizen (karamah) and nonviolence (selmiyah) were the two inseparable notions distinguishing it from the nationalist and Islamist uprisings of the past. But dignity and nonviolence were part of the new subjectivation process that was based on affects, moods, feelings and emotions. All of these ingredients are vital to a social movement but they also are fragile by nature. The evolution of the Egyptian Revolution challenged the dignity of the citizen, with violence emerging as the only appropriate response to the MB government’s repression and ineptitude. The Morsi government was insensitive to consensus. The revolutionary youths’ impatience was also detrimental to the preservation of dignity since it promoted violent street action that in turn undermined toleration and politics according to the supremacy of the law. Dignity was divorced from nonviolence, disrupting social dialogue. The military coup opened a chasm between dignity and nonviolence, each side begrudging the other’s violence. The “dignity revolution” in Egypt ended tragically, the major notions around which they evolved being challenged by the street violence and the coup d’état (Tripp 2013).

Revolutions are venues for social and economic struggles. But they are also the theater for moods, emotions, heightened subjectivity – in one word, subjectivation. Violence developed out of the clash between many groups, but via impatience, effervescence, the revolutionary temperament and intransigence, as well as partisan and sectarian interests (the MB, the Salafis, the army, the Tahrir Square youth, and so on). What was decisive in this revolution was much less economic issues for the new social actors at Tahrir Square (they had their significance, though for those who suffered economic hardship through social instability, resulting in the decrease in tourists) than subjectivation
issues based on the denial of dignity and state violence that refused genuine citizenship status based on political rights to the new generations. By holding to the logic of subjectivation without taking into account the social and economic hardship resulting from the political crisis, the people of Tahrir Square became blind toward the aspirations of society at large (more economic and political stability, even at the cost of political freedom). The emotions and antagonism toward the opponents made the Tahrir Square youth and the others irreconcilable, the final solution being a popular military coup that brought back authoritarianism even more repressive than Mubarak’s.

After five years of turmoil and repression, violence against the activists by the military and the government that took power after the military coup in July 2013 has become a daily experience for many netizens who restrict their activities to social media and who find themselves abroad, in prison, or in political quarantine. In a disillusioned society where mobilization has lost its appeal, the return to embittered fear and apathy has gained momentum and state repression has become the worst in decades. At the same time, it is a period of deep crisis for the Muslim Brotherhood, exposed to the most violent repression in its history. Social media have become the venue through which resistance to the military regime keeps going. In order to have another political uprising, a new generation is needed to invent new ways of acting socially and politically in order to shake off political repression.

References


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