Injustice Turned Inward? Continuous Traumatic Stress and Social Polarization in Egypt

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Based on 40 life-story testimonies with young Cairene activists, this article argues that post-revolutionary Egypt was marked by Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS). CTS is a phenomenological term that accounts for the structurally traumatic nature of political repression. It emphasizes the continuing temporality of such pervasive traumatizaton and the structural political stressors that underpin it. CTS thus entails a specifically *political* conception of trauma, according to which traumatic stress is in fact constituted by a violent, corrupt, unaccountable *political and judicial system*. This article argues that the traumatic experiences of activists in pre-and post-revolutionary Egypt are best perceived through the lens of CTS. It also insists that such traumatic stress—particularly the lack of justice and formal recourse—provided a fertile breeding ground for revenge and social polarization, which was directly incited by counter-revolutionary actors (such as the military and Muslim Brotherhood leadership), thereby sadly further contributing to the (seemingly endless) continuous cycle of continued traumatic stress.

Keywords: Egypt, Trauma, Polarization, Injustice, Revenge

Introduction

This research draws on 40 life-story testimonies of young (18-35 years) Cairene activists (25 male, 15 female) from different political orientations (liberal, socialist, Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafist), conducted between October 2013 and February 2014. The experiences of these activists are marked by Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS), which is a phenomenological therapeutic term developed by anti-apartheid South African psychologists to accounts for the relentless traumatic nature of political repression and its ensuing social conflict (Straker and Moosa). The key markers of CTS are the emphasis on a different–*continuing*–temporality of traumatizaton and the emphasis on the structural *political stressors* that cause this traumatization (Straker; Straker and Moosa). CTS hence advances a specifically political conception of traumatic stress that is constituted by a violent, corrupted political and judicial system (Eagle and Kaminer; Straker). In contexts of CTS, traumatic injustices are systemic and pervasive: the political authorities that were supposed to protect the people are the direct perpetrators or at best colluding in the abuses. Hence, in CTS, there is no recourse to the judicial or reconciliation processes. Rather, "the law is part of the problem rather than potentially part of the

solution" (Straker and Moosa 458). CTS is particularly useful since it sheds light on the feelings of disorientation and numbing pervasiveness of fear due to the continuation and pervasiveness of traumatic threats from which there is no respite. It also notes the difficulty of differentiating between real and perceived or imagined threats within such situations (Eagle and Kaminer), and how in those circumstances there are often two divergent and overlapping coping mechanisms: namely withdrawal, isolation, and disinterest in (public) living, and feelings of increased anger, aggression, and even hatred of others (Eagle and Kaminer).

In post-revolutionary Egypt, we see a destructive cycle of continuous traumatic stress. As the state authorities violently repressed dissent and foreclosed the possibilities of justice and political reform, activists not only became disillusioned with politics (and withdrew from the public sphere into social isolation) (Matthies-Boon; Matthies-Boon and Head), but anger and frustration also turned inward on society. That is, society became increasingly polarized, and social aggression spread like wildfire, thereby sadly further contributing to the cycle of continued traumatic stress and its feelings of disorientation.

Below, I will first explore the concept of CTS, its usefulness, and its contribution to trauma theory. I will then provide a brief overview of the traumatic stresses—and particularly feelings of injustice—activists experienced after the 2011 revolution. We will see how social polarization increased, and how it sets in motion a cycle of revenge and emotional outlet that in fact unfortunately further aggravated people's experiences of CTS.[1]

Continuous Traumatic Stress: What's in a Term?
The concept CTS was developed by psychologists in apartheid South Africa and provides a phenomenological account of the unpredictable, relentless, and pervasive traumatic stresses during political repression and civil conflict (Straker and Moosa). CTS arose as a therapeutic concept to supplement existing understandings of trauma, such as PTSD (Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zuckerman; Stevens et al.). Yet, it argued against the individualist, intra-psychical tendencies within much of the mainstream trauma literature and placed emphasis on the social and political contexts—i.e. the traumatic *stressors*—that cause the existential experiences of hopelessness, alienation, disorientation, and disassociation (Straker). The four characteristics of CTS are an emphasis on "the

context of stressor conditions, the temporal location of the stressor conditions, the complexity of discriminating between real and perceived or imagined threat, and the absence of external protective systems" (Eagle and Kaminer 85). CTS hence not only highlights the manner in which individual, social, and political dimensions of trauma are intertwined during state violence and repression, but also that in such contexts the traumatic experience is not located in the past, but continues to be omnipresent.

Moreover, Eagle and Kaminer argue that therapeutic help in such contexts should not focus on *symptom reduction* but rather on realistic threat discrimination. In situations of pervasive and unpredictable political violence, it becomes difficult to distinguish real traumatic threats from imagined or perceived future ones (Straker 216). This may lead to experiences of existential anxiety and fear that might in other circumstances be diagnosed as paranoia (Eagle and Kaminer 92). Yet, CTS scholars insist that it is important to realize that in cases of CTS, "the denial or minimalisation of danger might be more problematic than exaggeration, even if such defences allow for reduction of anxiety" (Eagler and Kaminer 93). Such denial or minimalization could directly compromise

the individual's safety. Furthermore, CTS also highlights how in contexts of political repression, one of the essential presumptions of trauma therapy—namely therapeutic safety—cannot be guaranteed (Straker). Importantly, they also point out that within contexts of CTS, the social contract between the state and the individual is entirely broken, which means there is no path of official recourse for addressing the traumatic violence inflicted (Eagle and Kaminer). This includes structural abuse by the security state and its cronies, such as physical violence, but also other forms of systematic destructions of life, such as life-threatening poverty in contexts of political corruption.

Hence, one of the main contributions of CTS for our purposes here is the recognition that the authorities charged with the protection of people are not only informally embroiled but are the main perpetrators of traumatic violence (i.e. the threat to life and bodily integrity). This aggravates the traumatic impact since violations are accompanied by "resignation, collusion, nonretribution and licence for further violation at a systemic level" (Eagle and Kaminer 94). Or rather, "systems designed to create a sense of accountability and to minimize harm to citizens are ineffectual and overstretched, at best, or corrupt and

collusive with informal systems of power, at worst" (Eagle and Kaminer 93). Hence, there is no or very little respite from the continuous threat of violence, and the culture of fear and suspicion spreads through society. Individuals may experience not only a sensation of hyper alertness but also a deep sense of vulnerability, a sense of impotence or loss of control over one's own life, and an altered sense of reality that makes it difficult to comprehend experiences.

CTS may thus instill a sense of nihilistic resignation in some, through disinvestment in living and a minimization of exposure through avoidance (Eagle and Kaminer 94). CTS can lead to withdrawal from public life as people become "withdrawn into a protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden" (Erikson 195). As I highlighted elsewhere (Matthies-Boon), due to a lack of positive revolutionary outcomes and socially embedded coping mechanisms, such a withdrawal had deeply depoliticizing impacts in Egypt. It resulted in (re)atomization: the deliberate isolation of each individual "from all his peers through the machinations of the regime" (Glasius 348). However, this article focuses on the other possible reaction to CTS, that of expres-

sions of anger and aggression. In CTS, individuals may "engage with the perversion of the good, and the breakdown of systems […] by assuming control themselves in violent or threatening ways" (Eagle and Kaminer 94). As Eagle and Kaminer explain, the adaptation towards structural dehumanization in CTS might instill a sense of paranoid defensiveness but also the desire for hatred and revenge, as well as the clinging to prejudices (Eagle and Kaminer 96). Structural continuous traumatization, and particularly its lack of legal or other recourse, hence provides a fertile breeding ground for the spread of further aggression and revenge (Eagle and Kaminer 94). This happened in post-revolutionary Egypt, where anger and frustration—encouraged by the counter-revolutionary forces of the military and the Brotherhood leadership, and stirred on by the polarizing Egyptian media—turned inward on society and turned people against each other. Social polarization spread like a wildfire because of the situation of CTS wherein so many people dwelled. Yet, whilst social polarization is an expression of CTS, it also further contributes to it, thereby closing the counter-revolutionary circle of repression.

Interlude: Theoretical Similarities and Divergences

Before continuing I will first explore how CTS differs from and contributes to trauma theory, notably complex or social/cultural trauma. Like other concepts, CTS holds that trauma breaks the symbolic order of the world (Kirshner, 1994), how people bring meaning into and make sense of the world. What happens in trauma is a shattering of one's dwelling in the world—one's sense of being-in and being-with others in the world (Bracken; Stolorow). The world and one's social surroundings appear alien as trust in the justice of the world breaks down – leaving one hanging in a void of nihilistic *groundlessness*. Trauma thus[2] exposes the brutality of life, and frequently invokes anxiety and meaninglessness that may be expressed through sensations of numbing, avoidance behaviour, hyper-arousal and alertness, and difficulty sleeping.

As stated earlier, the concept of CTS differs from that of PTSD due to its explicit focus on the structural *political stressors* of *continuing* traumatic stress rather than the individual's (intrapsychic) responses to a past event. It thus also differs from complex-PTSD in that CTS recognizes the recurrence (or sequential layering) of traumatic experieces and explicitly locates these in its systemic *political* contexts, whereas complex trauma focuses more on the sequencing of interpersonal trauma (e.g. sexual and childhood abuse) (Eagle and Kaminer; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zuckerman). CTS also diverges from the notion of cultural trauma (Alexander; Sztompka), which explores how particular cultural groups mobilize around traumatic experiences—see for instance minority rights movements. Cultural trauma not only potentially reifies social or cultural groups; it also presumes that groups are able to mobilize in the public arena. Yet, in CTS it is precisely the public arena that is at best systematically compromised and at worst entirely destroyed. Sztompka's insight that social trauma entails a rupture or a breakdown in social relations that poses an obstacle to creative and collective becoming remains relevant for CTS (Sztompka). For, in such situations, creative social becoming and collective pursuit of justice are indeed severly hampered, and may in fact itself aggravate conditions of CTS.

Social Polarization as Continuous Traumatic Stress in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

Mubarak's rule fits the classical image of CTS: unbridled and unaccountable security state violence and structural poverty that left a large section of Egyptians struggling for life. The neoliberalization of the economy empowered the corrupt, untouchable business-cum-political elite, whilst forcing millions into poverty, since the so-called trickle-down effect never materialized (Joya; Mitchell; Soliman). As this interviewee remarked:

> People are left to rot and survive in the informal economic sectors. All Mubarak did was to secure his own people, and play us out against one another. (Interview 38)

Mubarak used his brutal security state apparatus—which reigned with impunity—to repress any social unrest (Ismail). The use of informers was rife as people were either willingly or unwillingly co-opted into the regime's security apparatus.[3] And so, we see the classical expression of CTS, namely one of (justified) paranoid anxiety and fear that permeate everyday life:

> There was a lot of fear, and you cannot express yourself because you fear everyone around you. You know that we have a very strong intelligence security and you are expecting all the time that you speak that this guy or this woman is going to inform about you – and stuff like this. (Interview 32)

Yet, even this fear and suspicion can never fully repress the potential for new creative social becoming. During the 2011 revolution, people collectively expressed their frustration, anger, and depression, and directed it towards Mubarak and the security state (Matthies-Boon and Head). Interviewees recalled how they saw a new Egypt: brave people were fighting injustices, and they believed that poverty and state abuse would be eradicated. It was a time of social utopia and extreme hopefulness. Suddenly previously atomized people would talk to each other:

> You see the Salafist person sit next to the most liberal person. […] You see the poor classes with the crème de la crème and you see them sitting together enjoying a civil conversation and it was beautiful and so simple. (Interview 10)

Though the revolution was of course saturated with counter-revolutionary violence from its inception, it was the connection between people—and its potential for creative social becoming—that posed the gravest threat to the established political order. It drew people out of their atomized shells and made them collectively target the state's institutions.

After Mubarak's resignation and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) takeover, we see a deliberate attempt to break this spirit of collectivity and maintain the established political and economic order (HRW). SCAF violently dispersed protests (shooting, maiming, and killing protestors), publically stigmatized protestors (as being prostitutes, spies, and thugs), and insisted it was time for security and stability (playing on people's already heightened fears for economic survival). During SCAF's rule, we also see the torture of street children, virginity trials, and organized mass sexual assaults against women during protests. Female respondents explained how these mass assaults made them extremely fearful of going to protests, and when they did they were hyper-alert. Another tactic used to instill fear into protestors was the systematic use of torture. Torture is an effective tool for political repression since it instils a complete existential helplessness and uncanny loneliness at the hands of the other, and thus severs our trust in our shared social world. As this young man remarked:

> You cannot describe what you lived in these moments. You cannot put it in words. You live in different world than other people. Once you have experienced what I have experienced, you have experienced the worst and you live with death inside of you every day. (Interview 37)

Like him, all respondents who were tortured relayed how it ruptured their social relations and left them with a deep sense of alienation (from both themselves and others).

These are just some of the examples of grave physical force that was used by the security forces in 2012 to suppress political protest. Overall, the violence experienced by all respondents between 2011 and 2014 has been grave: twenty-six commented on the pervasiveness of death in their lives, twelve interviewees were teargassed, eleven were directly injured, seven were detained (and beaten), four were tortured, four were sexually abused, and three experienced near-death. Furthermore, twelve had friends who died, twelve had friends who were injured, nine had friends who were detained, and seven had friends who were tortured. Also, seven had family members who were injured, three had family member who were detained, two had family members who died, two had family members who were tortured, and one had a family member who nearly died. The threat of violence

was hence everywhere, continuous and ever pervasive.

What aggravated the traumatic nature of this pervasive violence was its perceived injustice. One young man narrated how during Mubarak's years he had not hoped for any justice, but the revolution instilled a deep ethical commitment in him to fight for the rights of those who died. Yet, "when we discovered that none of the people who killed where punished, we discovered that the worst part of it is the injustice, the violence, yeah" (Interview 38). It was hence not only that people were killed but the lack of political accountability and change that angered people. As this person remarked:

> My real sentiment is that I am infuriated by injustice. […] basically I don't want people to be unaccountable. My idea is that if something happens, the person no matter who he is, gets called on it and has to answer for it. […] That's the key thing for me. I am not infuriated— for example if something happens to someone, I'm not very compassionate in terms of 'poor thing'. I'm just infuriated for that person. That's my notion of… not being able to get away with something sinister. (Interview 11)

This feeling of sinister injustice became further imprinted on respondents as they saw politicians act in their self-interests rather than for the common good. One such example is the secret handover deal Muslim Brotherhood leadership struck with the military in September 2011. This deal guaranteed the secrecy of the military's budget whilst ensuring quick elections that the Brotherhood would no doubt win (which it did in December 2011 and January 2012). Subsequently, the Brotherhood leadership called for its members not to join the protestors during the violent Mohamed Mahmoud clashes in November 2011. This left a deep sense of betrayal and injustice:

> I will never forget and tolerate what the Brotherhood did at that moment… I can tolerate the police as we expected this of them but never the Brotherhood… they did not only remain silent, they incited against us… the Brotherhood wasted a historical chance for this country to become a real democratic country when they had their deals with the SCAF. (Interview 7)

When the Mohamed Morsi then became President after elections in June 2012, the political situation did not improve. Protests were frequently and violently dispersed

by either the security forces or Brotherhood vigilante groups after security forces had disappeared from the street. Moreover, protestors were again castigated as characters with questionable morality: thugs, prostitutes, and spies that sought to tarnish and bring down the nation. Security forces killed, tortured, and detained protestors en masse with impunity. Notable here is the Port Said massacre in February 2012 that killed 74 members of the Al Ahly football club supporters (Doward). Furthermore, on the formal political stage the Brotherhood stigmatized and excluded the political opposition. Social violence was further encouraged by, for instance, driving buses of Brotherhood supporters to sites of oppositional protests. This included the Presidential Palace protest in December 2012, where protesters objected to Morsi's presidential decree in November 2012 that granted him immunity against any legal challenge and called for a constitutional referendum on an overtly Islamist constitutional draft. Whilst until this point political violence had been directed at the state authorities, now civilians physically fought each other:

> I'm always used to conflict and violence from the police, from the army, but what I saw around the palace in December 2012 was traumatic, shocking,

so ehm... I mean I... It is very hard to see one of your friends, or those who used to be your friends... I won't say that they are shooting us or anything like that because very few of them were using weapons, but almost every one of them was throwing stones, being violent with us... so imagine that anyone of them could be your friend, your neighbor, your brother even. And what made me more shocked that I... I always used to be a pacifist, peaceful... After the Islamists were attacking us, I started attacking back, throwing stones back and I was shocked at my reaction afterwards. I went back home, wondering how I did that. (Interview 1)

These clashes tore Egyptian society apart. Friends, colleagues, and relatives now openly fought each other as relations became polarized along anti- and pro-Brotherhood lines. Interviewees remarked how during the spring of 2013 social tensions increased and heated verbal and physical fights became a prominent feature of the everyday on the street, inside homes, or on public transport. They also explained how due to frustration with continued injustice and lies, they became increasingly impatient and aggressive with their social surroundings: they became unable to hear the opinions of those politically opposed to them. What particularly weighed on them was the lack of structural, revolutionary progress, and that protestors had been killed precisely for the people they were now arguing with. The overwhelming absence of justice left a bitter taste, which for many triggered the desire for revenge. One respondent remarked how the violence of revenge had become an emotional outlet:

Revenge makes you go after your… and you forget about the fact that you are not making enough money, the fact that you don't have a job, that the fact that your health care system is…is … is blah. All of that you're forgetting about that and you're focusing on revenging yourself from some people. (Interview 2)

Others also explained how during such violence they felt a release, a relief even, which was however compromised after the event by the realization that they were embroiled in a cycle of violence that had become difficult to stop. They felt increasingly alienated not just from themselves ("how could I have become this person?") but also from their social surroundings as basic social trust plummeted. This modus of extreme polarized violence further intensified when civilian security forces withdrew from the street:

At the social level […] we have a lot of fights, and because the police is not like playing a role so people started actually to… eh… bypass the law and get their own right by their own hands, so… yeah. (Interview 6)

Social violence spread like a wildfire throughout Egyptian society, with civilians or vigilante gangs now even engaging in public practices of torture:

It was a bit of shock, because we were used to the policemen doing torture, the army doing torture... the politicians doing torture like military police also for intelligence or whatever but for normal people like here in the streets torturing people who they think are thugs or whatever, different from them, dehumanizing people by other people is really shocking. (Interview 22)

Social tensions reached their peak on June 30 when millions demonstrated on the streets after the successful *tamarrud* (rebellion) campaign,[4] which called for early elections. The military provided Morsi with an ultimatum and deposed him on 3 July 2013. Brotherhood supporters organized

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the Ennahda and Rabaa sit-ins, which were violently dispersed by the Egyptian security services in August 2013, resulting in at least 817 dead. This massacre left a deep ambiguous imprint on all activists. Those who were present described scenes of horror: one young woman narrated how, inside a nearby mosque, the smell of wading through a thick layer of blood mixed with ice water (as the bodies were covered with blocks of ice since it was over 40°C) and seeing all these dead, mutilated bodies made her feel sick, as she was trying to help relatives find their loved ones. And another person recalled how his father, cousin, and Quran teacher had been killed right in front of him. Even those who were not present—and in fact politically opposed to the sit-in—expressed their deep concern and ambiguity towards the event and its political aftermath. They were angry with the people—including loved ones—that attended the sit-in and expressed deep disappointment with their political choice. At the same time, however, they were concerned with how this massacre was legitimized through hate speech in the media, and how it intensified the bloodthirsty tendencies they saw emerging around them. They narrated how since Rabaa, death and violence had become even more of a pervasive feature in Egyptian public life. They were fearful of going outside, even walking in the streets, due to random physical fights, verbal scuffles, and even acid attacks. They narrated finding dead bodies on the side of the street (and no one caring), dead bodies being thrown out of driving vans (again without anyone caring), and people being beaten to death by passersby as hatred and dehumanization reached a boiling point. The threat of violence was pervasive and instilled in many the tragic existential realization that life is cheap in Egypt. As one person remarked:

It's not like these people are monsters—this is how it happens, this is how it happens. You're living in this deep shit and you feel like that threatened and you feel like, you know—lives are cheap in Egypt. And people are aware of that. It's a very brutal thought. Life here is superfluous and people here are aware of that. It is a really brutal thought. (Interview 19)

They also asserted that this omnipresence of intense violence solidified the Egyptian political landscape into two oppositional camps—the military and the Brotherhood—which left no alternative space. As one young man put it: "the two big elephants are fighting, and we are grass that is being trampled" (Interview 38). Or, in the almost prophetic words of this young person:

First the system of Mubarak will be more and more and more stronger, and the poor will be poorer more than now. The rich will be richer and more than now. There will not be any freedom, any justice—justice only if you are rich and in power, then you will have justice. If you are poor, no way. And no one will feel like a human, just everybody will just be looking for food and drink for his family. No one will care about anything. They will live a bad life more than now I think. No one will care about anyone. Step by step… this country is going to go down. (Interview 12)

Conclusion

This article argued that CTS is a useful concept to make sense of post-revolutionary experiences in Egypt. It provides a lens through which to comprehend the feelings of disorientation that result out of the relentless traumatic stress that is part and parcel of a deeply violent and corrupt political order. In the case of Egypt, this violence also provided fertile breeding ground for revenge and social polarization that was directly incited by counter-revolutionary actors (the military and Muslim Brotherhood leadership). It thereby sadly further contributed to the continued reproduction of traumatic stress.

Notes

[1] CTS is not a necessary reason for social polarization, but rather that where it is encouraged by powerful political actors (such as the military and the Brotherhood leadership) it provides a fertile breeding ground.

[2] We should note that trauma is one of the few concepts that includes its own etiology, as it refers to both the experience and the consequences of that experience.

[3] See Salwa Ismail's work.

[4] Tamarrud, a Nasserist and Old Regime (pro-military) alliance, successfully mobilized large sections of Egyptian society to demonstrate on 30 June.

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