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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*]

The 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,"¹ 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

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

12 Mona and I both supported the revolution. She and
13 her husband had been imprisoned (her husband also tor-
14 tured) for their student activism in the 1970s, and, in the
15 15 years I had known her, practically every mutual conver-
16 sation was marked by her exasperation with the political
17 and economic situation in the country. She was especially
18 angry about the dramatic decline in the state education sys-
19 tem and the hundreds of hours she had to spend tutoring
20 and worrying about her daughter because of it. Since begin-
21 ning fieldwork in the mid-1990s for a book on cultural pro-
22 duction, the state, and nationalism (Winegar 2006), through
23 my yearlong research sabbatical just prior to the revolution
24 for a book on state and NGO cultural development pro-
25 grams for poor and working-class youth, I had collected
26 haunting testimonies of people's experiences of life in the
27 increasingly harsh economic circumstances and political
28 oppression of the authoritarian neoliberalism that came to
29 define the Mubarak era.

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

48 Amal, Mona, and I spent the day in increasing ten-
49 sion, as reports on al-Jazeera suggested brewing violence,
50 and the regime shut down our phones and Internet. But
51 we also spent the day making the home seem as "normal"
52 as possible. We cooked, cleaned, and prepared for a party
53 for the kids as if it were any other Friday family gathering.
54 But Amal, who was required to do this work for her pay,
55 was also nervous that the revolution would negatively af-
56 fect her and her family's economic well-being. Meanwhile,
57 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 ob-
sessed 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 in-
side 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 hia-
tus 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 protestors 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 re-
ceive 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 de-
sires 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 me-
dia. 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 free-
dom that ring out in places like Tahrir. But everyday domes-
tic 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.

4 My point is not simply that women's work is impor-
5 tant to managing tension in conflict and to undertaking
6 revolution worldwide (e.g., Aretxaga 1997; de Volo 2001;
7 Peteet 1991; Ring 2006). Asma Mahfouz, Nawara Negm, Isra
8 Abdel Fattah, Gigi Ibrahim, and countless other women ac-
9 tivists rallied people to Tahrir. Women in Egypt also cooked
10 for their neighborhood watch committees, donated medi-
11 cal supplies and food to the people in Tahrir, and encour-
12 aged friends and relatives who were able to go downtown
13 to do so (Winegar 2011). They also cooked for their male
14 relatives who were demonstrating, took care of the chil-
15 dren whose schools were closed, managed the household
16 budget after banks closed and people were not paid, and
17 stood in long lines for food in anticipation of shortages. Per-
18 haps the most famous martyr of the revolution was Sally
19 Zahran, who, many say, died after jumping off her balcony
20 in a provincial southern town because her mother, afraid for
21 her daughter's life, prevented her from going out and join-
22 ing demonstrations.² But even if one looks for female ac-
23 tivists in Tahrir or brings to light the agency (and tragedy)
24 of women's work in their homes and neighborhoods, one
25 still is not adequately addressing the assumptions about
26 revolution, political agency, space, and affect that are ex-
27 pressed in the iconic image of the revolutionary. What does
28 it mean to say that the true locus of transformative politics
29 is an urban square, filled with fervently determined young
30 people—mostly men with some token women?

31 To be the iconic revolutionary in Tahrir, one either had
32 to be poor, without anything to lose, or privileged in certain
33 ways. One usually did not have children to provide for (an
34 older male role) or was not tasked with caring for them in
35 the home (a female role, usually filled by mothers and older
36 sisters). It helped if one had a salaried job at a place that was
37 closed because of the revolution (e.g., as did government
38 workers and some private-sector workers, mainly in com-
39 panies). People whose income depended on more informal
40 employment (e.g., housekeepers, vegetable sellers, cab
41 drivers, handymen, day laborers) often were not willing to
42 risk losing potential pay by protesting for hours in Tahrir. If
43 not among the eldest males in the household, one generally
44 had to have one's family's permission to go to Tahrir, which
45 was most easily (though not always) given to young men,
46 who—in Egypt as elsewhere—are the ones seen to be re-
47 sponsible for fighting for the nation but whose power is still
48 circumscribed by gerontocratic patriarchy. One had to also
49 have the health and stamina to endure hours in the square
50 and attacks by the regime, which, given the 30-year decima-
51 tion of the public health care system under Mubarak, often
52 meant the youth or the upper classes who could afford qual-
53 ity health care. One had to also live in Cairo or have the cap-
54 ital (both economic and cultural) to get to Cairo and to stay
55 there.³

56 Most of the women I knew had difficulty getting to
57 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 la-
bor 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 re-
connected 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 (“with-
out fresh air,” said one; “physically sick of the TV,” said an-
other). 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 ne-
cessities 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 depart-
ure 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). Peo-
ple 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 priv-
ilege 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 demand-
ing meaningful reform, but our Skype conversation is in-
terrupted 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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