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Making Sense of the Politics of the Egyptian Revolution in and through Popular Culture

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The outbreak of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 gave a huge impetus to the study of popular culture. In particular, scholars working in such diverse fields as anthropology, media studies, film studies, comparative literature and cultural studies have highlighted the flourishing of creativity and the role of popular culture in mobilizing and articulating popular resistance to authoritarianism and challenging state media narratives of events.[1] Not only artists but also ordinary people used music, poetry, graffiti, jokes, and citizen journalism to document events, to tell their stories and express their viewpoints. Comedy and, in particular, political satire were used to criticize and ridicule the authorities. Citizen journalism became prominent in correcting the omissions or distortions of state-owned media and creating a revolutionary narrative. The figure of the martyr of the revolution (that is, those individuals who died at the hands of the security forces in political protests) was ubiquitous in various forms of popular culture and served to create public sympathy not merely for those individuals but, more importantly, for the cause of the revolution. The state was not the only object of criticism. Popular culture was also used to raise awareness of sexual violence against women protesters, which was perpetrated not only by the police and military but also by unknown gangs of men. Moreover, popular culture was not only expressive of resistance to dominant power. It was also an arena for pro-regime voices, such as the TV presenter Tawfiq `Ukasha, who used his show to whip up hostility to the revolution and support for the military.[2]

Yet, political scientists have largely ignored popular culture and its role in the 2010-2011 uprisings. This reflects a general lack of attention to non-conventional forms of political agency alongside a narrow definition of what constitutes "the political" within the field of political science. Rather, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, political scientists have focused primarily on comparing structural or institutional factors or social movement dynamics to explain the outcomes of the 2011 uprisings across different country cases.3 As Jillian Schwedler argues, such approaches have obscured important micro-level as well as transnational processes. 4 In particular, these approaches are ill-suited to capturing the shifting subjectivities and identities and contested meanings of the revolution that underpinned post-2011 political dynamics. I argue that in order to capture these important dynamics, it is necessary to study the processes of meaning-making embedded in everyday life. In other words, political scientists should study culture, but not as a reified system of beliefs or values, as pursued by orientalists and proponents of "political culture," but rather, as Lisa Wedeen argues, as a social practice that gives meaning to politics.5 However, unlike Wedeen, I do not view culture as a "causal variable" that can explain political dynamics, such as individual compliance with authoritarian regimes or the reasons for violent conflict between ethnic groups.6 Rather, I view culture as *constitutive of* politics. By this, I mean that the construction of culture is intrinsically political because cultural meanings always exist in relation to power and, as Antonio Gramsci theorized, particular cultural meanings are crucial to the construction of hegemony for those who seek power.7 Such an understanding of the political is not merely interested in the direct expressions of politics within cultural production (for example, Rami `Issam singing *'Irhal'*) but also in the ways in which the meanings of the revolution were constructed and contested through representations of class, gender, and nation and their articulation with existing and emerging relations of power.

I argue that popular culture is a particularly productive site through which to understand the shifting meanings of the revolution and its aftermath for everyday Egyptians and how, in turn, this informed the unfolding political dynamics that led to the military coup of July 2013 and the reestablishment of authoritarianism. Toward this end, between June 2016 and January 2020, I was involved in a research project examining the relationship between politics and popular culture in the aftermath of the 25 January 2011 revolution.[8] Any discussion of the study of popular culture should consider the lack of consensus over what it is.[9] It is usually defined in terms of what it is not. As Walid Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman outline, popular culture in the Middle East and North Africa was long viewed as a lower form of cultural production, more superficial, consumerist and lacking substance vis-à-vis "high" culture, which was considered the more respected and canonized form of culture.[10] The conceptualization of popular culture in Middle East studies is further complicated by the lack of a precise translation of the term into Arabic. *"Al-thaqafa al-sha`biya"* does not correspond with the definitions of popular culture in Anglophone scholarship. In Arabic, the meaning of *"sha`bi,"* the adjective of *"al-sha`b,"* "the people," differs depending on the context and who is using it. As James Grippo usefully summarizes, in discussing *"sha`bi"* music, 'On one hand the word evokes a sense of *asala*, or "authenticity," a value explicitly steeped in local Egyptian-ness. *[…]* On the other hand, […] *sha`bi* is also potentially associated with the crowds of illiterate masses, backwards customs, and even vulgarity of speech and dress.'[11]

Rather than trying to present a definition of popular culture that attempts to fix the boundaries between "high" and "low" or "authentic" and "alien" culture, it is more useful to understand these boundaries as constructed and contingent, shifting over time. Indeed, the liminal moment of the Egyptian revolution is particularly fruitful for revealing both the constructed nature of the term and its fluidity in relation to sociopolitical transformations. During this

period, artistic movements attempted to break down barriers between "elite" and "popular" culture. For example, El-Fann Midan movement, formed soon after the ousting of Mubarak, aimed to bring art and culture to the streets of Egypt in order to create political and cultural awareness.[12] The monthly "street carnivals" hosted a mix of what would generally be considered "high" arts alongside performances of popular culture. Similarly, the annual Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) has hosted a mix of performing arts, visual arts and films from both high and popular cultures in spaces across downtown Cairo. Unlike El-Fann Midan, not all of D-CAF's events are free.

Efforts to transform the meaning of popular culture were intrinsically linked to efforts to define the meaning of the revolution, at least on the part of some of its participants. Stuart Hall argued that the construction of the boundaries between popular and elite culture is a product of relations of power, supported through a 'whole set of institutions and institutional processes.'[13] Conversely, efforts to dismantle or shift those boundaries were part of the struggle to dismantle the hegemony of state cultural institutions, which had carefully policed these boundaries before 2011. Whereas "the popular" was previously derided as inferior, in the liminal context of the 2011 uprisings, with its famous slogan, "*al-sha`b yurid isqat al-nizam*" (the people want the fall of the regime), the popular became elevated as the embodiment of revolutionary desire.[14] All of a sudden, everyone defined themselves as with "the people." The subversive potential of El-Fann Midan and other similar cultural initiatives lay not only in their attempts to reach a broader audience (the people) than the officially-sponsored arts events of pre-2011, but also their reclaiming of public space from the state and its security apparatus. However, it is precisely this element that led El-Fann Midan to be denied a license to continue holding events after 2013, whilst D-CAF has also been gradually forced to scale back its program of performances in public spaces.

However, whilst some of these cultural initiatives positioned themselves against the regime and state hegemony over the cultural scene, nonetheless they were imbricated in wider relations of power that cannot be reduced to the people versus the regime. For example, the organizers of El-Fann Midan were motivated by the middle-class, modernizing sensibilities of Egyptian artists in terms of the "enlightening" role of culture for the masses.[15] Such sensibilities were also apparent in the aesthetic preferences of middle-class protesters in 2011.[16] Hence, El-Fann Midan may also be understood as an effort to resignify the popular to include the middle classes and their aesthetic preferences in order to maintain or even reassert their political relevance and cultural power in a context of political, social and cultural upheaval and following decades of economic reforms that hollowed out the middle class. Meanwhile, D-CAF, which began in 2014, was the beneficiary of rather than an active participant in the opening up of public spaces and dismantling of aesthetic hierarchies in the post-2011 moment. It is an example of cultural entrepreneurship, in that particular aesthetics, associated with the revolutionary moment, were mobilized and commercialized in line with neoliberal logics as part of a broader neoliberal project of gentrification of downtown Cairo. In this regard, D-CAF has been criticized for its partnership with Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment, which has been buying up and gentrifying downtown buildings since 2008.[17] Hence, efforts to dismantle previously existing cultural boundaries and to valorize popular culture cannot be reduced to instances of resistance to regime hegemony but rather were implicated in the political competition over symbolic and material resources in post-2011 Egypt by different class fractions.

Hence, whilst there has often been a tendency in the scholarly literature to view popular culture as a form of resistance to hegemony, particularly in the context of the Egyptian

revolution, the politics of popular culture are more complex and contradictory. An interesting example of this is *mahragan or* "festival" music, which emerged in economically marginalized Cairo neighborhoods, such as al-Matariyya, blending electronic dance and *sha`bi* music styles.[18] It has been regarded as a form of resistance to the political and socioeconomic marginalization of these neighborhoods in urban Egypt.[19] Whilst this music long predates the revolution, emerging around 2007, nonetheless, it became widely listened to after the revolution, far beyond the neighborhoods in which it is produced, and was often a feature of the cultural events discussed above. The lyrics of this music are primarily concerned with the everyday concerns of those living in these communities, rather than the big political slogans of the revolution. Indeed, mahraganat musicians have tended to distance themselves from politics.[20] Nonetheless, through their representation of the everyday concerns of this group of people, these songs produce a politics that does not seek to challenge power directly but rather to carve out an autonomous sphere in which the dominant cultural meanings underpinning hierarchies of power may be disrupted. For example, in the song, 'The People Want LE5 Phone Credit,' ('*Al-sha`b yurid khamsa gineh rasid'*) mahraganat musicians MC Sadat El Alamy and Alaa Fifty Cent appropriate a key slogan of the 18 days and subvert it with reference to an everyday, material concern. By questioning whether "the people" seeking to topple the regime are the same as "the people" who are "tired," that is, the working classes and residents of the marginalized communities from where the musicians originate, the song disrupts celebratory representations of a unified Egyptian people and draws attention to the existence of different class interests.[21] However, mahraganat song lyrics have also been criticized for their problematic representations of gender relations, portraying young women as immoral, sexual temptresses and denigrating their appearance and behavior.[22] It is possible to contend that mahraganat, like popular culture more broadly, is a mix of dominant and oppositional cultural and ideological values.[23]

Yet, I argue, that such an approach ignores the ways in which particular forms of masculinity may be bound up with resistance. It is precisely the socioeconomic and political exclusion and prevalent state security surveillance faced by young working-class men that shapes the performance of what could be considered alternative masculinities. Working-class male youth reclaim the urban public spaces within which they are marginalized through their "voluble listening practices."24 Meanwhile, they compensate for their "injured masculinity" through the surveillance and policing of sexuality and gender behavior of the neighborhood's women, particularly young women, as revealed in Salwa Ismail's study of the informal neighborhood of Bulaq al-Dakrur.25 In other words, the cultural politics of mahraganat illustrate the need for a more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between popular culture and politics that goes beyond binary notions of resistance/domination to understand the ways in which different vectors of social inequality and hierarchies interact in contradictory ways.

Contestations over the definition the boundaries of the popular in popular culture are intrinsically linked to defining who constitutes "the people" and what do they want. This is clear in the example of the 'The People Want LE5 phone credit.' Definitions of the people shifted over time as the post-Mubarak transition unfolded and were intimately bound up with struggles over the nature of the emerging political order. The construction of "*al-sha`b al-Masri*" within popular culture took on an increasingly exclusivist characteristic as the political scene became more polarized, particularly after the election the late Mohamed Morsi. For example, comedian Bassem Youssef increased his viewership during the period of MB rule as he became known for his particularly scathing depictions of the Brotherhood, deploying long-standing anti-Muslim Brotherhood prejudices (that members of the group are "backward," whilst the leaders are treacherous) in his criticisms of the government. Similarly,

`Ali al-Haggar's '*Ihna sha`b wa intu sha`b*,' ('We are one people and you are another people') released in the summer of 2013, celebrated the military coup and demonized the Muslim Brotherhood as literally not part of the Egyptian people, also drawing on well-known anti-Brotherhood tropes.[26] Of course, the widespread opposition of artists and cultural figures to the Muslim Brotherhood was also motivated by the attempts of Morsi's government to establish hegemony over the cultural scene. Yet, the representation of the Muslim Brotherhood as being fundamentally *culturally different* served to position the organization as outside of the boundaries of the Egyptian people, demonizing it and normalizing the unprecedented state violence perpetrated against their supporters after July 2013, culminating in the massacres of Rabi`a and al-Nahda Squares on 14 August 2013.[27] Presciently, the cartoonist Andeel satirized the celebration and justification of anti-Brotherhood violence in his "Picture to remember the happiness of the great Egyptian people," published in July 2013.[28]

Identifying the struggles over the meanings of the popular and the people in popular culture provides a more complex insight into the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. It enables us to go beyond binaries of resistance versus domination, or the people versus the regime, highlighting the often-contradictory ways in which popular culture and the people were positioned in relation to power. Specifically, it is important to look beyond the direct political messages that may be part of cultural production and, instead, to pay attention to the representations of class, gender and nation and how these are positioned in relation to hegemonic meanings and existing and emerging relations of power. Moreover, rather than treating popular culture as a set of artefacts, it is more useful to view it as a terrain of struggle, in which even the definitions of popular culture and the popular are intrinsic to battles for power. In this way, popular culture is a crucial lens through which to rethink the

political, beyond formal political institutions and processes to include the everyday struggle over cultural meanings that are constitutive of power relations. In a revolutionary context in which there were new opportunities to challenge existing boundaries and categories and resist previously hegemonic cultural meanings, the political significance of popular culture was arguably amplified. Nonetheless, the ongoing political significance of popular culture is also demonstrated by the efforts of the Sisi regime to censor popular culture and to dominate its production, particularly in relation to Ramadan TV series.

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1 Among others, Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, "The Aesthetics of Revolution: Popular Creativity and the Egyptian Spring," in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Mona Abaza, "Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2013): 122-39; Mona Abaza, "Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo's Graffiti," *E-IR*, October 7, 2013b, http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/07/mourning-narratives-and-interactions-with-the-martyrs-through-cairos-graffiti/ (accessed 20 December 2019); Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia S Mostafa, "Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *Popular Music and Society* 37, no.5 (2014): 638-59; Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Report* no. 265 (2012), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer265/egypts-music-protest (accessed 5 September 2016).

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4 Jillian Schwedler, "Comparative Politics and the Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Law and Governance* 7 no. 1 (2015): 141-152.

5 Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 96:4 (2002): 713-728.

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7 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (trans., ed.), (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 161. I have previously studied the construction of regime hegemony through the reproduction of particular notions of Egyptian identity and nationalism. For example, see Nicola Pratt, "Identity, Culture, and Democratization: The Case of Egypt," *New Political Science* 27:1 (2005): 69-86.

8 This project, entitled "Politics and Popular Culture: Contested Narratives of the 25 January 2011 Revolution and its Aftermath," was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (no. AH/N004353/1) and was conducted by Nicola Pratt, Dalia Mostafa, Dina Rezk, and Sara Salem. The project website can be found here:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/cpd/popularcultureegypt/

An on-line archive based on the project, entitled "Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution" can be found here: https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/

9 For a useful discussion of different definitions of popular culture, see John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Abingdon, UK*:* Routledge, 2010), 5-11.

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