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EGYPT RISES UP

THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION: BREAD, FREEDOM, DIGNITY

Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

The 2011 Egyptian revolution is undoubtedly one of the most important socio-political events in modern history. Spanning a mere 18 days, from January 15 until February 11, the revolution began with street protests calling for social, economic and political reforms and ended with the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. The revolution has given rise to a multitude of questions and intersectional analyses that have looked at social, economic and political factors that came together to bring about the Arab Spring. Taking Egypt as a case study, this research focused on the narratives of protesters, specifically the concept of dignity as one of the major aspects of the protester's demands, and how the concept of dignity relates to the social, political and economic factors in narratives of the revolution.

The research was carried out during the months of July and August 2011 in Cairo and consisted of interviews with protesters and activists. The findings indicate that narratives of the state feature predominantly, in particular police brutality, the 2010 parliamentary elections, corruption, and passing of the presidency to Gamal Mubarak. It became clear that social class and generation were the two prominent social relations that led to and impacted the revolution. Finally, with regards to the research question, it became clear that dignity was a thread that ran through most elements and narratives. While much research is yet to be done on the revolution, this work aims to contribute towards an understanding of the revolution from a socio-historical perspective through the personal medium of the narrative.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH FOCUS, AND OVERVIEW OF THE 2011 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

1.1. Introduction

The 2011 Egyptian revolution is undoubtedly one of the most important socio-political events in modern history. Spanning a mere 18 days, from January 15 until February 11, the revolution began with street protests calling for social, economic and political reforms and ended with the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over temporarily, with promises of parliamentary and presidential elections within the year.

The Egyptian uprising followed Tunisia's successful revolution, and has been part of a wave of protest movements across the region. They have given rise to a multitude of questions and intersectional analyses that have looked at social, economic and political factors that came together to bring about the "Arab Spring." Taking Egypt as a case study, I want to examine some of the narratives of the protesters that grew out of those factors. More specifically, I want to focus on the concept of dignity as one of the major aspects of the protester's demands. It is necessary to go back in history, from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Hosni Mubarak, in order to analyse important societal changes that have resulted from the various state and economic systems that have been put in place by different regimes. It is also important to note that the past decade has seen a steady increase in protests and strikes across the country, and social movements and political opposition have been steadily increasing their pressure. The system was slowly coming undone; it was simply a matter of when and how it would fall apart.

1.2. Research Focus and Question:

The aim of this research paper is to attempt to understand how Egyptians who participated in the protests narrate and look back to modern Egyptian history in order to understand the various social elements that led to the 2011 revolution. More specifically, I aim to analyse the significance of the concept of dignity in those narratives. My research question, thus, is the following:

How does the concept of dignity relate to the social, political and economic factors in the narratives of the revolution?

My hypothesis is that dignity is a concept that can be interlinked with the various social elements that led to the revolution. For this reason, I will research the role and meaning of dignity to people that protested in the revolution, and how it was linked to other social elements.

There is no doubt that revolutions are among the more complex social phenomena, with social, political and economic factors combining to create a situation that pushed millions of Egyptians into the streets. At the economic level, there is liberalization of the economy, rising unemployment, rising cost of living, and a growing gap between rich and poor—despite a 6% growth rate per year. At the political level, Egypt has been an authoritarian state for more than 60 years, with increasing centralization of power and state repression. Finally, at the social level, the educational system is decaying, family structures are under increasing stress, there is a youth explosion, and the majority of Egyptians are faced with insecurity in all aspects of their lives (Hudson 2011).

While it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the different social elements, it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with all of them extensively. I will therefore present a brief overview of the various elements that were emphasized in the literature and the interviews. All of these issues intersect with one another, and occur at different, interrelated levels, including the global, regional, and local. Social power is always present, particularly class and generation. Finally, dignity is intertwined within each of these issues and is present at all levels: the global (Israel-Palestine, American aid); the national (police brutality, rigged elections, corruption); and the personal (family structures, marriage crisis, breakdown in social services). These levels also intersect and are not clear-cut. In attempting to conceptualize dignity, I will draw mainly from the interviews I conducted.

1.3. The Revolution

The Egyptian revolution was a grassroots movement, unlike the 1952 military coup popularly understood as a revolution. The main demands of the 2011 uprising were bread, freedom and human dignity.¹ Omnia el-Shakry argues that it is important to understand the uprising within the context of Egyptian modern history, specifically previous modern Egyptian revolutions including the 1919 revolution to overthrow the British colonizers, the 1952 military coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the introduction of neoliberalism to Egypt.² El-Shakry claims that the 2011 revolution was a people's revolution, with similar demands to those from 1919 and 1952, specifically demands for economic and social justice (2011).

The Revolution had several notable characteristics. One notable observation is that a large cross-section of Egyptians participated, thus giving it an enormous amount of legitimacy. In addition, the revolution had no leader(s): while it was certainly organized by various actors and organizations, it did not have a single clear leader throughout the 18 days. Furthermore, "Contrary to the analysis of foreign commentators, it was neither led by religious fundamentalists nor instigated by a hungry mob demanding cheaper food. The slogans were almost completely secular and emphasized the demands for political freedom and respect for human dignity," (Amin 2011: 1). Nawal el-Saadawi concurs that the revolution was about social justice and dignity, as could be gathered from the slogans and banners from the protests (*Al Jazeera Empire: Egypt, Revolution in Progress* 2011). While it is true that Egyptians from all social groups took part, it appears that the youth were instrumental in starting the revolution. Nawal el-Saadawi argues that the revolution was started by the Egyptian youth and later all of Egypt joined, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim concurred, stating that most revolutions are started by the youth (Ibid).

Mona el-Ghobashy (2011) agreed that most narratives of the revolution have focused on one of three explanations: technology, Tunisia and tribulation (especially soaring food prices). She brings up two traditional theories that have been used in understanding popular collective action: the dramaturgical model, where actors gain new consciousness and rise up; and the grievance model, where accumulating social issues push a population to the edge (259). Both need to be contextualized in order to understand why Egyptians decided to rise up now. Charles Tilly believes one cause of revolution is a decline in the ability of a government to coerce (el-Ghobashy 2011: 259). The street fights between the protesters and the police from January 25-

¹ Most protesters I interviewed described these as the main demands they saw during the uprising.

² This was not a revolution per se but a critical event to the understanding of modern Egyptian society.

28 indicated a shift in power between the regime and the people. El-Ghobashy argues that protests had been building up for years, and two events managed to turn local disputes with the state into a national protest movement. One was the murder of Khaled Said and the second the heavily rigged 2010 parliamentary elections. Both events led to protests that were violently crushed by the state.

Rashid Khalidi (2011) has argued that what distinguishes the 2011 Arab uprisings from previous ones is that they were directed inwards at their own societies rather than outwards at imperial powers. Related to this is the constant infringement on the dignity of each Egyptian and the dignity of the collective nation as a whole, as the state treated its citizens as worthless. This was internalized by Egyptians and manifested itself in an array of social problems including: “sectarian tensions, frequent sexual harassment of women, criminality, drug use and incivility and a lack of public spirit.” Other commentators such as Mostafa Fahmy and Nour Ayman Nour have added religious fanaticism to this list. Khalidi specifically discusses dignity, both at the individual and collective level. For decades, Egyptians have lived under a regime that has not only denied them political and economic rights, but also treated them in ways that have infringed upon their dignity. This continued throughout the revolution with Mubarak’s speeches that constantly underestimated the political awareness of the Egyptian public. Mona el-Ghobashy argues that the “genius of the Egyptian revolution is in its methodical restoration of the public weal. It revalued the people, revealing them in all their complexity – neither heroes nor saints, but citizens” (2011: 13).

Azza Kazzam argues that the main aim of the revolution was to reclaim dignity. She begins by linking the revolution to part of Egypt’s historical context, namely French and British colonialism. Egyptians suffered decades of humiliation, until the era of Arab nationalism, which provided an Arab social and political narrative (Kazzam 2011). Then the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 ended in a massive defeat for Arabs, and this added to their previous sense of humiliation. Following 9/11, these sentiments increased. She argues that although it is unclear what the result of the revolution is, there is no doubt that there has been one success: “The revolution has already resulted in the single most important contemporary change in Arab consciousness: retrieving a sense of dignity” (Kazzam 2011).

Finally, a concept that, I believe, adequately describes the role of dignity in relation to the revolution is Rami Khouri’s *intangible indignities* (Cairo Review 2011: 128). The word intangible is extremely useful in understanding dignity: it often relates to aspects of personhood that are not concrete or easy to study. Khouri gives abuse of power and corruption as examples. “You feel as an ordinary citizen you are mistreated by your own government, by your own police, you don’t feel your voice counts or is even heard,” (Ibid). These are two themes that came up often in the interviews: abuse by police and being ignored by the government. “People will put up with tangible pressures like jobs for the entire population if the intangible issues are resolved. If police are not mistreating people, if you go to a government office for routine service and you are not treated like an animal” (Ibid).

The dignity of each Egyptian certainly underwent a transformation during the revolution. Post-revolutionary Egypt has seen an explosion of national symbols, songs, movies, advertisements, and graffiti. This resurgence in national pride is related to a feeling of worth in one’s own country. Several psychological shifts have occurred, including this resurgence in national symbols, an end to the fear of the police, and a feeling among many protesters that Egypt “belongs” to them once again. As events progress, however, it is unclear whether similar

shifts in economics, politics, or society will also occur. There have been mounting tensions between activists and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, largely due to the continued military trials for civilians. “At the heart of the matter is the feeling that the basic demands of the revolution have gone unfulfilled, with little indication that a path for real change lies ahead,” (Kouddous, 2011). The issue of military trials, the lack of a clear timetable from the military, and increasing economic tension have led to a general feeling of insecurity. While human dignity may have been fulfilled to some extent, bread and freedom are yet to be delivered, and so the revolution continues.

1.4. Methodology

This research paper draws on two methodological tools: literature review and interviewing. In order to answer the research question, I used the literature to provide the context. Since this context is broad, my theoretical framework consists of academic debates in a few selected fields: theorizing revolution, intersectionality, social media and conceptualization of dignity. These tools will provide me with a framework to guide my research and fieldwork in order to answer my research question as comprehensively as possible.

The second tool is interviewing. I relied on snowballing as a means of creating a sample. Unfortunately this means that my sample is quite narrow in terms of social class (middle/upper class) but balanced in age, occupation and gender. Thus I have answered my research question for a specific group of Egyptians, and had the sample been more representative the findings may have been quite different. However I also believe the revolution had many common goals that bridged social class and are thus generalizable to the population in general.

I conducted a total of 11 in-depth interviews. The interviews were focused and semi-structured because I wanted them to resemble a conversation in which the respondents felt free to bring up issues they saw as relevant or important. It also allowed flexibility in choosing issues to focus on or changing the direction of the interview. Finally, since I wanted to focus on narratives, I did not want to fix the interview topics but rather allow the interviewees to do so. This also allowed me to focus on the issue of dignity, since it is a key concept in the RP. I began with a set of interview questions that were completed in most of the interviews. Most of the questions were open-ended. All interviews were recorded, except when technical difficulties arose (in 2 cases) or when it was difficult to ask for permission (1 case). All of the interviews were in English.

To sum up, focused semi-structured interviewing allowed me to set a few key questions, allowing ample room for input from respondents and for diversions. One downfall of this method is that the sample is small, since it is time-consuming to both set up the interviews and carry them out. This was especially the case in Cairo, a huge city where it is difficult to move from one area to another and where the month of Ramadan (August) also made it difficult to arrange meetings. I will refer to this set of interviews as “my sample.” I also drew on a second set of interviews, consisting of interviews conducted by American University Cairo (AUC) students, that are available online³ and some that were published in the AUC journal *Cairo Review*

³<http://www.aucegypt.edu/onthesquare/Pages/ots.aspx>

(Spring 2011). I will refer to these as “AUC sample.” A final interview was found on Al Jazeera English (with activist Hossam el-Hamalawy) has also been included.⁴

1.5. Reflexivity

I did not go into the field as a neutral observer. As an Egyptian-Dutch woman who has lived in Egypt for over 6 years, the revolution was an intensely personal and emotional experience for me, even though I lived through it from the outside.⁵ My research question emerged as I remembered the multiple slogans and banners related to dignity during the revolution. I then worked on a theoretical framework, and this helped me to centre my research as well as define clear questions and concepts.

Going into the field, I had a number of expectations. First, having followed the revolution through the media, I expected gender to have played a major role in narratives of the revolution. This was not the case. I will discuss this issue further in the theoretical framework. Second, I expected international issues to have played a major role, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian issue as well as Egypt’s relationship with America. This was not the case either, as most of the narratives focused on internal issues. Finally, following my experiences in Egypt as well as the literature review, I expected many narratives about the personal sphere, such as the marriage crisis, changing family structures, etc. Instead, most of the narratives focused on people’s relationship to the state.

These findings made clear to me the expectations I had before entering the field, and how my framework was affected by them. It also showed me the importance of taking the findings as the most important part of the research process, and not imposing my own assumptions and theories onto them. I explored the reasons for having the above-mentioned assumptions and came to the conclusion that following the revolution through the media led me to frame it in a certain way. The media tended to over-emphasize certain aspects such as gender and international issues, whereas personal narratives focused more on class and generation. This has attuned me to the fact that the media is a powerful tool that frames and *creates* events as they happen, often in ways that are stereotypical, Orientalist, and far from the reality of everyday Egyptians.

⁴ <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/201112792728200271.html>

⁵ I was in the Netherlands.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REVOLUTION, INTERSECTIONALITY, SOCIAL MEDIA & CONCEPTUALIZING DIGNITY

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The aim of this theoretical framework is to locate tools that will aid in the understanding of the Egyptian revolution and the socio-historical elements leading up to it.

2.1.1. Theorizing the Revolution

The Egyptian revolution is a new type of revolution, and for this reason it is difficult to theorize it as of yet. The innovation, creativity, use of communication, and mobilizing were unprecedented and were used in unique ways that have yet to be studied and theorized. The revolution does not appear to fit previous conceptualizations of revolution, including classical models and Marxist models (Skopcol and Selbin in Foran 2003: 4).⁶ Instead, the revolution is still progressing and will clearly need to be studied for many years to come. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to research literature on revolution in order to conceptualize a new framework for understanding the Egyptian, as well as other Arab, revolutions. New social movement theory in particular could be of use, as it speaks of interest groups in society mobilizing in order to bring about social change, as well as the mobilization of the middle-class, both of which were present in the Egyptian revolution. However, since it is not the aim of this research to tackle these questions, in this paper I will offer a descriptive review of the work that has been done on the revolution so far, as it is still too early to offer a conceptual framework.

2.1.2. Intersectionality

One of the most notable features of the revolution was the large cross-section of Egyptians that took part. “For many Egyptians of all backgrounds, the traditional social divisions are taking a back seat, as people experience a new sense of connectedness along the lines of age and generation, a population usually divided by class, gender, religion and ethnicity” (Shahine 2011). While these divisions may have taken a backseat, they still impacted the way different social actors experienced the protests.

The concept of intersectionality is closely related to identity and social structures of exclusion. We are simultaneously members of different groups, differently located in social relations of power that constantly interact to produce our reality. “The intersectional perspective provides a holistic framework for conceptualizing social identity processes” (Thomas 2011: 3). Instead of studying only one concept of identity, only one aspect of power relations, it is useful to look at them as influencing one another. “Fundamentally, race, class and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect and structure all aspects of human life” (Anderson & Collins 2004: 7).

I began this research with the conviction that it is important to take various social identities into account in personal narratives of the revolution. Gender, class, religion, political beliefs and other social markers must be taken into account, as this will provide a deeper understanding of their experiences. One thing that became clear was the prevalence of class and

⁶ Although class relations were a major driving force of the revolution, it was not organized or carried out in the way Marx envisioned.

generation as important social relations, as opposed to gender as I had previously expected. I will elaborate on this at the end of this section.

2.1.2.1. Social Class

The world is increasingly dominated by capitalism and shrinking social mobility, making social class a major social division across the globe. Many of Egypt's current class issues are directly related to Nasser's socialist policies and Sadat's neoliberal reforms, which I will expand on in the following section. In this section I will briefly outline some of the key issues related to social class in Egypt.

Poverty is one of Egypt's major problems. Galal Amin, a prominent Egyptian sociologist, argues that the poor of Egypt before 1952 were worse off than today, but today's poor feel their poverty more intensely because Egyptian ideas of what is necessary to live a "good life" have changed, largely due to a flood of imports and a media that encourages consumption. Unemployment is another significant problem, with official rates around 20%. Moreover, the rates are higher for the youth and for women (Arraf 2011). The growing gap between classes is another major issue. Amin focuses on the relevance of social mobility: "If it is true that the rate of social mobility during the past 50 years has been higher than anything experienced by Egypt in its modern history, then one may argue that it could be the most important factor behind many of the social changes happening in Egypt since 1950" (Amin 2000: 4-5). Omar and Saad Nagi have also raised the issue of social mobility as transformative, arguing that before 1952 there were clear classes but little tension between them, due to close social proximity and familial relations that spread across class boundaries (Nagi 2011: 6). Following European penetration, the Egyptian nationalist movement had egalitarian tendencies, which helped solidify class struggle (Ibid: 7). After 1952, land distribution, the spread of education and nationalization of major industries coincided with increased class awareness. Under Sadat's neoliberal policies, class inequalities grew dramatically as opportunities expanded, although more so for men than women (Ibid: 13).

Finally, an area closely linked to social class is that of the "decline of the middle class." This is a common worry expressed by Egyptians, but the literature reflects a more complex reality. Amin argues that the middle class has expanded, not declined, but the aspects distinguishing it from other classes have diminished. He also argues that Egypt is no longer divided into three social classes but two nations: the rich and the rest (Amin 2011: 100).

2.1.2.2. Youth as Political Actors

"Youth" commonly refers to people between the ages of 15 and 30 (Simonsen 2005: 7), and they have become an increasingly important area of study and policy, particularly in the Middle East where a major demographic shift has occurred. "For decades to come, the demographic change will pose a number of serious challenges to political systems in the region," (Ibid: 8). The modern Arab world is an overwhelmingly young one, with 65% under the age of 30 (Ulrichsen et al 2011). In Egypt, two thirds of the population are under 30, which has a concrete impact on the state and society.

“Certain conditions of the contemporary period are bringing to the fore a shifting regional politics in which today’s young people, the most numerous and educated generation in history, are recognized simultaneously as critical objects and agents of change” (Herrera 2009: 368). Herrera describes these conditions as neoliberalism, authoritarianism and regional conflicts (Ibid). It is important to understand their expectations and discourses, as they usually make up the majority of any movement. These expectations are prevalent in the literature: “The majority aspire for justice, opportunities, work, stability, and the ability to marry and form families” (Herrera 2009: 369). However, the inability for most youth to attain these desires has led to widespread generational unrest (Ibid).

Karl Mannheim has emphasized the importance of the relation between an individual’s life cycle and changing social conditions in order to understand generational shifts (Shahine 2011). It is clear that several such “generational shifts” have occurred in Egypt and that they have created a certain type of political consciousness among the youth. Mannheim also theorizes that a generation is only a sociological reality if they have a “common destiny” (Skovgaard-Petersen in Simonsen 2007: 4). I will use this idea later in the research to analyse the interview data. Herrera also speaks of the modern period where youth are forging a generational consciousness: “A generational consciousness emerging on practices of participation and converging on issues of rights and justice seems to be the basis of social and cultural renewal” (2009: 369).

There are many problems facing the Egyptian youth today, mostly stemming from poor state control of the economy, corruption and weak economic growth. Moreover, there are few institutions that can respond to the needs of the youth (Rutherford 2008: 12). These issues lead to major social problems, including unemployment and delays in marriage (Hopkins 2003: 18).

Historically, the youth in Egypt have often been active; they were a major part of the 1919 revolution, for example. However, today’s youth refer to different discourses and methods. Globalization, media, exposure to other countries and massive consumption have all been part of the context of the Egyptian youth (Ulrichsen et al 2011). Globally, the youth in many countries are taking the lead in protesting against the status quo: “We’re seeing a shared sense of deprivation among the young, a shared sense of there being a democracy deficit across the world...in all these places neoliberal economic policies have intensified their hold and affected young people the most,” (Shenker 2011). As the world enters a period of economic crisis, the youth are feeling the effects more than other segments of the population.

2.1.3. Problematizing Intersectionality

Much of feminist theory has focused on gender as the primary social interaction upon which other social interactions stem from/depend upon. “Epistemologically, the production of feminist knowledge has to let go of the centrality and primacy of gender as difference and as an analytical tool. It is only one – among many – organizing principles of social life and only one of many analytical categories, it does not have a natural primacy in social relations,” (Zarkov in Lutz, Vivar & Supik 2011: 114). Prior to conducting my fieldwork, I had an assumption that gender would be part of my findings, whether through women protesting or police brutality. However, while gender was present, it was not the principle social relation that emerged. Rather, class and generation were the “master-categories” that emerged from the narratives. I find this concept of “master-category” (Ibid: 109) useful to apply to this research paper, as it highlights the reality that

in different contexts different sets of social relations will emerge and dominate. This does not mean that others are not present; indeed gender was certainly present in the different narratives about the revolution; rather, it points at the fact that other relations were more dominant for this sample at this point in time.

Intersectionality as a tool can be used creatively in order to challenge and problematize the theoretical hegemony of gender that has its roots in white western feminism (Davis in Lutz, Vivar & Supik 2011: 46). Rather than assuming that gender will always be the main focus of analysis, it is important to complicate our research and ask instead: “In what times, places, and situations do intersectionalities appear most evident?” (Bereswill & Neuber in Lutz, Vivar & Supik 2011: 74). I would add to this: *which* intersectionalities appear at what time, place, and situation? This conceptualization of intersectionality should be used to challenge feminist discourses that place gender as the central aspect of social life.

It is clear from my research that generation and particularly class were the two dominant social relations. I believe Collins’ conceptualization of “interlocking systems of oppression” to be particularly useful, as it shows the way various social relations interconnect to produce unique and varied forms of oppression across gender, class, age, religion, etc. (Lutz, Vivar & Supik 2011: 2). Moreover, it is necessary to examine the processes of exclusion that are linked to each social relation, otherwise intersectionality could lead to the imposition of our own frameworks onto our research.

I hope that this research paper can aid in the process of “decentering gender” (Ibid: 8) and showing that social life in all its complexity will not always centre around gender. This central position has been questioned and it is my hope that this research will add to this body of work. I stand corrected that gender was not the key social relation that was present during the revolution and the narratives thereof; and that class and generation were more dominant. Having followed the revolution largely through traditional (CNN, BBC, al-Jazeera) as well as social media (Twitter, Facebook), I realize now that while much emphasis was placed on gender in the media, the narratives I collected during my fieldwork did not justify said emphasis.

2.1.4. Social Media

There is little doubt that forms of social media played an important role in the Egyptian uprising. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were the most visible of these, and can be defined as “alternative media” that challenge concentrations of media power (Couldry & Curran 2003: 7). In this research, my aim is not necessarily to understand the extent social media was responsible for the uprising, but rather *how* Egyptians used it during the uprising.

Social media has played an important role in a number of uprisings globally. In the Philippines, Estrada was overthrown by demonstrations organized through phone messaging and in Iran social media has been central to opposition organizing (Tabassi 2009: 13). Cottle argues that the “soft power” of communication flows cannot be avoided and are spreading ideals of democracy around the globe (2011: 650).

In Egypt, Simon Cottle argues that social media played a role in “communicating, coordinating and channelling” the rising tide of opposition (2011: 648). Especially relevant is the way social media allows for raw and immediate footage from the ground, thus creating a direct link with the audience. Dahlgren argues that social media has created a space for “social

inclusivity, group recognition and pluralized participation as well as different forms of political conversation and engagement” (2009). Ghannam agrees, writing that the rise of social media in the Arab world has led to increasing citizen engagement: “These networks inform, mobilize, increase transparency and seek to hold governments accountable” (2011: 4).

In terms of the build up to the revolution, blogging was an important type of social media. “In the Egyptian blogosphere, the most directly political counter culture has emerged,” (Springborg in Hopkins 2009: 16). It was often bloggers who highlighted cases of state torture or abuse, especially through posting videos leaked from prisons.

Different social actors will theorize the role of social media differently. However, it is important to bear in mind that social media is dependent on age: Herrera speaks of the spread of youth-led cultural movements “via horizontal spaces made possible by the new media and communication technology” which help the youth create cultural regeneration (2009: 369). In the interviews it became clear that the younger generation used social media to organize in ways the older generations had not been able to. Class and gender are also important. In Egypt, most Facebook users are young males who can afford Internet access.

To argue that Twitter and Facebook were responsible for the revolution is to take agency away from the millions of Egyptians who took to the streets as well as from organizations who worked tirelessly for years to mobilize Egyptians. Nevertheless, social media inevitably plays a role in most uprisings today: “Claims that deny the role of media in coalescing broad-based, non-hierarchical political movements and channelling their demographic weight into real democratic power fail to understand the changed nature of today’s media environment or how this can be creatively infused inside political struggle,” (Cottle 2009: 651).

2.1.5. Conceptualizing Dignity

“Egyptians are retaking ownership of their own country.”

Nabil Fahmy (Cairo Review 2011: 107)

Dignity is not a stand-alone concept but rather is linked to the social, political and economic. The 18-day revolution and the period after saw many commentators and scholars posit that the impetus behind the protests was the economy: a large number of Egyptians could no longer survive, and thus they were pushed to take to the streets out of desperation. While there is no doubt that the economic situation of the majority of Egyptians is extremely dire, it is simplistic to suggest that it is the only reason behind the protests, or to delink it from the social and political.

My central premise is that dignity of the person is closely interlinked to all aspects of the revolution. Dignity does not just function at the personal level, but it is embedded in different levels experienced by an Egyptian every day. At the global level, the lack of dignity was perceived in terms of Egypt’s subservience to America and Israel, Egypt’s declining role in the Arab region, and the lack of protection for Egyptians working abroad. At the state level, the issue of police brutality is a major issue, and has become a constant threat in the relationship between the state and Egyptians. At the societal level, the lack of dignity was felt in many areas: lack of education, lack of opportunities, lack of healthcare and other social services, a marriage crisis, and increasing conservatism. At the personal level, the issue of police brutality reappears, as it is felt at a deeply personal level due to its intensity under Mubarak. For many who encounter police brutality, it greatly affects their self-worth and identity. The issue of police brutality demonstrates how many

of the issues are interlinked and appear at different levels. Other issues at the personal level include the lack of hope, the breakdown of family structures, and shifting gender relations. There is no doubt that the different levels are closely linked; for example political decisions made at the state level affect what happens at the societal and personal level. Moreover, while I do not agree with the separation between the social, political and economic, I have used these categories for the sake of clarification, and because social sciences are already divided in such a manner. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that they intersect in each issue. In the words of Karl Gunnar Myrdal: “there are no such things as an economic problem, a sociological problem, or a political problem; there are just problems, and they are complex (Amin 2011: 7). In this paper, I will focus on dignity at the state–cum-personal level, as this is what emerged from the interviews.

My main research question was the following: how do protesters conceptualize dignity in relation to the 2011 revolution? It became clear from the interviews that dignity was among the central issues of the revolution, if not the central issue. However, only a few of the interviewees mentioned the *actual word* itself. It was only when I brought up the issue of dignity that they agreed that it was a central reason behind the revolution. This made me realize that dignity is not a cause separate from other causes, but is rather interwoven into all the reasons people had for protesting. I will expand on this in the interview section.

In every interview, I asked whether dignity was related to the revolution, and the answer was always yes. “We had a principle of the revolution—bread, freedom, human dignity,” said Omar Higazy, a youth protester. Omar Ahmed, another youth protester, confirmed that the first chant during the revolution was about dignity. Mostafa Fahmy said that dignity was central to the revolution: “People were chanting all the time—change, freedom, social justice.” Mohamed El-Masry, a medical doctor, believes that people were looking for dignity and justice in the revolution. “There was no justice, no dignity, no identity and there was a loss of direction.” As mentioned previously, dignity is often linked to freedom. Asmaa Mohsen, a professor at AUC and a protester, explains that the revolution was about freedom and about being able to speak freely. Thus it became clear from the interviews that dignity and freedom were closely linked to one another and to the revolution.

In my interview sample, I asked the interviewees to define what dignity signified for them. There was unanimous agreement that dignity was lacking before the revolution, and many felt that it had returned afterwards. According to Fahmy, “When I was at the square, I asked 20 people what they think is different now from before the revolution, and the word dignity was in all of the answers. I have my dignity back, I feel that I have my dignity now.” Omar Higazy said: “The revolution was about dignity. Its not about economic freedom...we’re still poor, but we gained our dignity back.” According to El-Masry, before the revolution “people felt there is no dignity, no freedom. Egyptians now feel dignity. They feel much better than under Mubarak, although they don’t know where they are going.”

Interviewees disagreed about when exactly Egyptians began to lose their dignity or freedom. For most, dignity was definitely present during Nasser’s era. According to El-Masry, “During Nasser there was definitely dignity, people felt dignity, their identity, they were proud to be Egyptian and Arab. During Sadat, in 1973, dignity became high again because they managed to get Sinai back. So the identity was there.” Ibrahim Youssef, however, believes that dignity was lost with the military coup in 1952: “Despite the colony, Egyptians were able to go out and protest, but after 1952 people started losing a lot—culture, religion...we also lost our dignity

even against the GCC⁷.” In general, it appears that dignity is something that was lacking before the revolution.

Definitions of dignity given by the interviewees revolved largely around respect and being treated as a human being. Layla Ahmed said, “What bothered me the most was people can go to the hospital for a blood transfusion and die. There’s no dignity in it.” Tarek Mansour, a youth protester, said “Dignity is basically treating me like a normal human being. It’s a basic need.” Fahmy describes dignity as “the value of your being. The feeling that you are treated as a human being and the respect of human rights.” Omar Higazy describes dignity as a sense of worthiness for each individual Egyptian.

A major aspect of dignity appears to be protection by the law and the state, including the police. El-Masry defined dignity as being well protected by the law and law enforcement and the absence of torture or humiliation to you or your family. Tarek Mansour describes dignity as being able to walk down the street and feeling he has the right to be respected by everyone there. “It’s a mutual understanding that you need to respect me, I need to respect you.” Karim Abdelrahman, a university professor, described Egyptians as victims humiliated by the miserable level of the government, specifically in regards to economic policies. The fact that the Egyptian government often treated westerners better than Egyptians was also an issue. Ahmed Nabil brought up an incident in Hurghada where people were attacked by sharks. The Europeans were taken to private hospitals where all their bills were paid, whereas the Egyptians were taken to public hospitals where services are known to be poor. Mansour brought up an Egyptian joke about how Egyptians need an American passport in their own country to get by. “When you travel abroad you’re scared with the Egyptian passport because if anything happens to you the foreign ministry doesn’t care.” Thus the weak state and social services were contributing to a perceived lack of dignity.

Police brutality was brought up consistently in the definitions of dignity. Tarek Mansour said, “Just go on YouTube and you’ll be shocked at the amount of videos and the things that happened, while officers were laughing.” El-Masry links torture to dignity in his response, by saying that because there was no torture of civilians under Sadat and Nasser, there was dignity. “Now anything can happen to anybody at anytime.”

Corruption and lack of services were another major aspect of dignity. Mansour mentioned the Sallam ferry that sunk⁸ and how Mubarak cracked a joke about it the week after, as well as the trains that kill hundreds of people because they are not well maintained. Ahmed Shoukry talked about bribes, and how any bribe inevitably takes away a person’s dignity: “The moment a bribe is taken from you, dignity is lost. That person might need the money but you take their respect too.”

Egypt’s position as a country was related to dignity in a number of interviews. “Egypt lost her position between Arabs, between Africans, in the world. Egypt was a very highly respected country but unfortunately we lost this by Mubarak and his family because his only aim was to satisfy Israel and America” (El-Masry). Fahmy said, “We consider Egypt a great country. We are very proud and we have reasons for that. But Mubarak underestimated the country he is leading and overestimated the other countries because they have oil and this is insulting to Egyptians.” Omar Higazy mentioned that Egypt’s best ally is Israel: “How messed up is that?”

⁷ Gulf Cooperation Council

⁸ Early February 2006, a ferry carrying 1,400 Egyptians sunk in the Red Sea.

He also mentioned that Egypt gave up all her roles in the international arena and in her own backyard because the only thing important to Mubarak was maintaining the status quo. Tarek Mansour discussed how Mubarak was constantly sacrificing Arabs just to please the US and Israel. It became clear that for many of the interviewees, Egypt was a great country that had been brought down by years of dictatorship.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MODERN EGYPT: NASSER, SADAT, MUBARAK

3.1. A Brief History of Modern Egypt

Due to the scope of this paper, I will limit the historical overview to the 1952 revolution and after, focusing on the socio-economic and political histories of each political era. I will end this chapter with the concept of the “soft state” which I argue is useful in understanding Egypt’s current situation.

3.2. Nasser and Arab Socialism

Nasser presided over the first independent Egyptian government, from 1956 until his death in 1970. One of the major hallmarks of his rule was Arab socialism. His focus on social justice led to the implementation of massive social service programs and subsidies: “The state provided food, electricity, education and other services for free or heavily subsidized” (Rutherford 2008: 133). He nationalized many industries, as well as the Suez Canal, and led a massive industrialization program. In order to implement all of these changes, a strong state was needed (Shorbagy 2009: 522). Asef Bayat terms this the *statist* model, where “the state controls the bulk of the economic, political and social domains, leaving little space for society to develop itself and for interest groups to compete and act autonomously” (2002: 2). This meant that politically, there was little space for opposition groups. “Nasser chose to create a highly centralized statist regime that controlled the economy, polity and society” (Rutherford 2008: 132). Workers unions were banned and the media was state-controlled. With time, the Free Officers responsible for the 1952 military coup became more authoritarian.

It was under Nasser that the infamous security apparatus was created. The Muslim Brotherhood became its main target, leading to numerous brutal crackdowns on the opposition group, including one in 1954 where 30,000 members were arrested and scores executed (Ibid: 81). These crackdowns almost crushed the organization, but following the defeat to Israel in 1967, they regrouped. “Nasser had come to power with sweeping plans for prosperity and dignity, but had created a divided regime that failed to defend the country and even lost territory in Sinai and Jerusalem” (Ibid: 82).

The youth were guaranteed certain securities by Nasser, including free education, a government job for university graduates, affordable housing, and highly subsidized public services. Students in particular received many benefits. This had the advantage of drawing them into the regime’s system and removing them as a source of oppositional activism (Hopkins 2009: 28). Nasser’s focus on pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism also shaped the youth, as they became involved in the Palestinian and anti-colonial movements.

It became clear that Nasser’s system was unsustainable in the long run. It was a welfare state that was inefficient and insulated from the global economy (Rutherford 2008: 139). Slowly, subsidies were cut back and social services removed, leading to a crisis in Egyptian society. Graduates were no longer guaranteed jobs as the burden on the public sector became unbearable (Hopkins 2009: 28). The defeat to Israel also had a major impact on the youth, as it made possible a split between the regime and the student body (Abdalla in Hopkins 2009: 28). Nevertheless, it is clear that Nasser was a leader popular among many Egyptians, and one that had a strong national project. He was a skilled and charismatic politician, but his downfall may have been that he promised the Egyptians more than the system could offer them.

3.3. Sadat and Neoliberalism

Anwar Sadat, president from 1970 until 1981, is known for his peace treaty with Israel, as well as his economic policies. His open door policy, *infitah*, was put in place in order to lift Egypt out of the dire economic situation it was in. This policy included privatizing key industries Nasser had nationalized, opening the economy to foreign goods and markets, removing many social services and subsidies, and increasing foreign investment. Many rebelled against these policies, the most notable case being the 1978 bread riots in response to soaring food prices. “These reductions violated the social contract between the state and the masses, triggering anger and discontent” (Bayat 2002: 3). Sadat’s introduction of neoliberalism also had major cultural consequences, notably the spread of westernization through imported consumer goods, education, and media (Eum in Simonsen 2007: 92). This was a major shift from Nasser’s policy of keeping Egypt’s markets closed.

Sadat’s peace treaty with Israel is arguably the major political event of his presidency. “To the great majority of Egyptians, Sadat seemed determined to steer the course charted by the Americans no matter how contrary this was to Egyptian sentiments” (Amin 2011: 140). Sadat was assassinated in 1981 by extremists citing the peace treaty as their motive. There were other shifts in political stance during Sadat. He allowed the establishment of political parties, but this did not mean much as the regime continued to control power centres and any president was still able to run for as many consecutive terms as he wanted (Meital 2006: 258). Sadat freed many MB members Nasser had jailed, and used them in his fight against the communists. He also encouraged the MB to expand, particularly in universities, in order to balance the growing influence of communists and Nasserists (Rutherford 200: 82).

Sadat’s neoliberal policies arguably had major effects on the youth, but these effects differed depending on social class. A small circle became extremely rich fast as countless investment opportunities were instantly available. The middle class also benefitted, as they were educated and thus able to find well-paying jobs in the private sector. “After college, most of us got jobs at Egyptian private companies, multinational corporations, or abroad. The sky was the limit for us” (Shahine 2011). The lower class, however, was severely affected by Sadat’s policies. Social services were cut, subsidies lowered, and food prices increased.

For the vast majority of Egyptians, the beginning of a downward spiral began with Sadat’s *infitah*. Privatization (fewer public sector jobs), cuts in social services and subsidies, increases in immigration out of Egypt and the effects of westernization were all to have a lasting impact. Moreover, the peace treaty with Israel was a major blow to most Egyptians, and was what led to his literal demise.

3.4. Mubarak and the 2011 Revolution

Mubarak’s presidency, from 1981 until 2011, soon encountered problems from Nasser and Sadat. Economically, Egypt had to accept the IMF’s structural adjustment program (SAP), which led to *more* privatization and less government control. This meant that what had caused so many of Egypt’s economic problems, neoliberalism, was being used as a solution to those same problems. While SAPs may have improved Egypt’s macroeconomic situation, at the micro level they were

leading to less social mobility, more people under the poverty line, and an increasing gap between rich and poor (Rutherford 2008: 139).

Egypt under Mubarak is similar to other countries in the Global South that practice “low-intensity democracy.” These countries implement neoliberalism and have close ties to the US while maintaining tight control over domestic issues. Elections are systematically rigged and violence is used to maintain the power of the military and the ruling elite (El Mahdi & Marfleet 2009: 15). I believe that electoral politics are particularly important in understanding the Mubarak era. Elections were generally seen as rigged affairs of little consequence. The past decade, however, has seen a number of opposition groups calling for major reforms, including the removal of emergency law, liberalization of the media, and amendments to the constitution that would end the ruling party’s control (Meital 2006: 263). This period also saw Gamal Mubarak seemingly being prepared to take over the presidency from his father. In 2010, parliamentary elections were held that marked a watershed moment for Egyptian politics. The Muslim Brotherhood, the only opposition group, went from 88 seats to 2, with the ruling party winning over 90% of the seats. The elections had clearly been heavily rigged and this led to widespread unrest.

Other than parliament, another way Mubarak maintained absolute power was through the state security apparatus, which he had inherited from Sadat and expanded. “No other regime in the Middle East had such an elaborate hard power capacity to deter and contain behaviour” (Springborg in Hopkins 2009: 11). Moreover, forms of soft power such as spying and weakening the opposition were also consistently used by Mubarak’s regime (Ibid). In the 1990s, a harsh anti-terrorism law was introduced and military trials for civilians were instituted. Police brutality became a major issue and the killing of Khaled Said by police officers in 2010 sent a signal to Egyptians that police brutality was out of control.

Many of Egypt’s youth have only known Egypt under Mubarak. They grew up at a time when the effects of neoliberal policies were becoming clear and corruption was growing: “They witnessed the formation of a new coalition of government officials, businessmen and politicians that emerged on the back of deregulation and privatization” (Shahine 2011). This elite began to treat Egypt as though it was their private estate, and relied excessively on police force to crush opposition. This situation led to a feeling of hopelessness among many Egyptian youth. “Regimes are endangered by the interlinking of socio-economic frustrations with a widespread belief that advancement under current conditions is impossible” (Ulrichsen 2011). A number of social protest movements have emerged in the past decade. *Kefaya*, one example, was created in response to both internal political repression and external neo-colonialism in Palestine and Iraq. “The twin dangers facing Arabs are the assault on Arab native soil and a repressive despotism pervading all aspects of the Egyptian political system” (El Mahdi & Marfleet 2009: 89). One characteristic of the youth under Mubarak was their access to the Internet, which provided a degree of exposure to other societies. *Kefaya* relied on the Internet and mobile phones to mobilize and communicate. Another major protest movement was *6 April*, which takes its name from the 6 April 2008 Mahalla strike⁹, during which protesters were brutally suppressed by the police. Organized movements have been one reaction to Mubarak’s regime, but there have also been non-organized reactions. Asef Bayat writes about the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”

⁹ Mahalla is home to Egypt’s largest textile factory and in 2008 there were major strikes at the premises. These were brutally put down by security forces, resulting in several deaths.

defined as the advancement of ordinary people onto property belonging to the state or elite in order to survive (Bayat 2002: 20). One example is a person who steals electricity from a street lamp in order to light his home.¹⁰ Although this form of protest costs the state, it also relieves them of a burden which state infrastructure can no longer handle.

What has become clear is that the Egyptian regime lost all sources of legitimacy. Sadat's peace treaty with Israel and close relationship with America already lost Egypt legitimacy at the global, regional, and local levels, but was not enough to topple the regime, as it still had other sources of legitimacy to draw on. The past 10 years under Mubarak, however, led to the loss of *all* sources of legitimacy, ranging from economic security to a coherent national project.

3.5. The Nature of the Egyptian State: Soft/Hard State

Galal Amin discusses the concept of the soft state in relation to Egypt, an application I find particularly useful. He borrows the concept from Karl Gunnar Myrdal who describes it as a state that passes laws but does not enforce them. Myrdal argues that a soft state is able to exist because of a powerful upper class more loyal to their family than their nation. Amin applies this to Egypt: "The elites can afford to ignore the law because their power protects them from it, while others pay bribes to work around it. People clamour for positions of power so they may turn them into personal gain" (Amin 2011: 8). Amin believes Egypt's transformation began under Sadat, as the government slowly backed away from its duties (Ibid: 9). The state, having relinquished economic duties to privatization, began building commercial ventures at the expense of infrastructure. Moreover, a weaker state was necessary for the transition to open markets—this was a global phenomenon, not only an Egyptian one. Egypt's position vis-à-vis other Arab states was also weakened after the 1973 war with Israel.

Both Nasser and Sadat had strong national projects: socialism and neoliberalism. Mubarak, on the other hand, did not develop a coherent and justificatory ideology, instead surrounding himself with a small elite comprised mainly of businessmen intent on making as much profit as possible. Tarek el Bishry terms this "the personalization of power" (Springborg in Hopkins 2009: 17). This circle required a brutal security system to maintain power and repress any social discontent or opposition. Finally, corruption became a part of every day life, and spread into all institutions and transactions. These three issues—rampant corruption, a small circle of elites, and a brutal security system—were to emerge as major grievances that eventually fuelled the 2011 revolution.

At the same time, Egypt has an extremely strong, centralized state security system, which contradicts the idea of Egypt as a purely soft state. I would argue that there is a class element to this characterization. As the upper and middle class have some protection from the security apparatus due to money and connections, the state may appear soft to them. For the lower class, however, who do not have access to such protection, the state may appear as more hard. Thus it is more useful to see the state as a combination of soft and hard that depends on the class of the person interacting with the state.

¹⁰ Another example is the illegal use of piped water, which cost the state over \$3 million in Alexandria alone during the 1990s.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DATA: NARRATIVES OF THE 2011 REVOLUTION

4.1. Narratives of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

This chapter is mainly dedicated to the narratives of the revolution that came through from the interviews. In order to place these narratives within the socio-historical realities, it is useful to refer both to work by scholars and the interviewees themselves. I will begin by addressing the literature.

4.2. The Social Elements Leading to the Revolution

Globally, Egypt has long been a key player. Due to its strategic position, Egypt is paid over \$1 billion/year to maintain a cold peace with Israel and act as a US ally in a region of immense geopolitical importance (Cornwell & Wolf, 2011). “Egypt is subservient to the US and there is every indication that her subservience is much worse now than at the beginning of the Mubarak era” (Amin 2011: 59). Nawal el-Saadawi argues that this subservience began during the Sadat era due to his open-door policy, which resulted in a lack of economic and political independence (*Empire: Egypt The Revolution* 2011). Egypt’s relationship with Israel is another issue, particularly the closing of the borders with Gaza and the Rafah crossing, as well as the controversial gas deal that allows Israel to buy Egyptian gas at below-market prices. Moreover, Egypt has lost its role as regional powerhouse. Finally, immigration trends have also impacted Egyptian society. The past twenty years have witnessed a major brain drain due to limited opportunities in Egypt. Moreover, immigrants returning from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia bring with them notably conservative ideals taken from their host society. Leila Ahmed argues that Islamist organizations and their ties to Saudi Arabia, as well as the immigrants returning from the Gulf, are one of the major reasons behind the increasing Islamization of Egypt (Ahmed 2011).

Internally, it is clear that Mubarak inherited a state that had major problems. Nasser’s socialism had been unsustainable and led to the corruption of the public sector, while Sadat’s capitalism was corrupted by the state and elite (Shorbagy 2006: 526). Mubarak continued Sadat’s economic policies, paying no attention to social justice or even political ideology. Mubarak’s political system resulted in making a small elite richer than it already was.

Demography is an element that cannot be ignored. Egypt’s population has increased almost 8.5 times since the beginning of the 20th century, going from 10 million in 1897 to 85 million in 2011 (Awad & Zohry 2005: 1). Egypt’s infrastructure was built for a much smaller population, resulting in problems with electricity, water, and other basic services. A large proportion of the population is under the age of 30, making it a youthful society. This has put a strain on schools, universities and the job market. Following the youth explosion, the demand was too great for the education system put in place by Nasser: “The government’s avowed policy to offer employment to all graduates has long outstripped even the enormous bureaucracy’s ability to absorb these aspirants” (Shann 1992: 228) and Egyptian universities have turned into “assembly lines that produce thousands of unskilled graduates every year” (Butler, 2011). Historically social mobility has been achieved through education, but the system is no longer able to provide either high quality education or social mobility upon graduation. Moreover, the youth tend to be active and creative, but the Egyptian system does not encourage critical thinking or creativity (Butler, 2011).

As mentioned previously in the paper, unemployment is an issue that specifically affects the youth, and in particular, the more educated and women. Underemployment is also an important issue, often neglected in official statistics: about 43% of the workforce in Egyptian cities work in the informal economy, which means they are not organized, not protected by labour laws, and are often paid very little (Bayat 2002: 8). Neoliberal reforms in general have weakened labour organizing in Egypt, although independent labour unions remain an important oppositional force to the state. Egyptian workers have been striking for decades for better pay, conditions, and an end to privatization. Worker's pay has been decreasing steadily since Sadat, and privatization was sped up after 2004 (Rutherford 2008: 226). In 2006, strikes including more than 500,000 workers erupted, and in 2008 the infamous Mahalla strikes took place, led predominantly by female workers (Beinin in Al Mahdi & Marfleet 2009: 81).

Police repression was necessary in order for the power elite to maintain their control. "When we talk about torture in Egypt, we are talking about an oppressive policy that is adopted by the Ministry of Interior—an organized, systematic and on-going policy used against citizens" (Seif el-Dawla in Al Mahdi & Marfleet 2009: 134). Torture and brutality stemmed from a culture of abuse that functioned as a disciplining measure. Moreover, torture was usually gendered; with women it usually involved sexual harassment or specific forms of sexual violence, whereas with men it often involved brutality and forms of sexual violence often used against the victim's female relatives. Seif el-Dawla argues that cases of abuse at the hands of the police shot up in the past decade, possibly signalling a state that felt its power eroding and responded by tightening its grip (Ibid: 122).

The effect of any social element has gendered outcomes. Unemployment, for example, affects women more than men, even though there are large numbers of female-headed households in Egypt. Another example is sexual harassment, a gendered symptom of a failing social order that has different effects on men and women.

Two elements in particular can be found to cut across all social issues found in Egypt: corruption, and the rising gap between rich and poor. Corruption has reached unprecedented levels in modern Egypt, becoming a routine part of everyday life. Galal Amin argues that the media, through emphasizing consumerism, has made people aim for a higher standard of living only available through corruption. "The rapid rate of population growth, combined with insufficient economic growth and the slackening of labour migration, plus the resulting rise in unemployment and the growth of slums were all powerful enough motivators for people to circumvent the law" (Amin 2011: 42). The presence of a weak state is another reason for the rampant corruption present in Egypt, as the mechanisms for combatting corruption are ineffective. Moreover, the fact that the ruling elite in charge of the country is corrupted means that there is little incentive for them to tackle the problem.

The issue of social mobility and the gap between rich and poor is the second element that intersects with most of the other elements. Nasser's reforms, including nationalization, land redistribution, universal education and a rise in minimum wages, led to a rise in social mobility. The middle class experienced major growth due to education and public sector jobs. During Sadat, however, the government could no longer provide jobs for all graduates, meaning that usually only upper/middle class youth could find work as they had more "connections." This caused class tensions (Rutherford 2008: 85) and continued during Mubarak's presidency.

The massive gap between rich and poor is arguably the most noticeable cause of tension in modern Egypt. There is a small, extremely rich elite that is westernized and consumerist, while

the majority of the population lives below or just above the poverty line. The middle class struggles to survive, and is constantly faced with a media pushing consumerism. Combined with the problems in education, health, employment, marriage, and a repressive security system, social class takes on added importance. Moreover, in a corrupt system, social class inevitably makes a difference in living standards. While the upper and middle class can afford to bribe or have extensive social networks, the poor do not always have these options, and are thus more likely to suffer. Moreover, education and health services are plagued with corruption but it is only a certain class that can afford private schools and hospitals, while the majority must resort to public services of poor quality. Social class also offers a form of protection from state security abuse, as the police are always wary of abusing somebody who could turn out to be powerful. Thus in a corrupt and repressive system, social class takes on added importance.

4.3. Narratives of the Revolution

This section will begin with an overview of the revolution itself, to get a sense of the atmosphere and nature of the protests. In the following sections, I will discuss the major narratives that emerged from the interviews. I will begin with narratives about the state, followed by narratives of generation, of class, and finally, narratives of the global. The data draws on interviews from my sample as well as the AUC sample.

4.3.1. The Revolution

Several important characteristics of the revolution came up during the interview process. It was a broad-based movement that included all types of Egyptians. It was a leaderless revolution, which was both positive as it meant state security could not stall the revolution by arresting the leadership, but also negative as it led to the protesters splitting into different camps following Mubarak's resignation. The protests did not come out of the blue but rather on the back of a decade that saw hundreds of protests and strikes. Labour organizations (the official union is government-controlled) have been especially active in organizing, and the last few days of the revolution saw many workers going on strike, which provided the final push that led to Mubarak stepping down. Finally, it is important to realize the psychological effects the revolution has had. It is clear now, 7 months later, that the regime and system are still in place.¹¹ Egypt, however, is different. The fear barrier has been broken, especially with regards to the police; a sense of dignity was regained; and seeing Mubarak and his sons in a courtroom has made the rewards of the revolution more tangible.

In terms of social media, every single interviewee confirmed that it played an important role during the revolution. As stated previously, my aim is to understand *how* Egyptians used social media during the uprisings. Social media provided an important alternative to state-controlled traditional media during and after the revolution. "The main media I trusted was citizen journalism, like Twitter. You're getting the information from people that are there" argued Reem Ali. State TV was heavily censored and showed very selective images of the revolution, whereas Twitter and Facebook provided more diverse opinions: "So much fear was

¹¹ Especially if one considers the military as part of the former regime.

caused by the state media, which was a good tactic from the regime to stop people from going to Tahrir,” Reem pointed out. The fact that social media allows people to post raw footage and thoughts as events happen is one of its unique features.

Most of the interviewees, especially the younger generation, found out about the planned protests through an invitation to the event on Facebook. On the whole, it appears that there are varying accounts of the role played by social media in the revolution. While some argued that it was used to mobilize, others said it was merely used to spread information about protests that had already been organized. Raw and direct information sets mediums such as Twitter apart from traditional media and helped provide up-to-date feedback on the revolution. Social media also played a role in building up to the revolution, especially bloggers and videos of police torture. In addition, Al Jazeera played a role as the major broadcaster of the revolution, especially its constant live streaming.

4.3.2. Narratives of the State and the Personal

A prominent theme that came up during the interviews is that of people’s relations to the state. This can be broken down into several categories, including police brutality, electoral procedures and results, the presidency, and corruption.

4.3.2.1. Police Brutality

A major narrative about the revolution is that of police brutality. It is also closely linked to the case of Khaled Said, which I will expand upon in the following section. As Egypt was a security state, the security apparatus was an integral part of the regime. This consisted of paramilitary, riot police, the secret service, and many other sections whose job it was to efficiently repress the population. It is no coincidence that the 25th of January was a day meant to celebrate the police: “We wanted to make a statement about the police system. That’s why it started on the day of the police” (Higazy). According to Seif el-Dawla, people went out on the 25th to reject police policies (Cairo Review 2011: 120).

The state of the security system in general was extremely corrupt. “The corruption of the police was out of control. There were thousands before Khaled Said. He was one of thousands of stories” (Ibrahim Youssef). Seif el-Dawla confirms that Khaled Said was a typical case that had happened many times before (Cairo Review 2011: 120). These cases often directed the public’s anger towards the Ministry of Interior, responsible for the security and police apparatus. On January 25th, the main demand was the removal of Habib el-Adly, then Minister of Interior.

While most Egyptians were aware of police brutality, many tried to find explanations. “We knew about police brutality but I think we were hoping that they were doing it for the best of the people and country, for example against political prisoners” (Abdallah). Mubarak often described the Islamists as a major threat and thus implicitly suggested that torture was necessary. Another interviewee, El-Masry, claimed that the difference between Nasser and Sadat compared to Mubarak was that under the latter torture could happen to anybody, whereas during the former, it only happened to political prisoners. Mostafa Fahmy confirmed that the police brutality was no longer only political, but widespread. Everybody was a target, as the case of Khaled Said showed. El-Hamalawy began to question the police in 2001, when he participated in

a demonstration showing solidarity with the second Palestinian *intifada*: “Why are police so brutal with us when we’re just trying to express our solidarity with Palestinians in a peaceful manner?” I believe that the police’s behaviour at demonstrations was a major reason behind the anger of Egyptians towards the security system, as most demonstrations in the past decade were put down ruthlessly.

A major aspect of police/system brutality is the insecurity related to it. “I walk out on the streets and I feel like I have to look away, change sidewalks when I see the police” (Mansour). Mansour went on to say that his main problem was the state security service: people being kidnapped, tortured, and the protection of this by the Interior Ministry. “The power of the policeman should be the power of the law, not the gun,” said Shoukry. The knowledge that police are acting without reference to the law creates massive insecurity in society, as it means any problems with the police will either be solved through corruption (bribery, connections) or violence (from the police).

The class aspect is also present within police brutality. Mansour argued that the issue of the police is a middle class one: “Obviously because I’m better off than a lot of people I’m only going to say things about the police because thankfully I don’t have other issues.” His point is that for the middle class, police brutality is the main issue because the basics are not major issues as they are for the lower class. However, I would argue that police brutality is also a major issue for the lower class, perhaps even more so, as they have less connections or money to use to get out of any problems with the police. In his interview Karim Abdelrahman mentions the mounting police repression, *even* at the gates of AUC. The police presence outside a prestigious institution such as AUC suggests that the state is intensifying its security measures. It also reveals surprise at police presence outside a place frequented by the upper class, showing that police abuse is class-centred.

The issue of social media is also linked to police brutality, in two important ways. One, social media played a major role in exposing police brutality. Bloggers had been posting videos of torture happening inside prisons, most of them taken by police officers who would laugh or make jokes while recording. Social media was also instrumental in spreading information about and pictures of Khaled Said. Two, social media provided Egyptians with a way to organize that evaded state security control. An important point is that social media is difficult to censor, as it is leaderless and anonymous. A number of interviewees claimed that state security did not know how to deal with or control social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. El-Masry emphasized the fact that Amn el Dawla had penetrated all aspects of Egyptian society except social media: “Small demonstrations and meetings were penetrated. All telephones were penetrated. Everyone on TV is under control. So Facebook played an important role, definitely.” Youssef agreed with this, arguing that state security expected the traditional methods of communication, and when social media was used instead it was beyond their control. Mansour pointed out that social media was the only platform where you could talk about the things you wanted to, as other types of media were state controlled. Mostafa Fahmy also believes social media played a major role, because it solved a big problem: “We kept trying to organize for 20 years but the security state was efficient. Facebook to some extent changes this, as it was a reliable source of information and an efficient means of communication.” A number of youth protesters mentioned that they knew state security was censoring social media as well, since bloggers had been arrested. But, as Omar Higazy pointed out, it became too big and they could not track everybody.

4.3.2.2. Khaled Said

I would argue that Khaled Said represents one of the major, if not *the* major trigger, of the revolution. On June 6, 2010, two police officers entered an Alexandrian Internet café and began asking for people's ID cards. 28 year old Khaled Said objected to being searched without a warrant, so the police officers began beating and kicking him, before dragging him out of the café. They began smashing his head into a concrete wall, before throwing him into their car, returning a few minutes later and dumping his corpse on the street (Abdelaty 2010). The Ministry of Interior claimed Said had swallowed drugs and then died, but photographic evidence of Said's smashed up face spread rapidly through social media, throwing doubt on the official story. Demonstrations in Cairo and Alexandria followed, but paramilitary and riot police crushed them violently. A Facebook page entitled "We Are All Khaled Said" (*Kolena Khaled Said*) was started and became one of the major sources of information before and during the revolution.

For many of the interviewees, Khaled Said *was* them: a normal, middle-class youth who was not involved in politics. This made them realize that no one was immune to police brutality. Fatima Abbas, a youth protester, recalled how his death made her realize that the police could do anything to you, and protection through connections (*wasta*) is no longer a guarantee. "I realized that if a policeman told me to get out of my car and dance around naked, I would have to do it." Tarek Mansour said, "Before the revolution even, I was angry about the Khaled Said issue. Police brutality had become very normal over the years." Tarek also spoke about identifying with Khaled Said: "I can imagine if I quarrelled with a police officer I would have been buried in the middle of nowhere. It's very expected and has become normal." Shoukry also noted that police brutality had become normal and was ignored by many people, even though they knew about it. Omar Higazy said that the Khaled Said protests were the first protests he participated in: "The real incentive or motivation that made people not care about getting arrested (during the revolution) was when Khaled Said got killed. Because everybody thought this could be anyone. They could be at a police station and get beaten to death."

Many were not convinced that the police killed Khaled Said. "You had the media saying he was on drugs, and there are tons of young Egyptians on drugs anyway, so I think a lot of people were in denial" (Mahmoud el-Rifae). Tarek Mansour recalled a conversation he had with a police officer, who was completely convinced that nothing had been done to Said: "He believed Habib el-Adly (ex-interior minister) would never overlook a case like this and that he only looks out for the Egyptian people. It was a ridiculous conversation and it made me angry because I couldn't do anything about it."

Another thing that made people angry was the official reaction to the killing. "There was no investigation, even though there is no human who can swallow drugs like the police said" (Ahmed Nabil).

For most of the interviewees, Khaled Said represented the final trigger. "The last straw for the young people, our people, was probably Khaled Said," claimed Abdallah. However, the older generation also saw Said as a turning point: Youssef, Abdelrahman and el-Masry all cited Said as a trigger. According to Mansour, Khaled Said was by far a common issue. "It was definitely a big issue and I think it was everyone's thing." Mostafa Fahmy describes the killing of Said as the "revolutionary moment," a moment where people are ready to change and just needed a spark. "It was evident how the whole system was corrupt—not just the police brutality but the judges, everything was fake and corrupt." According to Seif el-Dawla, Khaled Said was

the trigger but was also the “culmination of long years of struggle for all kinds of rights. Every revolution is about rights” (Cairo Review 2011: 119).

When analysed from a class perspective, the Said case reveals a lot about internal class dynamics. Most respondents brought up Said because they realized that they were like him, and that they too could be killed by the police. As Seif el-Dawla said, “He did not belong to the population that is usually subject to torture—the poor, the marginalized. He was a middle-class young man who used the Internet” (Cairo Review 2011: 120). Apart from his social class, other elements also made his case unique, particularly the fact that his pictures were spread so widely using social media. Seif el-Dawla argues that his case is not unique but typical, and has happened many times (Ibid). I would argue that what made it distinct from other cases was his social class and the widespread access to his pictures through social media. Nevertheless, Said was a trigger, not a cause, and other elements had to have reached breaking point for the Said case to have had such a profound impact.

4.3.2.3. The 2010 Parliamentary Elections

A second major trigger mentioned by many interviewees was the 2010 parliamentary elections. As mentioned previously, these elections were heavily rigged, with the ruling party winning an overwhelming majority, and the MB, the main opposition, going from 88 to 2 seats. Amr Hamzawy, a professor at Cairo University, describes these elections as disastrous: “The arrogance of the regime reached a point where even an opposition representation was no longer tolerated. This pushing out meant ultimately pushing them out to the street” (Cairo Review 2011: 114). While I do not believe the elections pushed people out onto the streets, as public space was still severely controlled, I do believe many saw it as an insult. Nabil Fahmy, former ambassador to the US, also spoke of the regime’s arrogance: “You have to be a political amateur to even want to achieve that kind of majority” (Cairo Review 2011: 107). Essam el-Erian, MB spokesman, saw the elections as the straw that broke the camel’s back: “It was because of corruption, closing any window for free expression” (Ibid: 96). El-Erian also believed that the elections pushed people out onto the streets, as parliament was completely controlled. “Their representatives were pushed out of parliament to the street” (Ibid: 94). However, I would disagree once again. It does not appear that the representatives of major political parties were major driving forces behind the revolution, particularly as it was instigated by the youth. Moreover, parliament had never been a space for dialogue, and so the latest elections did not close a space that had once been open. El-Erian goes on to say that what set this election apart was the “vulgar” nature of it: “It was not only the rigging but the insulting of the people and the comic scene from the president” (Ibid).

From my sample, a number of interviewees brought up the 2010 elections. Abdelrahman and el-Masry both mentioned them as an important trigger. Mostafa Fahmy cited the elections as the second major trigger after Khaled Said, particularly because of the “humiliating” way Mubarak spoke about them. Mansour called the elections a complete joke: “It was blatantly rigged and in your face. We’re counterfeiting all these votes and there’s evidence and videos but you know what, there’s nothing you can do about it. Obviously you can’t ignore the state party winning more than 90% of the seats.” Abdallah cites the elections as having caused a lot of tension. He also believes that while Khaled Said was the last straw for the young middle-class, the elections were the last straw for the political parties.

I would argue that the major effect of the 2010 elections was a psychological one: they were rigged so blatantly that it sent a message to the people: that the regime did not see itself as vulnerable, and that its arrogance had reached epic proportions. As el Aswany said, “The elections were unbearable; they didn’t bother to hide what they were doing. They were telling you as an Egyptian, you are nothing” (Cairo Review 2011: 90). This total disregard can be seen as the regime realizing its immense power and thus not feeling the need to hide the rigging. However, it could also be seen as a system on the brink of collapse, a system that underestimated the public it was repressing, and thus a system that made a fatal mistake.

4.3.2.4. Gamal Mubarak

Many Egyptians suspected that Hosni Mubarak and the NDP were planning to pass the presidency on to his son Gamal Mubarak. This was a major issue for a lot of interviewees. Ahmed Shoukry noted that even a week before the revolution, Egyptians assumed that Gamal Mubarak was going to take power. Adel Mohamed said that after 2005, Mubarak began to lose track of what was happening, especially when “Gamal Mubarak’s succession scenario became a project and was implemented” (Cairo Review 2011: 114). Omar Higazy mentioned that in 2005, Egyptians began to call for Mubarak to step down, and this was largely in response to the possibility of Gamal Mubarak becoming president. Mostafa Fahmy believes that Bashar in Syria gave the idea to Mubarak. “But they couldn’t implement it because they would have faced resistance. When the situation is catastrophic, 40% under the poverty line, and then you bring your son?”

For many Egyptians, the idea of Gamal inheriting the presidency as though Egypt was a monarchy was offensive. I agree with Fahmy that had it been possible for Gamal to take over earlier, it would have happened, but the regime must have realized they would have faced resistance. “This was insulting to Egyptians, that they are going to be inherited as if we were chickens” (Cairo Review 2011: 89). It is in relation to Gamal that we can see one of the major effects of the revolution: in August 2011, Gamal Mubarak was in a cage in a courtroom, being questioned and tried. Had the revolution not taken place, he may have already become the president of Egypt.

4.3.2.5. Corruption

The issue of corruption runs through every interview and every social element that can be said to have led to the revolution. Whether it is education or unemployment; police brutality or bureaucracy, it appears that every element of Egyptian society has been corrupted. “The corruption is ridiculous, in every aspect of life there is corruption. And we know there’s corruption but then no one does anything about it,” (Mansour). Abdullah explains that the youth saw corruption as something normal: “We thought that’s how things should be. You just pay a bribe and that’s it.” Bribing is perhaps the most visible sign of corruption in Egypt, and is used in a multitude of situations. For many, bribery is the only way to ensure they can get through bureaucracy. “We have corruption in every field,” said Esraa Abdel Fattah. “We have corruption in elections. The system of punishment is not found in any institution or ministry. Everyone just does what they want. The corruption before January 25, you can find it in every place in Egypt, I think (it was) the cause of the revolution” (Cairo Review 2011: 76). There was

especially massive corruption at the state level. As Amr Hamzawy argued, “corruption became wide-scale and embedded in the ruling establishment” (Cairo Review 2011: 114). Karim Abdelrahman brought up the *Madinty* case, in which a rich businessman got away with massive fraud. “You have so many people who don’t have enough for education, cannot be treated when they’re sick, there’s no money, no marriage, no food. In every level there was something to complain about,” (Layla Ahmed). There was a widespread consensus that corruption was what had led to the deterioration in education, health, and other social services. It had infiltrated the employment market (now most jobs are attained through connections) and had taken over the bureaucratic system.

There is an element of social class with regards to corruption. The upper class have always been able to draw upon connections or money in order to avoid problematic situations or to access resources. Moreover, corruption has protected them more than other social classes. As mentioned in the Khaled Said section, when the privileged classes began to feel that they too could face police brutality, the revolution happened. The middle and upper class always knew the state did not protect them, and now they felt that neither did their class. The corruption was so massive that instead of benefitting them, it had started to work against them.

4.4. Narratives about Generation

Most interviewees confirmed that the revolution was started by the youth, and many believed it was a youth revolution in its totality. I find it useful to draw on Karl Mannheim’s work in order to understand the data from the interviews. Mannheim argues that a generation only becomes a sociological reality if they participated in achieving a common destiny. Moreover, if this is the case, there will be “decisive features” or moments that will characterize this generation. It became clear during the interviews that the younger generation *did* have a common aim and destiny, and that this was characterized/created by key defining moments. Similarly, in order to understand the way in which the parents of these youth reacted to the revolution, it was necessary to understand *their* generation, and what *their* common destiny had been.

In terms of the youth, most of them were born after Mubarak became president of Egypt, and thus his system is the only one they have known. They have grown up in a society that has become increasingly stratified and repressive, and in which public space has become increasingly constricted. Apart from the upper class, most Egyptian youth have little future prospects, which explains why immigration rates are extremely high. These are some of the “decisive features” Mannheim wrote about. The murder of Khaled Said was probably the major “decisive moment” that eventually triggered a revolution initiated by the youth.

Most interviewees acknowledged the fact that the youth started the revolution. “At the beginning, no one can deny it was the youth,” said El-Masry. One reason it was predominantly youth, however, is the fact that youth make up the majority of the Egyptian population: “Our population is what, 50% under the age of 30?” Tarek Mansour asked. Mostafa Fahmy emphasizes this: “You cannot forget that 60% of the population are under the age of 30 so this is a young population. You find all the time half of any gathering is under 30.” He agrees that at the beginning it was stimulated by the youth but then everybody joined. Omar Higazy believes that the spirit of the youth initiated the protests: “You can see the talent in Tahrir, the hope.” Across the board, the interviewees agreed that the revolution had been initiated by the youth.

One question I was interested in was why previous generations had not revolted the way the younger generation did on January 25th. As Abdullah said, “They started calling it a revolution of the youth. There were so many (older) people saying we owe you guys a lot - in two weeks you did what we never dreamt of doing.” A number of interviewees spoke about parents or older relatives who felt guilty for not having demanded change during Nasser and Sadat, despite living under dictatorships that got progressively worse. El-Masry explained one possible reason for the lack of action: “Amn el Dawla (state security) was involved everywhere. They are everywhere. There was always the fear of going to demonstrations because of the penetration from Amn el Dawla.” The youth managed to avoid this through new communication tools. One older interviewee noted: “We weren’t used to the new methods of communication. The reason the youth succeeded is because they had no leadership, so Amn el Dawla could not arrest them. The youth managed to spread information through Facebook and the Khaled Said site.” Mansour believes the reason his parent’s generation did not take much action is because they had seen a lot and were pessimistic. Ahmed Nabil agreed, stating that youth by nature tend to be more active. Omar Higazy builds on these ideas by suggesting that the youth may not be as corrupt as the older generations who have been living in fear their whole lives. “We’ve been exposed to things abroad—international standards.” Globalization has certainly played a role in exposing the Egyptian youth to the way the rest of the world lives. This was probably one factor that led to so many youth questioning their own system.

As stated previously, in order to understand the older generations, it is necessary to understand what their common aims and defining features had been. Nasser and socialism and then Sadat and neoliberalism were both definitive economic structures that impacted Egypt severely. Both rulers were also dictators that did not hesitate to crush any opposition. The youth are the first generation to really feel the effects of neoliberalism and to face such intense economic and social insecurity. As stated previously, this is one of the defining features of the youth generation.

Another area in which there is a clear generational gap is with regards to the future. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) continues to be in charge of Egypt, supposedly until elections take place in November. SCAF has been widely criticized by activists. In terms of my sample, there was a clear generational gap with regards to the military: the older generation had more trust and respect for SCAF, whereas all younger interviewees expressed pessimism, disappointment and distrust towards them. The older generation argued that the military *is* the people and thus could not be against the people whereas the youth pointed out that the military did not always protect protesters and have continued to arrest, torture, and put people on military trials since the revolution. One explanation for this divergent view is that the youth did not live through the various Egyptian wars with Israel, in which the military played an extremely important role. For this reason, they may not have the same reverence or commitment to the military. Furthermore, many youth see the military as part of the old regime, especially SCAF, whose head is the former Minister of Defence. The biggest issue was the continuation of military trials for civilians. I believe it is useful to distinguish between SCAF, the military commanders, and the army itself. Military service is compulsory for Egyptian males, which means almost every family knows someone in the military. For this reason, many Egyptians are certain that the military would never turn on them. At the same time, SCAF and the commanders have strong links to the old regime, and as they continue to conduct military trials and torture protesters, their agenda becomes more questionable, a point brought up by most of the youth interviewees.

In conclusion, I would argue that there is definitely a generation gap. The youth have had to face more insecurity in more aspects of their lives. “It is in societies currently undergoing major transformation that we expect to find larger disparities of attitude and behaviour between generations. In those situations, young people have markedly different experiences from their parents” (Al-Tawila in Hopkins 2003: 216). Mannheim argued that a generation only becomes a sociological reality if they participated in having a common destiny. I would argue that this was the case for Nasser and Sadat’s generations, and is definitely the case for the youth in Egypt today.

4.5. Narratives about Class

It became very clear throughout the interview process that social class is one of the major stratifying elements of Egyptian society. It came up in every interview, and appeared to permeate many of the issues brought up. I would argue that social class and the wide gap between rich and poor was one of the major causes of the revolution.

Almost every interviewee mentioned the fact that different social classes participated in the revolution. “You had everybody in the revolution, you had rich people, upper-middle class, very poor people, everybody was there” said Mostafa Fahmy. Shoukry spoke about how there were all different backgrounds and education levels. These observations suggest intense class awareness: “It was clear in Tahrir that there were different classes, even from the tents and clothes. But they were connected like one family. We were together.” While most respondents noted the class differences, they also emphasized that there was unity, something that seems to have been rare pre-January 25. Nevertheless, the sample, all middle/upper class, expressed awareness of being a minority: “I’m fortunate to have a good education and job, but obviously I’m not happy seeing people living in graveyards and eating out the garbage,” Tarek said. For some, Tahrir was a chance to meet people from other classes: “I learnt so much from conversations (in Tahrir) with people not in my social circle, my AUC bubble,” said Reem Ali. “Most of my social circle benefitted from the regime, so they were against the revolution.”

There is little doubt many from the upper class benefitted from the regime; nevertheless quite a sizeable amount went out to protest. “The people who started the revolution weren’t poor. They started the revolution for those less fortunate than them,” said Layla Ahmed. Indeed there was awareness, especially among the youth, that poverty was one of Egypt’s major problems. While many expressed the view that not only the poor suffered under Mubarak, there was also an acknowledgement that social class brought protection with it. Asmaa Mohsen spoke about her friends who did not understand why she was going out to protest: “I live a very comfortable life. But it’s not about monetary things. This is not the life I wish for my kids.” Omar Higazy spoke about 50% of Egyptians being under the poverty line, with only a small segment being wealthy: “If you’re going to have this many poor people at least give them something. We did not have a state to look after people. So it was only normal for people to revolt—if anything, it took us so long.” Shoukry said, “I’m not going to pretend my life is hard. I want to live in a country when I don’t have to see somebody and think: did I do something wrong, am I responsible?” Shoukry also spoke of class tension. As a member of the upper class he says he often gets looks of “we’re going to get you.” There is also the question of how one feels living among fellow countrymen who are extremely poor. Abdallah spoke about spending

300 LE (\$60) on one meal in Sequoia¹² while many Egyptians cannot read and write. Mansour spoke about the chants for bread in Tahrir: “The majority of Egyptians are poor, we just tend to drive around nice areas so we don’t see them. The first demand of the revolution was bread. People stand in line for hours just waiting for a loaf of bread.” The issue of injustice was certainly an important one for most interviewees. This is especially the case for the youth, who had only seen Egypt under Mubarak and thus had not witnessed the attempted social justice of Nasser, something the older generation brought up repeatedly. While for the middle class the revolution may have been about political dignity, for the poor the economic situation was equally important.

One consensus was that the revolution was a middle class revolution. While members of the upper and lower classes did participate, the majority was the middle class. However, some interviewees argued that it was only middle class at the beginning, and that after the 28th the lower classes joined. Karim Abdelrahman posits that the victims of neoliberal economic policies joined the revolution in the end, and this is what made it successful: “I think the victims of economic policies were fundamental in the success of the revolutionary change.”

In a number of interviews it was made clear the differences between Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Karim Abdelrahman spoke about Sadat’s neoliberal policies creating poverty. El-Masry argued that during Nasser there had been social justice: “Education, health, no big gap between rich and poor, which is very important.” But during Sadat, due to the open-market policy, some people became very rich “out of nowhere,” creating many problems. Mostafa Fahmy agrees that Nasser had kept his eyes on the poor people and had created real social change: “In the 70s when I went to university, most of my professors were the first generation of their families to be educated.” Fahmy also commented on social mobility: “If you see social mobility from poor to upper class in 20 years because you worked hard, then it is okay. But the problem in Egypt is that after Sadat people changed social position in a couple of years without any effort, and other people were working very hard and never improved their situation.” This creates a cycle of poverty where it becomes almost impossible for the poor to move upwards.

It is noteworthy that when discussing the issue of social class, many went back into history to explain the current situation. As mentioned previously, it appears that Sadat’s neoliberal policies are seen as the major reason behind Egypt’s economic state today. Moreover, the last decade has seen even more privatization, and many labour union strikes have been against this. As Hossam el-Hamalawy said, you cannot separate the revolution from the wave of labour strikes that have swept Egypt over the past decade.

In terms of social media, it is important to understand it from a class perspective: as essentially an upper/middle class phenomenon. Facebook and Twitter users in Egypt do not number more than 5 million, which is not a majority by any stretch. However, once the event was up on Facebook, word of mouth helped to spread it. “The first protesters were only in the thousands, and then the millions came. So Facebook got the ball rolling,” (Tarek Mansour). The middle-class revolution called for dignity in terms of political rights, increased justice, increased freedom, and an end to corruption. I would argue that this was the start of the revolution. The second half comprised of *all* social classes with many demands, ranging from the minimum wage to political rights. “Bread, freedom, dignity” was the slogan of the revolution, and in it can be seen as representational for all Egyptians.

¹² Popular Cairo restaurant.

4.6. Narratives of the Global

While there is little doubt that the global, regional and local levels were all present during the revolution, two particular issues came up repeatedly during the interviews: Tunisia and Egypt's future role in the international arena.

The revolution in Tunisia that ousted Ben Ali had a definite impact on many Egyptian protesters. Amr Hamzawy points out that the Tunisian revolution showed many Arabs how weak those authoritarian regimes actually are (Cairo Review 2011: 114). El Aswany argues that the Tunisian revolution accelerated the Egyptian revolution: "It gave you a model and showed to you, yes, it is possible. I think it would have happened anyway (at some point). But we were inspired by the Tunisians" (Ibid: 90). Esraa Abdel Fattah, one of the founders of 6 April, said that Tunisia helped Egyptians think that they too can change, and that this contributed to the change in energy (Ibid: 75). Osama Ali, an activist and protester, believes that Tunisia was a "catalyst, not an instigator, because the objective conditions for an uprising existed in Egypt, and the revolt had been in the air for the past few years." From my sample, Ibrahim Youssef believes that Tunisia was a trigger. Omar Higazy pointed out that Tunisia had had a president for 24 years and Egypt for 30, so Egyptians had every reason to revolt.

A second element brought up in many interviews with regards to the future is that of Egypt's role in the global arena. Most interviewees argued that the revolution's focus was predominantly on Egypt's internal issues, as opposed to geopolitical and external issues. This is something I had not expected before beginning my fieldwork, having hypothesized that Palestine had played a major role. While all of them expressed support for Palestine, many strongly believed that the only way to help the Palestinian people was for Egypt to become a democracy. Recent events at the Israeli embassy in Cairo show the resentment many feel towards the government for its pro-Israeli policies over the years, including closing the Rafah crossing and selling gas cheaply to Israel. The predominant view expressed was that Egypt can only significantly alter its geopolitical position once it has become democratic.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1. Conclusion

My aim in this RP was to understand how the social elements that led to the 2011 Egyptian revolution have been narrated, and whether they could be understood through the concept of dignity. I believe the answer to this is that they can. Dignity as a concept should be understood as interlinked with all levels of Egyptian society. There is the dignity of the person in terms of their economic status, their political freedoms, the worth of their passport, and the opportunities for their children. Before starting my research, I conceptualized dignity as a category on its own, that Egyptians thought of fighting for when they took to the streets on January 25. After finishing my research, I realize that it is spread throughout all the social elements and all elements of oppression Egyptians have suffered since the 1952 military coup.

The two main causes of the revolution, according to the data, are corruption, and police brutality. The literature adds other causes such as the wide gap between rich and poor, economic stagnation, and a youth bulge. There was wide agreement in both the data and the literature that the main triggers were the murder of Khaled Said and the rigged 2010 elections. The Tunisian revolution provided the final spark. An important point is that class and generation emerged as the “master categories” of the revolution.

The research in this paper shows how complex Egyptian society is and how many layers one must analyse in order to understand the revolution. It did not come out of nowhere, as the media seemed to suggest. It resulted from the build-up of social forces that were largely set in motion after the 1952 coup. Socialism, neo-liberalism and soft-state ideologies have all left their mark, and the youth of today are paying the price. An intense awareness of social class, combined with a generational gap and new communication tools, are major characteristics of the generation who started the revolution.

Having followed the revolution through social and traditional media, one impression I had was that it was a gendered revolution. I realize now that this was a projection of traditional media, rather than a reality. None of my interviewees nor any Egyptians I had conversations with mentioned the fact that men and women protested: it was an accepted reality. It also seemed to be expected, unlike the participation of different classes. Indeed, what people constantly mentioned and were surprised at was the different social classes uniting to overthrow the regime, *not* the different genders. For this reason, the research ended up focusing predominantly on class rather than gender. That said, gender is something that permeates every issue, and has been included in the social elements and interview sections when brought up.

The revolution is not over, and 8 months on battles are still being waged. Twice crowds of Egyptian protesters have removed the Israeli flag outside its Cairo embassy; the Ministry of Interior has seen numerous protests calling for police reform; Tahrir square has been full of protesters as well as occupied by the military since Mubarak resigned. Elections are scheduled for November. While activists continue to make demands and bring attention to lapses on the part of SCAF, it is clear that Egyptians will no longer tolerate the widespread corruption, police abuse, or culture of impunity that were hallmarks of the Mubarak era. My final question for each interviewee was whether they were optimistic. Every single one replied that they were.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Protested?	Date of Interview	Sample
Omar Higazy	M	24	Media Consultant	Yes	August 10	My sample
Ahmed Shoukry	M	28	Private sector	Yes	August 3	My sample
Ibrahim Youssef	M	60s	Private sector (Saudi Arabia)	No	August 31	My sample
Seif el-Dawla	F	-	Nadim Centre for Human Rights, Egypt	-	March 12	AUC sample
Mostafa Fahmy	M	40s	Author	Yes	August 5	My sample
Alaa el-Aswany	M	40s	Author and dentist	Yes	February 16	AUC sample
Amr Hamzawy	M	-	University professor	-	February 19	AUC sample
Amr Khaled	M	-	Satellite preacher	-	February 23	AUC sample
Layla Ahmed	F	50s	Volunteer	No	August 31	My sample
Esraa Abdel Fattah	F	-	Activist 6 April	Yes	February 27	AUC sample
Ahmed Ibrahim	M	-	Spokesman – Muslim Brotherhood	Yes	February 21	AUC sample
Hossam el-Hamalawy	M	40s	Activist	Yes	27 January	Al Jazeera
Karim Abdelrahman	M	-	University professor	Yes	March 28	AUC sample
Hossam Abdallah	M	27	Private sector	Yes	August 6	My sample
Mohamed El-Masry	M	60s	Medical doctor	No	August 30	My sample
Nabil Fahmy	M	-	Career diplomat	Yes	February 22	AUC sample
Ahmed Nabil	M	21	Works at Siemens & university student	Yes	August 20	My sample
Rami Khouri	M	-	Institute director at American University Beirut	No	March 6	AUC sample
Asmaa Mohsen	F	40s	University professor	Yes	March 24	AUC sample
Reem Ali	F	23	University student	Yes	March 24	AUC sample

Tarek Mansour	M	28	Private sector	Yes	August 4	My sample
Ayman Mohamed	M	29	Private sector	Yes	July 20	My sample
Fatima Abbas	F	25	Private sector	Yes	July 24	My sample