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‘The street’ and ‘the slum’: Political form and urban life in Egypt’s revolt
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How, after two years of revolt that if anything were meant to shift the very terms of political subjectivity, do we make sense of what appears to be the unlikely popularity of Egypt’s latest military rulers? Much of the commentary and imagery would seem to suggest that the military, garbed in revolutionary cover, have succeeded where countless others have failed in postcolonial polities and achieved some kind of hegemony and broad consensus. By contrast, this article argues that if the military have been able to seize the initiative to drive themselves as a populist wedge between restoration and revolution this is not because they have attained consent but because they have been able to mobilize organizational and discursive machinery much more quickly and effectively than anyone else. That is, to take advantage, in this interstitial temporal space between end and beginning, of the organizational weakness of Egypt’s revolutionary street politics. A weakness only magnified in the rush to electoral politics. What this disjunction, underlines, then, with increasing urgency, is not the question of “voluntary servitude” but the question of form. Both the party and the much-heralded horizontality of ‘the street’ appear lacking; the latter capable of sublime insurrectional moments—the re-enacted rupture—but not the necessary sustained assault on institutions. The form-to-come will have to emerge from the struggle itself, and the article gestures to the possibility of new collectivities that might be found in the coordination between the revolutionary subjectivities and networks that emerged from the revolt and the life-worlds of Egypt’s ‘informal’ urban poor that have both participated in and provided the enabling conditions of revolt.

Key words: revolt, political subjectivity, organization, insurgency, informalism, Egypt

It starts with a black screen. A single female voice recites: “Deliver us from evil”. It cuts to a solitary figure in a gas mask, walking down a dusky, battle-ravaged, eerily empty—even sad—Cairo street. Her mediated breathing through the mask is audible, at once ominous and vulnerable. Her voice seems to come from somewhere behind the scene—more prayer than reflection. Heavy with the pathos of an already thwarted desire for a return of innocence, she pleads:

“Spare us this trial. The battle this time is terrifying. The battle is murky, strain upon strain. And on our side, the General . . . ”

This figure—masked, anonymous, generic—that had previously seemed so full of collective purpose, so confident in its own political and universal truth, walks alone . . .
lost, despondent. Severed from the crowd that had previously been the medium of both its de-individualization and its re-emergence; the crowd that now carries an essential ambivalence, perhaps even a taint. The screen cuts to people demonstrating in support of the army, jubilantly waving the image of the latest general to assume control. There is loss here. But also something much more troubling. Black filthy water pours down stairs. Something won’t be washed away. The editing cuts to images of the Rabe’ el-‘Adawiya massacre, but we watch this scene from within our protagonist’s sonic space, there is no sound but her breathing and monotonous speech. We share her inner space, and maybe her inner guilt:

“We stood like corpses, watching the massacre. Blood on our chest.

Are we winning? Or in line for slaughter?

Is this question shameful? Or is silence worse?

Should we go down to scavenge the spoils?

Or count the bodies of the martyred?"

This is more than prayer, this is testimony, confession. This video put out a few days ago by the Egyptian activist-media collective Mosireen cuts—with the very honesty of its confusion—to the affective core of the current impasse. The military junta effectively ruling Egypt since July 3rd of this year have done worse than physically smash the revolutionaries, they have embraced them. Implicated them. Tarnished them. What we are left with is a disoriented revolutionary subject, weighed down heavily with a sense of associated guilt and taken aback by the closing of societal ranks around the military. This is not a question of Egypt’s “absent third” as Slavoj Zizek recently put it when he rhetorically asked “where are the agents of the Tahrir Square protests from two years ago?”, only to reply to himself that they have been reduced to “surprised impassive observers” [2013: unpaginated]. No, that won’t do. The disjunction is far more vexed than that. What underpins the bewilderment and self-interrogation is that they might have been reduced not to observers but to unwitting accomplices.

“As monsters howled and sunk their teeth into each other,

we suddenly smelt the scent of blood in our voice. And discovered fangs in our face . . .

And that the monsters were us.”

How do we understand the relative ease with which the military was apparently able to assume leadership and not simply control of the country? How, after two years of revolutionary upheaval that, if nothing else, were meant to have shifted the very terms of political subjectivity, do we make sense of the wild popularity of the latest in a long and pitiful line of army strongmen turned autocrats? What do we make of the return of the ubiquitous image of the leader (the pictures of the army chief of staff General Abed al-Fattah al-Sisi that now adorn so many surfaces), this aesthetic that so singularly not only represents but reproduces a certain kind of paternalist politics—and was the first fetish to be destroyed in the January 25th revolt? Citing the deep capillary presence of the army in Egyptian life, or its historical roots in the very foundation of the Egyptian nation-state (one far less colonially contrived than those carved up by that mandate system just a little further east) does not really cut it. Nor is it enough—though it is crucial—to bear in mind that the last democratic experiment to emerge out of a revolution (in 1919) is remembered largely as a failure, undermined and unable to end the colonial control of the country. (Control, it should be added, that was only eventually defeated when democracy was sidestepped by the radical and hugely popular but ultimately autocratic Gamal Abed al-Nasser—the very figurative embodiment of a certain historical merging of popular revolutionary will and militarily-led re-ordering, and a figure unsurprisingly invoked with increasingly regularity these days). This is all significant, yet none of it tells us how to come to terms with what—in this faux antagonism between the secular and the religious—seems like a frenzy of popularity around the military, with what seemed to become commonplace statements
of adoration as in, “al-Sisi is like the Nile. The source of life in Egypt” [Kingsley 2013: unpaginated].

Are we really that passionately attached to the terms of our own subjection? Did the sudden collapse of a discursive universe around the hollow edifice of state power create a reflexive crisis at the level of subjecthood? Less abstractly, might the revolts, by failing to produce a counter-ideological formation, have been a de-subjectification without the necessary symbolic resources for a re-attachment—one offered now by the ascendant and fatherly army chief? Like the freed slave or convict who finds life on the ‘outside’, without its clear and symbolized lines of authority and hierarchy, too much to handle—we experience a loss of integral self.

At one level this would seem to pose once again that question which Deleuze and Guattari [2003 (1972)] would, in an elliptical whirlwind of a book, call “the fundamental problem of political philosophy”—why, they ask, “do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed that they actually want humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves?” [ibid: 29]. But, reading these passages from Anti-Oedipus is to read both a resonance as well as a discrepancy or distance between the temporality that framed these questions and our current predicament. The question that dogged political thought at the start of the 1970s (and after all the dashed hopes that the name ‘May ’68’ always uneasily indexed) was why people, despite objective conditions, did not revolt. It is, then, of considerable significance that after 2011 this question was neatly reversed, and we all played catch-up trying to understand why people everywhere were revolting. This should shift the very terms of theoretical research in a way that exceeds the preoccupations of Anti-Oedipus. And yet Deleuze and Guattari’s questions remain somehow relevant to thinking about our present, perhaps most sharply in Egypt but also beyond, because they testify to a certain ambivalence latent in the revolting crowd itself, to the potentially reactionary furies of re-directed desire and to a certain ambiguity and populist plasticity in the figure of ‘the people’.

In a scathing polemic, Joseph Massad, writing from Cairo, recounts a story of sabotage and collusion in the build-up to the army’s takeover on July 3rd. Deploying wonderfully caustic prose he targets the complicity of Egypt’s intellectuals and media personalities that in effect paved the way for a well-executed restoration; one that took full advantage of a conjunctural alignment of liberals, leftists and regime remnants and now consolidates itself day upon day around a revitalized discourse of ‘anti-terrorism’. By the time the Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces (and now First Deputy Prime Minister) Abed al-Fattah al-Sisi suspended the constitution and removed the president, the pieces had already been well in play and the popular mobilization was not so much exploited as completely appropriated. This he charges is nothing short of ‘Mubarakism without Mubarak’. But is this to suggest that Event, as a break in time, can be rolled back? That history can be unfolded? It seems at once to somehow concede too little and too much. Would Mubarak ever have got away with massacrering over 1,000 people in the space of a few hours in the stark daylight of an Egyptian summer morning? That needed revolutionary cover. This is the heart-breaking irony of the impasse. Restorations after all, as Antonio Gramsci (who lived through actual fascist takeover) long realized, are never returns: “It is certain that in the movement of history there is never any turning back, and that restorations in toto do not exist” [2012 (1971): 220]. Gramsci wrote these lines while reflecting on that period in European history that so many today are tempted to analogically reach back to: the revolutions of 1848. What Marx historically unpacked around the figure of Louis Bonaparte, Gramsci
sociologically expounded as Caesarism: “a particular solution in which a great personality is entrusted with the task of ‘arbitration’ over a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe” [ibid: 219]. In a period of change, stalemates between antagonistic forces might be broken by a third actor, appearing as a neutral arbiter above politics. In the dialectic of “revolution-restoration”, this can be progressive or it can be reactionary; reactionary Caesarism brings opposing forces together around a mobilization of national-popular forces that helps reactionary forces triumph, albeit with compromises and limitations. In Egypt, today, a spectrum of political forces, across lines of antagonism between what Gramsci would call “organic classes”, rally around al-Sisi’s military: right-wing Salafists and the left-wing Tājamū’, centre-right liberal parties like the Wafd and centre-left liberal parties like the Social Democratic Party, the main independent trade unions as well as most private business interests, ostensibly anti-imperialist parties like the Popular Front and the already-ossified National Salvation Front, the Coptic Pope and the al-Azhar Sheikh, not to mention the youth-led Tamarod movement and the vast majority of Cairo’s self-avowedly secular intellectuals. In effect, the vast bulk of the country’s official, organized political and civil life. They all speak in the name of revolution and many endorse the army chief for president… often in the same breath. All of this would seem to suggest that the military have achieved what seems near impossible in most postcolonial states: to have forged some kind of hegemonic hold—a workable form of consent and an ability to speak on behalf of a national-popular collective, to incorporate the masses into its project. There is after all, everywhere, still currency in strong leadership, not least the kind that might reappear when the chaos of revolutionary upheaval and experimentation becomes too much to bear; people just want to know that they’ll find petrol in the stations and bread at the bakeries, and if a strongman, especially one that seems above the bickering fray of politics, is going to get it done, then so be it.

Yet all of this might be better understood not as an assertion of hegemony and leadership, but as the dynamics of an ongoing and unresolved political impasse born out of a certain organizational weakness in Egypt’s revolutionary street politics. I previously argued [Abourahme 2013] that certain forms and mechanisms of politics have been superseded and rendered obsolete (kleptocracy, paternalism, security). They may reappear around the coercive arms of state machinery—but as the stable basis of a politics, they are no more. The trouble continues to be that the form to replace them is as elusive as ever. If the military have been able to seize the initiative to drive themselves as a proto-Caesarist wedge between restoration and revolution this is not because they have attained consent but because they have been able to mobilize organizational and discursive machinery much more quickly than anyone else. This would suggest that their hold over the situation is far more tenuous than it might seem and that this disjuncture might prove to be far more episodic than it now appears. The idea that the army can continue to wrap itself in the garbs of revolution and at the same time keep a tight lid on protest and insurrection seems very unlikely; witness the ham-fisted attempt to effectively criminalize protest (and its fallout)\(^5\) or the clampdown on labour activism and strikes that suggests the entente with organized workers will increasingly prove more difficult. It’s also unlikely, despite the hysterical and racist demagoguery aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood by a largely reactionary media establishment\(^6\), that Islamists can function, in some neofascist sense, as the “dividing name” of this period, that is as the misidentified target for displaced class antagonisms—popular hostility to the Brotherhood was
real, but much of it sprang from their period of rule and its reproduction of the previous regime’s politics and not some mass ideological mystification. What all this does underline, with some urgency, is that in this interstitial temporal space between end and beginning, in this second, and perhaps more threatening attempt to preempt the revolutionary dynamic, the question of form looms ever more acute.

Democracy or Insurgency? The insurrectional versus the constitutional

In his Endpiece, “Towards the Great Transformation: Relocating Egypt and the West”, Bob Catterall responds to my dismissal of what I dubbed—perhaps too perfunctorily—as “formal democracies”, to suggest a need for greater clarification. Might democracy, he asks, “still stand for something, some process, that despite the encroaching corporate electoral spectacle, is still of value?” [2013: 571]. His question is vindicated by the fact that a large part of our current predicament continues to take the shape of a foundational critique of democracy, that is also, at the same time, a demand for greater democracy. What I saw—and celebrated—being upended in the June 30th mobilization was not the democratic impulse but the stranglehold of electoral politics on a country still in the midst of revolutionary movement. This requires careful parsing. It is the subject of much deliberation these days. Take the recent commentary by Azmi Bishara [2013] who reads in the same mobilization a split in modes of legitimation, with something he calls “the street’s legitimacy” (the populist legitimacy of bodies on the street) being used against “the people’s legitimacy” (the legitimacy of a popular-democratic mandate). An electoral system for Bishara was meant to sweep away the need for mobilization; legitimacy was presumably now to be constitutionally regulated. “As for street legitimacy as an expression of popular legitimacy, it is only valid when the people are repressed and not permitted to express themselves through their opinion or their electoral vote” [ibid: 29]. This not only reduces revolt to a form of orderly protest (and not a ruptural reordering of society itself) but in its Weberian positivism—more sophisticated but typical of a certain orthodoxy around procedural democracy—also fails to recognize the temporal specificity of Egypt’s short-lived electoral experiment. The latter occurred in a state where the ‘street’ as source of movement and legitimation never really ceded any kind of universality to parliamentary institutions (“the street is our ballot box,” as activists put it). The elections did not signal some kind of Fukuyamist terminus in which the search for alternatives had simply ceased. Under Brotherhood rule there were more than 9,000 protests—this is not sedition, it is a kind of dual power. A battle not for legitimacy but for hegemony.

But one should be even starker than this. The current alignment of political forces around the military and the outfoxing of activists on the ground is more than simple opportunism or superior organization, it is also in part the result of the premature rush into a certain type of electoral, party-based democratic politics that broke the popular unity of the initial uprising. To say this is not simply to reject something inadequately called “formal democracy”, nor is it simply to plead for a more radical democracy—it is to recognize the revolutionary need to defer democratic competition. A call to continue the ‘war of movement’ and not settle into a ‘war of position’ on the terrain of a civil society in which the ruling regime had already been politically and intellectually defeated. This is what many activists were aware of when they rejected early parliamentary and presidential elections; their calls were not to fetishize the street, but to sustain the insurgent momentum and assault. Moments of insurgency are always defined by a certain...
tension between ‘the insurrectional’ and ‘the constitutional’. Crowds tire, occupations fray, energies lag and people begin to long for the rhythms and routines of the normal and banal; forces push for the subsumption of movement into existing institutional life and legislative structures. In Egypt, the early exit, after Mubarak’s removal, of a broad alliance of revolutionaries from urban spaces and streets and then the quick movement into the constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections (organized by the military and pushed for by the Muslim Brotherhood who had most to gain) seemed to stultify ‘the insurrectional’ dynamic just as it was gathering pace. Instead of a broad front capable of assuming leadership and forcing the re-ordering of institutions (the security apparatus first and foremost), the moment was subsumed by a facile electoral game that necessarily polarized a wide revolutionary bloc at exactly the moment it needed consensus. Dismantling the regime became secondary to electoral competition. Consciousness had shifted, new subjects had emerged but the institutional landscape remained largely intact. The army, the internal state security, the judiciary, the trade syndicates, the media establishments, the large business conglomerations, more still the massive bureaucracy and its managerial classes (what came to be referred to in Egypt as the “deep state”)—all of this seemed beyond reach somehow. “Revolutionary action”, as Michel Foucault once put it in a remarkable interview with young Marxists, “is defined as the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature and armor” [1980a: 228]. In Egypt this simultaneity in its insurrectionary moment was suspended by electoral and democratic politics.

But perhaps I get ahead of myself, perhaps to talk of re-ordering institutions is to expect too much of insurrectional moments. Is this not once again to demand of them programs, plans and policies? Those who demand of revolts the imperative to be programmatic, writes political theorist Benjamin Arditi, are “confusing the disruption of the given with the task of reconfiguring it” [2013: 4]. Revolts, he writes, are the plan in that they shift the coordinates of the conversation; they are political performatives—“participants start to experience what they strive to become”. Think of them, he urges us, as vanishing passageways to something yet to come; “to ask that they also provide us with blueprints of a future order is to demand from them something they are not” [ibid: 8]. And yet as compelling as I find this, it leaves something deeply suspended. The revolts in Egypt have reconfigured the conversation, they have upended the given, but their failure to push on beyond the reoccurring re-enactment of rupture, beyond the negative, leaves them open to the redirected populism stumping them today. They might be the passageway of the “yet to come” but the ‘vehicle’ that takes us there is not clear. It is here that Catterall incisively locates a certain weakness, a certain “fetishism of the streets”; of revolting bodies he writes, “that velocity along the streets is remarkable and at times essential but not enough”. In an almost biopolitical plea for organization, he goes on: “Food has to be grown and distributed. Goods have to be made. Children have to be cared for. Hospitals have to be funded … ‘The people’ has to assemble and re-assemble not just to oppose, but also to build. But how?” [2013: 572] This, to my mind, recalls Foucault’s provocative question to socialist practice: “What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality?” [2008: 94]. And therein, of course, lies the rub and the niggling question of form.
Photos 1 and 2. Demonstration in Tal’at Harb Square calling for end to military rule and the annulment of the “Protest Law”, October 26th, 2013. Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy
“Against the rule of the until now”: political form and urban life

On the one hand, as the Egyptian case makes clear, conventional political parties are at this conjuncture largely moribund. Foucault was always insistent that a revolutionary movement organized as party will invariably reproduce the form of the state apparatus—the same mechanisms of hierarchy and organization of powers—within the movement itself [1980b: 59]. Alain Badiou, recently, has been even more abrupt: “The party-form has had its day, exhausted in a brief century by its state avatars” [2011: 65]. In Egypt the only party with a wide enough social base and organizational network to really challenge the bureaucracy and bypass its resistance was the Muslim Brotherhood. Enough has been said about their debacle, but one cannot overemphasize that part of their failure must be located at the level of form itself—centralized, secretive, totalitarian. At the same time the much-celebrated horizontality and the leaderless, rhizomatic swarm seem suited for insurrectionary street fights and a kind of deterritorialization of state power but not for the rebuilding and organization that Catterall urge us to keep in mind: “It can hold back the ‘algorithms and coded flows of networked capital’, undermine the extant legitimacies of capital and state but it cannot supersede them” [Catterall 2013: 572]. Might this be, as others have charged, that horizontality mimics the nature of post-Fordist power—immanent, productive, molecular—leaving itself open to lateral appropriation—a mirror of power? The nebulous and fragmented character of the Tamarod movement in Egypt, that achieved remarkable mobilization of wide sections of society, seemed precisely the right prey for resurgent reactionary forces themselves distributed across an assemblage of civil society and state institutions (it later transpired that they were funded by an Egyptian billionaire media mogul—that this seemed unknown to many of the group’s participants might precisely be the issue).

It seems clear, then, that there is no precedent upon which to build. Form has to come from the struggle itself. There is no inherited blueprint for change, and history—even, maybe especially, revolutionary history—will weigh heavily on our imaginations. Later, in Foucault’s interview, one of his young interlocutors insisted on the salience of previous experiments: “Our problem is that all successful revolts against the system succeeded by reinforcing similar kinds of organizations—under partisan or state control—forms which directly correspond to the dominant structures and which pose the essential question of power” [1980a: 232]. This he argues is the fundamental contradiction of revolutionary action—we reproduce that which we seek to destroy, but there is little else by virtue of alternative. Foucault was unconvinced, his reply was short but precise: “What strikes me in your argument is that it takes the form of ‘until now’. A revolutionary undertaking is directed not only against the present but against the rule of the ‘until now’” [ibid: 233, emphasis added]. This is a hugely important sentence, the ramifications of which we still have not come to terms with; it echoes his insistence in his 1978 lecture series that if there really is a socialist art of governmentality, it won’t be found hidden in socialism or in conformity to its sacral texts: “It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented” [2008: 94]. Reflecting on this we should take it to mean that whatever political form emerges in Egypt will have to be sui generis, but we can also argue that its lineages are already here, in those experiences and encounters that have already begun to connect the lived and the historical [Merrifield 2013]. For Foucault, building from the experiential was critical: “I would rather oppose actual experiences than the possibility of utopia... If scientific socialism emerged from the Utopias of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization, will emerge, in
the twentieth century, from experiences” [2000: 231, emphasis original].

We can, if nothing else, gesture towards two forms of already-existing experience in Egypt that can be the basis of a different socialization. One is quite simply the revolutionary energies and subjectivities that have not only been circulating in the flows and clashes of the street—where for thousands of people insurrection is now nothing short of an established modality of everyday life—nor only expressed in the statements and visibilities that define this temporality but are also increasingly taking shape through sustained networks, meeting, assemblies, new mediums of expression, new configurations of sensible experience and new lines of alliance. Groups like the Revolutionary Socialists, the April 6th Movement, or the newly emerged Revolutionary Path Front (which attempts to bring these formations together) and many others even less legible in dominant political language—the Ultras football fan formations, for one—may appear today like solitary voices, but the energetic spheres of engagement and activity around them are still key. Here Zizek is on sounder ground: “This vast network of new social units, much more than the overthrow of Mubarak, is the principal gain of the Arab spring; it is an ongoing process, independent of big political changes like the coup; it goes deeper than the religious/liberal divide” [2013: unpaginated]. Beyond any kind of messianism of revolt, beyond a final climactic denouement—there is sober work here, and an appreciation of the demands of the ‘day after’.

But there is another level of urban life that has changed with the revolts but received far less attention. Here I’m talking about the life-worlds of Egypt’s inner cities and its shanty towns: the squatters, hawkers, rag sellers, shoe polishers, fetchers, doormen, and irregulars; what urban studies has long filed away under the always-problematic category of the informal. Much has been written about the life and politics of the urban ‘informal’ poor in Southern cities. In the Egyptian case, one of the most compelling and sensitive accounts is the one we get in Asef Bayat’s book Life as Politics. Here in what he calls “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, common practices of everyday life not only reshape urban environments and livelihoods but incrementally shift urban politics and governance institutions. Claims here are made almost surreptitiously through an “art of presence”—active economic use of public space, tapping into energy networks, squatting and building on land; these may not be “extraordinary acts of defiance” but they have far-reaching consequence. This is, in Bayat’s reading, the work of “non-movements”, marked by “the collective actions of non-collective actors... they embody the shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaders and organizations” [ibid: 14]. Not a politics of protest, he insists, but a politics of practice. What Bayat in part points to, then, is an already operative fusion between experience and politics—a blurring of the lines between everyday life and the political, or between the lived and the historical. These “passive networks” contain the socio-technical building blocks of a common life sphere—exploited, subsumed in places by market logic, fraught with conflict but self-organized and resilient nonetheless. Might, then, this “politics of practice” also be thought of as a kind of counter-biopolitics? In those arresting last pages of the first volume of the History of Sexuality Foucault in the late 1970s already insisted that most of the great struggles of our century have not been about the law or rights but about life itself: “…what was demanded and what served as an objective was life, understood as the basic needs, as man’s concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plenitude of the possible. Whether or not it was Utopia that was wanted is of little importance; what we have seen has been a very real process of struggle; life as a political object was in a sense taken
at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it” [1990 (1976): 145]. For Foucault these everyday struggles are in a sense prior to radical ruptures or what he calls “massive binary divisions”, they are their enabling condition; ruptures occur but, “more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings... And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible” [ibid: 96].

The participation of Egypt’s ‘informal’ networks and life-worlds in the revolt, and if or how they effected regroupings and produced cleavages crucial to the revolt, has all gone largely unnoted. Let alone the question of how the revolt has affected and changed them. More still, where these questions have come up, they’ve often been treated with nothing short of dismissive disdain. Take this from a leading young Egyptian, and otherwise sharp, academic in conversation with the New Left Review, when asked about the ‘sub-proletariat’ this was his response, without—and it does need saying—a hint of sarcasm or parody:

“These are the poorest of the poor, whom many feared might one day stage an Egyptian jacquerie. In and around Cairo, they numbered between five and six million people, living in subhuman conditions—shanty towns with no running water, no electricity, no sewage system, no schools. The Arabic word for these places is ashwa’iyyat, coming from a root word meaning ‘random’. The dwellers of the ashwa’iyyat are random—contingent human beings for those with a settled life, whom they terrify, as people possessing nothing, descending from their sinister habitats on the ordered city, speaking a strangely distorted Arabic, desperately looking for jobs, stealing goods and harassing citizens before retreating to their dark world. Might they not one day ransack the city and burn it down?
Fortunately, this menacing human mass was entirely absent from the revolt, which probably contributed to its civilized and peaceful character” [Kandil 2011: unpaginated]

One scarcely knows where to start with this, or for that matter the class anxieties it so nakedly indexes; it reads like some sort of bad science fiction—the imagery of the descent of latter-day urban ‘morlocks’ “on the ordered city” before they fiendishly retreat to their subterranean “dark world” is an affected and well-rehearsed aesthetic but no less shocking for being so. (And if “ordered city” is here meant to describe Cairo then its sci-fi credentials are truly well deserved). It’s also willfully myopic. By many accounts, this “menacing human mass” did participate in the revolt and continues to do so. Some may have been bribed and duped in the early phase to play the role of Mubarak supporters, but many have mobilized against political authority. In an account written during the clashes over Morsi’s ‘constitutional declaration’ Maysoun Sukarieh spent some time on Mohammed Mahmoud street—the now iconic fault line adjacent to Tahrir Square, that bore and partook in so many of the battles; there she came across the non-descript youth, the ‘street kids’, the thugs and hoodlums of the revolt—precisely the “random” denizens of the “sinister habitats” of Cairo’s inner city neighborhoods and peripheral shanty towns (habitats, it should be added, they often built themselves). They are nobody’s constituents. Even revolutionary formations and organizations are hesitant to associate with them, “The April 6 Youth Movement… said that they do not know these youth. But they do not denounce them.” To Sukarieh, “it does not seem the newly formed parties are interested to get to know them” [2012: unpaginated]. So who are these people? “Another boy strolls by. He is eight. He is a rag-picker, going through the garbage and finding things to resell. Police harassment is the coin of his trade. He comes with his friends from el-Amiriyya. “I came to harass the police as they harass me everyday in the streets, maybe when this is over they will think before they hit every time they see me looking for something to eat”” [ibid]. In all of their accounts there is an irreducible antagonism towards the police and security forces: “we do not attack peoples homes or stores—meaning private properties—we only attack state property and the police.” Their disposition of refusal becomes a site of pleasure, and joy; as they charge and retreat, Sukarieh recounts, “the children beam”. What is key here is that, for those whom the street has been both site of revolt and source of livelihood, there already exists both an acute stake in the commonness of urban space and a certain organizational logic of solidarity that is mobilized at times of confrontation.

All of this poses an obvious question: might not concerted effort between the revolutionary networks and groups and those who not only find themselves in antagonistic position to government but who also already have some experience of and socio-technical capacity in growing and making their food, caring for their sick, building their own homes, assembling their own lives in the most contingent and precarious of circumstances yield a form that can begin to move people along the passageway between rupture and restructuring? Might such sustained encounters not expand and scale-up spaces of self-organization and common life in ways that can begin to challenge institutions from the bottom-up? The urban ‘informal’ poor that have been largely organizing and assembling the conditions of their own existence beyond the purview of state apparatuses possess distributed skills and capacities that might move revolutionary politics beyond both demands and disruption and towards different localizations. The existing forms of common life, the networks of self-organization and solidarity—are these not the very mundane ground of revolutionary praxis? Would the revolts have been possible if for years these forms of life had not blurred the lines between formal and informal, public and private, and made
a steady mockery of the state’s pretense as a totalizing governmental apparatus? Would they have been possible without the disenchanting effects of the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”? Might there not be between the (now converging) “art of presence” on the one hand and the “will to revolt” on the other a new continuum between a politics of protest and a politics of practice? What would it take for the forms of self-government of the informal settlements and the insurrectional energies of the revolt to become a kind of dual power, one capable not just of disrupting circulation but also creating new circuits of communication and production? Is not dual power, as Alberto Toscano in some highly perceptive lines reminds us, always a kind of biopower? (In Toscano’s post-Leninist and Negrian reading dual power is no longer a short, impossible temporality but can be spread over a long period of struggle). If we move beyond the sterile disputation around the seizure of state power then, Toscano urges, we might engage with, “the far greater challenge posed by thinking revolutionary politics in terms of the sundering of power—not just in the guise of a face-off between two (or more) social forces in a situation of non-monopoly over violence and political authority, but in the sense of a fundamental asymmetry in the types of power” [2007: unpaginated]. This new incommensurate type of power, I want to suggest, may, in our revolting cities, be found in the spaces of encounter between the insurgency of ‘the street’ and the self-government of ‘the slum’.

Notes

1 The Rabe’ el-‘Adawiya Mosque was the main sit-in for the pro-Mursi supporters. On the morning of August 14th the army cleared the encampment, killing over 1,000 people in the process, though figures to this day remain oblique and contested.

2 Mosireen, a Cairo-based activist-media collective, put out the video in September; the poem recited in it is called “Prayer of Fear”, by Mahmoud ‘Ezzat. It can be watched on CITy’s online site: [http://www.city-analysis.net/]

3 The aggressive (and often farcical) campaign to wrap al-Sisi in some of Abed al-Nasser’s residual aura speaks to an awareness of the resonance of this historical memory; the difference being, of course, that Abed al-Nasser was a leader whose authoritarianism was tempered by a genuine anti-imperialism and radical, if partial, socio-economic reform. His self-designated successor—despite vague anti-American rhetoric about declining aid—is far from a following act.

4 Some of the more absurd images around al-Sisi’s popularity have been collected at this aptly named tumblr: http://sisifetish.tumblr.com/

5 October 2013 saw the interim Cabinet ratify a piece of legislation dubbed the “Protest Law”, that would, by requiring protestors to seek and gain prior authorization from the Ministry of Interior, essentially criminalize unauthorized demonstration.

6 See Massad [2013] for a sense of the shrill chauvinism that colored much of the media campaign against the Brotherhood. Some of this does seem to be seeping further afield, one piece of menacing graffiti popping up these days reads: “al-ikhwan khifan” (“The Brothers are sheep”).

7 In an earlier and well-circulated article from 2011 Bishara, one of the most influential contemporary Arab intellectuals, demonstrates the same preoccupation with modes of legitimation and liberal-constitutional guarantees, but he does at least recognize the need to not prejudice the revolutionary process of changing the very sources of legitimacy; in a passage that seems to allude to the Brotherhood, he warns of the danger—in a situation in which revolutionary forces have no model for rule or administration—of “an old political force, whether it had been in power or in the opposition, implementing programs that neither produced the revolution nor were the basis on which the revolution arose” [2011: unpaginated]. In this later account, though precisely what he warned about transpired, his initial concerns seem elided in favor of the norms of procedural and electoral democracy.

References


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