Intellectuals and the People: Portrayals of the Rebel in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising

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Apart from attempts to account for the massive support provided by Egyptian writers to President Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi, the 25th of January uprising was rarely explored from the standpoint of Egyptian intellectuals. Yet, during the uprising, some did take an active part in the events, such as forging an image of the revolution and its actors through opinion columns. However, by promoting what became an iconic image of the Egyptian protester—middle class youth, peacefully seeking liberty and rights—they drew on the same discourses as those adopted by their counterparts in the semi-official press: the belief that the uprising threatened to unleash the oppressed masses who would embark on the destruction of the State. This article attempts to shed light on the conditions associated with the 25th of January revolution by exploring op-eds published in several Egyptian private dailies during the first years of the uprising.

Keywords: Egypt; 25th January Revolution; Intellectuals; Op-Eds; Violence

In parallel with the demonstrations that filled the streets during Egypt's most recent revolution, an equally important battle was taking place in the columns of the local press. While protesters were demonstrating against Mubarak's regime, opinion writers in private newspapers were busy saving the reputation of those demonstrating. In their articles, they were fighting against the negative framing of protesters in the government-influenced press, which depicted them as vandals, unemployed thugs or foreign conspirators willing to destroy the country. To counter these accusations, pro-revolutionary columnists promoted what became an iconic image of the Egyptian protester: the middle class youth, peacefully seeking liberty and access to rights. Far from being random choices, the images and words selected to depict the protesters reveal the dominant perceptions as to which social group had the right to engage in protest movements and which did not. They also tell us about the type of action that was tolerated in protests, how long it lasted, and the highest price that was acceptable in achieving political change. In short, there were certain conditions and limits associated with the revolution that were set by its normative image. It was informed as much by the local political

culture and history as by the international heritage of previous revolutions.

This article attempts to shed light on the conditions associated with the 25 January revolution by exploring opinion columns published in several private Egyptian newspapers throughout the three years of the uprising, i.e. from January 2011 to January 2014. In total, 50 opinion articles were analyzed (28 from 2011, 9 from 2012 and 14 from 2013) from five Egyptian private daily newspapers (al-Shurūq, al-Miṣrī al-Yawm, al-Taḥrīr, Veto and al-Wafd). There are specific reasons behind the decision to focus on this section of the private Egyptian dailies. While much of the scholarly attention has been devoted to the framing strategies adopted by different Egyptian media outlets during the uprising (Hamdy and Gomaa), the voice of columnists writing in these newspapers has remained unexplored. Yet, during these years, the commentary section of private Egyptian newspapers became a privileged space of intellectual intervention, where various authors shared their views on the events. Furthermore, despite the conflicting stances adopted by both the private and semi-official press towards the uprising, at least during the initial 18 days leading up to the ousting of the president, Hosni Mubarak (Klaus), the commentary section presents a striking rhetorical homogeneity used to define the revolution and its actors. As the uprising progressed, columnists in both sections of the media increasingly came to share similar concerns, namely how to prevent the uprising from spreading to the popular classes which, according to them, threatened to turn the revolution into uncontrollable chaos. By fighting the negative portrayal of the movement as disseminated through the semi-official press, columnists were in a position to promote a romanticized image of the protester, which drew extensively on the same discourses as the ones adopted by their opponents: the belief that the uprising threatened to unleash the oppressed masses, who would then embark on the destruction of the State. Eventually, the main difference between the writers employed by the semi-official press and those engaged by private newspapers was their perception of the limits they set in relation to the revolution.

I begin by providing some theoretical and historical background which will help to capture the flavor of one particular newspaper section, namely the commentary. This background is crucial if we are to understand the power relations that existed within the Egyptian journalistic field and which were to determine the various stances adopted during the uprising. Following this, I proceed by considering the issue of the use of violence in the Egyptian revolution. In the light of the stated necessity to adopt peaceful modes of protest, outbursts of violence that accompanied the uprising prompted intellectuals to define the limits between the legitimate and unwelcome protest groups. Finally, in the last section, I examine the most common depictions of the unwelcome rebels, which were informed by the collective fear associated with the hunger revolution and the threats this presented to the survival of the State.

Op-Eds as a Battlefield of the Revolution

Before turning to the various representations of the protester, it is important to provide some theoretical and historical tools in order to map the space in which they were disseminated. The commentary section in a newspaper can be defined as a space for opinion, located at the overlapping intersection of several institutional orders, mainly the fields of journalism, politics and intellectual activity (Jacobs and Townsle 13). Forged in the American context, this definition also seems to correspond well to the Egyptian case, where the political stances adopted by private newspapers, and the increased significance of their op-eds, were largely determined by the position they occupied in the field of Egyptian journalism. After the

emergence of the private press in the 2000s, the protests, strikes and general social criticism that surged during the same decade were to become the main focus of its coverage (Ben Néfissa). Rather than simply being a response to political sympathies, it was actually a strategy aimed at survival in a field dominated by semi-official newspapers and journalists. Deprived of the privileges usually enjoyed by the state-influenced press, such as access to sources, private newspapers had to become innovative in order to establish a new journalistic formula (Benaziz 33-37). Critical, well-informed and eloquent commentaries, written by famous writers, activists, academics, doctors, experts and other members of burgeoning Egyptian civil society, became one of the main ingredients in the successful formula adopted by the private press (41-42). In their study devoted to opinion pages, Ronald N. Jacobs and Eleanor Townsle note that columnists often speak with different voices which are not easy to reconcile. The position from which they speak tends to switch between that of political advisor, addressing the elites, and teacher, providing the readership with the background to understand certain events or situations. Accordingly, the position of columnists is defined by the tension between access to political elites and institutions,

such as the media, and the commitment to detachment, which is more easily aligned with the intellectual claim of autonomy (Jacobs and Townsle 28). The present article suggests that during the Egyptian revolution the commentary section in private newspapers was defined by a similar ambivalence of positions, the one seeking to provide the readers with informed comment on the situation, and the other aiming to promote the interests of the movement. In other words, opinion authors sympathetic to the protests were not only sharing their analysis of the situation but were also consciously seeking to bolster support for the revolution by portraying it in a particular way. The battle of images and words waged between the private and state-influenced press as they sought to define the protests provided the framework for intellectual engagement during the revolution.

The expansion of opinion pages in private newspapers during the revolution is evidence of their increased significance for both readers and writers. Large portions of Egyptian society began to take a fresh interest in politics during the uprising, and naturally turned to op-eds in order to locate themselves within the new political setting. Some newspapers, such as al-Miṣrī al-Yawm, attracted up to half a million new readers in the first months of the uprising,

most of whom were particularly interested in opinion columns (Klaus). The newspaper reacted to this development by promoting its columnists as "those who were painting the image of the Tahrir revolution."[1] The space allocated to opinion columns in the private press increased proportionally; in the daily al-Shurūq it expanded, for instance, from one page to two. The number of columnists also rose: between February and March 2011, al-Shurūq welcomed thirty-two new writers, some of whom were former contributors who, inspired by the fall of Mubarak, had returned to writing.[2] For at least the first 18 days of the uprising, to write an op-ed in a reputable newspaper (i.e. one that was not compromised by its previous stances towards the movement) was basically the same as the act of protesting in the streets, as is suggested by the tendency of authors to identify themselves with protesters, to reproduce slogans in their op-eds which were being chanted on the streets, or to portray their articles as being direct reports from Tahrir Square.[3] As the intellectual legitimacy was redefined according to the stances adopted towards the movement, op-eds provided the most appropriate space to affirm one's loyalty to the revolution or to salvage one's reputation if it had been soiled by previous links to Mubarak's regime.[4] The com-

mentary section of private newspapers was also the space where the corruption and prejudices of the semi-official media were unveiled and denounced, and where moves to reform the media institution in the "new Egypt" were presented.[5] In the context of a pitched battle between various newspapers, opinion columns became an alternative battleground for the struggle taking place on the streets, with columnists seeking to promote particular images of the revolution.

Peaceful Revolution and Violent Rebels

Following Mubarak's resignation, the air in Egypt was filled with the lyrical depictions of the protesters. Epithets such as "pure," "selfless," "noble" and "civilized" were repeatedly used to describe the movement and its actors. However, in addition to these romanticized depictions, there were more down-to-earth accounts which pointed to the level of education, middle-class credentials, cosmopolitan profile and an allegiance to peaceful modes of protest (Ismail, "Urban Subalterns" 865). It was these features of the legitimate protester that commentators invoked when they felt that the uprising was going beyond its predefined limits. In light of its goal of peacefulness, these limits were being set in relation to acts of violence.

Non-violent resistance was the official tactic advocated by the organizers of the initial protests associated with the uprising. The famous manual entitled "How to Revolt Intelligently" that circulated during its first weeks insisted on the need to keep protests peaceful, though it endorsed actions that might be held to be violent by some intellectuals, such as the occupation of official buildings. For example, the advance of the protesters on the Ministry of the Interior, situated in one of the back streets of the Tahrir Square, might be condemned by many columnists as irresponsible. But revolutions rarely follow a planned pathway, and the Egyptian revolution was violent from the very outset. As has already been noted by previous studies, street clashes, the burning down of police stations, armored security cars and official buildings were to be an integral part of the uprising (Ismail, "Urban Subalterns"; A. Ḥusayn). In addition to these acts, there were other less acceptable realities of the revolution, such as sectarian attacks, sexual harassment, looting, street crime and other forms of everyday violence that were feeding the all-pervasive rhetoric of *al-infilāt al-amnī* ("the dissipation of security"). One has to acknowledge, however, that these realities cannot be separated from the overall experience of the revolution. If we depart from its

romantic definition and focus on the sociological one—which understands it as an imbrication of multiple indiscernible motivations, aims and perceptions of opportunity (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule) then limiting the movement to its fragments to which we are sympathetic does not advance our objective of understanding revolutionary situations. As Samuli Schielke has noted, as much as they might seem distant, the rising up of Egyptians against Mubarak's rule and the increase in street crime were the result of the same phenomena: "the broken fear," which undermined social hierarchies at their multiple levels.

In line with the activists, columnists in private newspapers strongly advocated peaceful demonstrations, and expressed their concern over the potential for outbursts of violence. Commenting on the call to protest of the 25th January 2011, a columnist in al-Shurūq, for instance, invited protesters to offer flowers to the police in order to avoid misunderstandings that might lead to violent confrontations (ʿAbdulfattāḥ, "Warda"). The decision to focus on non-violent modes of protest provided the ground for making comparisons between the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the wave of uprisings that had swept across Central Europe at the end of the 1980s ("Rasāʾil"; El-Choubaki,

"Li-mā-dhā"). In the manner of these historical precedents, the Egyptian uprising was also expected to bring about the change in a swift and inexpensive manner. The considerable success achieved during the initial 18 days seemed to confirm these expectations.

As a result, columnists in private newspapers were keen on limiting the Egyptian uprising solely to its peaceful episodes. The adherence to the slogan *silmiyya* ("peaceful") was identified as the condition for belonging to the revolutionary camp, as revealed in the comment written by a columnist in al-Miṣrī al-Yawm who stated that the act of setting buildings and facilities on fire turned revolutionaries into "attackers, road bandits and thugs" (Ḥusayn, "Al-Qāhira"). Such acts "were not a part of the revolution," asserted the same author on another occasion, "and by no means are related to it" ("Al-Taḥaḍḍur"). The perpetrators "were not Egyptians," chimed in another columnist, thus setting the limits not only on the revolution, but also on Egypt's national community (Jūda). It is important also to highlight the tactical dimension of the portrayal of the Egyptian uprising as being peaceful. Amongst the numerous arguments advanced by opinion writers regarding the need to adhere to the peaceful modes of the movement, two were explicitly strategic in nature. The

first pointed to the efficiency of non-violent modes of protest, attested by the success achieved during the first 18 days. As for the second, it evoked the absolute need to retain the support of public opinion, or *ḥizb al-kanaba* ("the couch party")[6] as boldly stated by a renowned Egyptian activist in al-Miṣrī al-Yawm (ʿAbdulfattāḥ, Silmiyya). Accordingly, one of the most common and efficient strategies employed to bolster support for the revolution was to attribute acts of violence, crime and lawlessness to the agents of the Mubarak regime. It was maintained that various parties of the former regime were acting behind the scenes with the intention of distorting the image of the revolution. In order to preserve the image of the uprising as peaceful, some columnists openly invited protesters to treat those who engaged in violence as "outsiders" (*dukhalāʾ*) in relation of the revolution (ʿAlī Ḥasan; ʿAbdulfattāḥ).

However, the line between revolution and infiltration was to become blurred, as it was constantly being redefined according to the situation. As the uprising progressed, and street clashes proliferated, it was increasingly difficult to maintain the peaceful image of the movement. The two stormy winters of 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 produced notable shifts in the arguments justifying the advent of violence. The five-

day clashes that erupted in November 2011 in Muhammad Mahmud Street, and the emergence of the Ultras as a powerful political force after the Port Said massacre in February 2012, convinced some intellectuals that violence was deplorable but an inevitable reality of the revolution. The soaring anger against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood that became widespread the following winter, which led to clashes and the torching of many Brotherhood offices throughout the country, definitely succeeded in burying the dream of a peaceful transition. It was during these months that, in contrast with previous years, violence started to be seen not only as a legitimate, but also as a necessary political solution (Schielke). The gradual adjustments in relation to the use of the slogan *silmiyya* in op-eds serves as a barometer against which to measure the progressive legitimation of violence. Street clashes that marked the end of 2011 led to a redefinition of the principle of the peaceful protest by including in its scope a definition of a defensive application of violence. A columnist in al-Miṣrī al-Yawm explained: "throwing stones against those who shower us with tear-gas is a peaceful act, as well as burning down police stations that unleash on our demonstrations dangerous offenders. Retreat is the opposite of a peaceful act, it's cowardice"

(Samīr). At the end of the following year, which was marked by a series of demonstrations organized by the Muslim Brotherhood in protest against the deposing of President Mohammad Morsi, the slogan *silmiyya* witnessed another shift in meaning: it came to be seen as the opposite of demonstrations that impeded the traffic, or during which posters were raised criticizing the army (Ḥusayn, "Widāʿan"). Despite these shifts, the *silmiyya* slogan was not abandoned, as in the eyes of some columnists it embodied the very legitimacy of the Egyptian revolution.

The Spectre of a Hunger Revolution

The fear of violence that emerged in op-eds during the first year of the revolution was supported by certain collective representations of the Egyptian poor. The words used to describe perpetrators of reported or anticipated violence reveal the prevailing belief that the uprising should be prevented from spreading to the popular classes because it might result in chaos. The acts of violence were mostly attributed to forces related to the worlds of crime and poverty, such as "road-bandits" (*qattāʿa al-ṭuruq*), "ex-convicts" (*arbāb al-sawābiq*), "individuals with dangerous criminal records" (*musajjalīn khaṭr*), "riff-raff" (*al-ghawghāʾ*), "the depressed" (*al-muḥbitīn*), "lost youth" (*al-shabāb al-ḍāʿī*), street children, and the "proverbial thug" (*balṭajiyya*). In fact, it was mostly representations of the poverty-stricken as being groups naturally prone to violence and crime that were used to promote a positive image of the revolution.

The portrayal of the poor as being inclined to crime was not new. It was supported by the deep-rooted representations associated with popular areas in Cairo, identifying them as centers of crime, moral degradation and unruly conduct. As the works of Salwa Ismail have shown, since at least the 1980s these representations have been widely used in the official discourse in order to justify the enhanced security controls employed in popular quarters ("Political Life"). The image of these urban areas as sites of a generalized chaos are maintained by means of popular culture; for example by the films of the Egyptian filmmaker Khaled Youssef, who has made the subject of informal neighborhoods his favorite topic, and also as a result of numerous commentaries in the press that have portrayed them as "the belts of dynamite" encircling Cairo's middle class quarters which have the potential to explode at any moment and invade them (Muntaṣir). During the uprising, such predictions and the fears they invoked became particularly prominent. As suggested by the initial interpretations of the protests in Tunisia that were published in the Egyptian press before they spread to Egypt, the spontaneous reading of the uprising in Egypt was that of a rebellion led by the poor (Kreil and Sabaseviciute). These fears derive from the pervasive rhetoric of "the revolution of the hungry ones" (*thawrat al-jiyāʿ*), which is deeply embedded in Egyptian social and political discourse. According to the narrative, hunger rebellions are inevitably destructive as they sweep away everything that stands in their way, or "devour the green and the dry" (*yaʾkul al-akhḍar wa al-yābis*) as the favored Arab expression has it. These rebellions are portrayed as being driven by the sheer desire for revenge and savagery, drawing on classical literary illustrations of the animalization of the poverty-stricken (Poli). The image of *balṭajiyya*, the term commonly used in Egypt to define hit-men working on the payroll of various groups and replacing the rule of law, is the embodiment of the fear of the poor. Tellingly, during the uprising the figure of the illiterate and hungry thug was used by both sides on the frontline, i.e. those who accused the protesters in Tahrir of being effectively "bought" with meals from Kentucky Fried Chicken, and those who imputed violence to the thugs employed by the former regime.

It should be noted, however, that the poor in general were included in the uprising, and their presence provided it with the legitimacy associated with a "revolution of the entire people." Nevertheless, the role attributed to them in opinion articles reveal the perceived need to preserve the firmly established social hierarchies, even in times of revolution. The urban poor were recognized as a revolutionary force mainly when they acted in unity with the protesters in Tahrir, helping them to protect neighbourhoods and properties from looters (El-Choubaki, "Thawra"; Farīd). On these occasions, they were also identified by reference to the positively connoted term, *al-busaṭāʾ* ("the poor"). As Lucie Ryzova has argued, the battle in Mohammad Mahmud, led mostly by socially marginalized young men, might have been forgotten if it had not been for their spatial connection to the Square, populated by the predominantly middle-class crowd. In most cases, however, the underprivileged were generally held responsible for turning the revolution into chaos. It was the threat of infiltration on the part of the poor that a commentator in al-Shurūq evoked when arguing against labour and civil servant protests that spread across Egypt after the downfall of Mubarak:

In contrast to the civilized behaviour of the protesters in Tahrir and other squares, most of the sectorial demonstrations that have appeared lately might lead to unparalleled chaos […]. Some of these demonstrations have already degenerated as they were infiltrated by frustrated rabble who engage in the random destructions of public facilities […]. As protests spread, some of them felt that it was their golden hour to regain their lost rights. And then, they tried to snatch for themselves what they saw as their right. (Husayn, "An taʾatī", tansl. by the author)

The fear that the poverty-stricken might be tempted to exact justice through their own actions became constant fodder for the argument that the role of the police and the authority of the State should be urgently restored (Abū al-Ghār "Intikāsa"; Ḥadīdī).

Given the entrenched fear of a hunger revolution, it was in the interest of pro-revolutionary intellectuals to portray the 25th January uprising as something entirely different. This was achieved by stressing the difference between political revolutions, defined as quests for freedom, and social rebellions, driven by the sole desire to fill empty stomachs (al-Ghazzālī; Faḍl; Muntaṣir, "Fāriq"). The difference between these two movements was crucial as it predetermined their outcomes, a fact noted by an academic in al-Shurūq, who stated that revolts sparked by "the violation of basic needs, such as eating, drinking and reproducing" result in "replacing the dictator with a new one, more capable of responding to basic animal needs, but at the expense of providing for basic human needs" (ʿAbdulfattāḥ, "Ḥayawānyya"). Social questions were indeed on the revolutionary agenda, according to the commentators, but they were dependent on political solutions, such as the introduction of free elections and the establishment of democracy (ʿIsā). The hierarchy of demands (Abdelrahman) reflected the belief that the uprising should remain in the hands of the youth encamped in Tahrir. Related to that is one of the most common arguments used to promote the 25th January uprising, i.e. the claim that the latter saved Egypt from an impending hunger revolution. According to this argument, those who trembled at the prospect of a rebellion by the poor should have been grateful to the middle class youth who had taken on the responsibility for addressing the disastrous economic situation. They had been responsible for the inclusion of social demands in the slogans chanted in Tahrir, such as the demands for bread and social justice, and this was seen as a promise to save the country from the potential of a destructive class struggle (ʿAlawī). "Since 2010 I knew that "chaos" (*fawḍā*)

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was about to come […] (triggered) by the lost youth without hope or perspectives from informal neighborhoods", confessed a columnist in al-Shurūq. "But the great revolution has stopped this from happening for the time being" (Abū al-Ghār, "Al-thawra", transl. by the author). The phrase "for the time being" is important here, as the threat of a hunger revolution would be evoked in the future every time the revolution revealed any perceived shortcomings. In contemporary Egypt, the image of an uncontrollable and destructive rebellion led by the poor serves as a barometer to measure the level of discontent against those in power. During the three years of the uprising, it was regularly used to threaten those in power: the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF),[7] the Muslim Brotherhood[8] and the current rule of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.[9] Not surprisingly, the coup (or the revolution) led by al-Sisi on the 30th July to depose Mohammad Morsi was also popularly credited as having saved the country from a rebellion on the part of the poor.[10] The level of political significance attributed to this image reveals that the representations of the poor as a potentially destructive force were shared across the spectrum of political affiliations.

Conclusion

The ambivalence that surrounds the representations of the rebels reveals one of the most significant dilemmas that faced Egyptian intellectuals during the uprising: How to make a revolution in a world perceived as being Hobbesian? In other words, how to liberate a society without liberating certain classes whose involvement in the revolution might prove to be fatal for the survival of the State?

As indicated by the words and images used by columnists to define the legitimate protester, the fears that the uprising might unleash forces leading to chaos proved to be a constant feature of the revolution. The conviction that Egyptian society was being exposed to internal threats reveals the prevalence of a certain political philosophy among Egyptian intellectuals, resting on the view that tends to see the State as a mostly coercive institutional power to which all the citizens are bound to fearfully demonstrate their respect (Goldberg and Zaki). It is revealing to observe how the representation of these forces shifted throughout the revolution. During the first years of the uprising, they were defined in terms of poverty and crime in line with the dominant representations of the poor in Egyptian popular culture. These representations expose inherent conviction that a revolution is a risky venture in a country where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants live below the poverty line. There was a fear that the poor would act alone, without waiting until the perceived higher political aims that had been expressed by the youth in Tahrir had been achieved. These arguments echo Hanna Arendt's reflections that maintain that "revolutions for freedom" are impossible in countries which suffer from acute poverty, where the satisfaction of bodily needs is defined by reference to urgency. Since the winter of 2012-2013, when the figure of the unwelcome rebels shifted from the hungry thug to the Muslim Brother, the fears it embodied were expressed less by social than by political vocabulary. The vision of the revolution advocated by columnists sympathetic to the uprising was thus limited from the beginning.

Notes

[1] See *al-Miṣrī al-Yawm* from the 6th February 2011 onwards.

[2] This observation is based on the study of op-eds published in *al-Shurūq* between the 11th February and the 30th March 2011.

[3] See, for instance, a series of articles by Amr Hamzawi entitled "From Tahrir Square", published in *al-Shurūq* between the 4th and the 19th February 2011.

[4] It was a widespread practice for politicians to start writing in the private press after their resignation from official positions, as well as for columnists who were associated with the semi-official press before the revolution.

[5] See, for instance, countless op-eds devoted to the criticism of the semi-official media in *al-Miṣrī al-Yawm* in March 2011.

[6] A derogatory term referring to the "silent majority" of Egyptians who followed the uprising through their television, comfortably seated on couches.

[7] In July and October 2011, two pages entitled "the revolution of the hungry is approaching" (*thawra al-jiyyāʿ qādima*) were created on Facebook in order to criticize the repressive measures against protesters adopted by the military council.

[8] The anti-Muslim Brotherhood newspaper Veto devoted its 29th January 2013 issue to the hunger revolution, maintaining that the living conditions of the poor had worsened during Muhammad Morsi's presidency.

[9] For example, "Khubarā: ʿAla al-abwāb thawra al-jiyyāʿ." *al-Miṣrīyūn*, 18 May 2015. See, also, the excerpt entitled "Thawra al-jiyyāʿ': Al-ṭūfān al-qādim ʿala Miṣr" screened on the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated channel *al-Mukkamalīn* and accessible on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/

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