

BEING A YOUNG ACTIVIST IN THE LATE MUBARAK ERA

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN EGYPT

Department of Political and Economic Studies (Development Studies)
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

BEING A YOUNG ACTIVIST IN THE LATE MUBARAK ERA

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN EGYPT

HENRI ONODERA

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ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic study of the lived experiences of young activists during the last years of Mubarak's presidency in Egypt. Its general aim is to provide an understanding of what it was like to be involved in opposition politics during a period when the eventual end of Mubarak's rule in 2011 was little more than a collective aspiration. Drawing on different strands of qualitative social science, including anthropology, sociology and youth research, the study is based on 12 months of fieldwork in Cairo, conducted between 2007 and 2011. It makes use of political engagement as an open analytic that enables the examination of different activities that were oriented towards, but not exclusive to, public political processes and formal avenues to political participation. In this vein, the study explores the activities that the young activists regarded as meaningful in terms of challenging the status quo, and how being young in itself shaped their ways of participating in public political life. While it focuses on the experiences of young Cairenes who were predominantly male and aged in their 20s, it is acknowledged that important differences existed among them that conditioned their efforts to acquire new visibilities and political roles, including social differences such as class, gender and global connectedness. In order to explore the diversity of their political experiences, the study discusses four principal areas of analysis and related topics: namely, generational consciousness, tactical practice, friendship relations and ethical reflections.

It is demonstrated that, firstly, the new forms of youth activism in the 2000s promoted a critical generational consciousness as a disenfranchised social location in the intergenerational order, while also providing reinvigorated meanings to youth as a subversive political category, and in some ways a privileged experiential realm, ready to conduct public political dissent on its own terms. The new youth movements, such as Youth for Change and April 6 Youth that emerged on the fringes of larger processes of conten-

tious politics, assumed new roles in public political life and merged, at least temporarily, young Egyptians from different backgrounds and affiliations into collective actions: forging alliances, largely beyond the formal political institutions.

Secondly, the young activists resorted to a number of tactical practices in order to reach out to wider publics via both offline and online avenues. Their operating preferences lay in organizing unlicensed street protests in the popular, lower-class residential areas and tapping into the subversive potential of the new information and communication technologies, including blogs and social media. Although these forms of public dissent expanded their otherwise narrow political opportunities, their adoption was not, however, equally available to everyone. Some either had the necessary social networks in place, including family support, or the available time and the economic means to do so, while those, who were less equipped for public dissent, could nonetheless acquire new combinations of practical skills, knowledge and social connections that enabled them to enact their sense of meaningful political action. At the same time, the efforts to build youth coalitions faced a number of challenges, one of which was internal factionalism, which, coupled with the growing use of social media, diversified the scope of youth activism in the run-up period to the 2011 uprisings.

Thirdly, being a young activist in the late 2000s provided much more varied everyday experiences than merely the acts of public political dissent. It also involved absorbing pre-existing oppositional culture and adopting dissident lifestyles that were filled with shared moments of being and doing things with others on a daily basis. In the absence of representative political institutions, the experiences of having friends and being a friend to others offered intimate avenues to public political life that stretched beyond kin ties and formal organizations. Although oppositional youth activism was divided along lines of class, gender and political affiliation, the young could forge mutual grounds for friendship relations on the basis of their shared experiences and stories of contention, while frequenting downtown Cairo as the main hub of their everyday trajectories. Although friendship relations were at times volatile in the contested field of politics, safeguarding the bonds of trust, belonging and everyday solidarity represented highly relevant everyday activities.

Fourthly, the young Cairenes were faced with a number of ethical reflections on the meaningfulness of their own dissent practices, not the least due to the personal risks that opposition politics involved in authoritarian settings. While the prospect of impoverishment did not generally motivate

their political engagements, they shared a sense of injured patriotism that prevailed in the wider prodemocracy movement, and aspired to greater recognition as rightful citizens. At the same time, they operated on an ambivalent moral terrain that required positioning one's self and others in relation to normative claims to the common good; furthermore, they had to contend with popular suspicion about the impact of their public political dissent and about possible motives for their activism, such as the pursuit of social status and personal wellbeing. Despite the differences that existed among the activist youth in terms of class and gender, however, they could in part challenge these types of speculations by enacting the prevailing ideals of personhood in terms of bravery, righteousness and self-sacrifice. Meanwhile, although the young Cairenes were embedded in the moral worlds of prodemocracy mobilization, they were also compelled to balance their political engagements in terms of multiple life transitions, especially in terms of balancing their activism with the requirements of gaining a livelihood.

While there were multiple ways of being or becoming an activist in the late Mubarak era, the young Cairenes' political engagements were connected to their collective pursuit of playing a meaningful role in what happened in the present, while acknowledging that Egypt's future was intimately tied to their own life trajectories.

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Conducting this study amounted to a tremendous learning experience in so many ways. I feel privileged to have been surrounded by so many inspiring and devoted fellow human beings along the way, and to have witnessed at close range one of the historical changes taking place in Egypt and the Middle East. In as much as the final stages of this research proved at times quite a lone rollercoaster ride, it would have never materialized without the support, company and encouragement of numerous people over the years, including colleagues, scholars, friends and family members.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this study, I have transliterated Arabic terms according to the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (ICJMES Transliteration System). I have, however, made a few modifications in order to attend to the spoken Egyptian dialect in Cairo, especially in citations, where the letter jīm (ج) is pronounced as g and the letter qāf (ق) as a glottal stop (ʾ). For proper names of persons, place names and political groups, the common English forms are used, such as Gamal Abdel Nasser instead of Jamāl ʿabd al-Nāṣir.

Consonants

ء	ʾ
ب	b
ت	t
ث	th
ج	j (and g)
ح	ḥ
خ	kh
د	d
ذ	dh
ر	r
ز	z
س	s
ش	sh
ص	ṣ
ض	ḍ

ط	ṭ
ع	ʿ
غ	gh
ف	f
ق	q (and ʾ)
ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
ه	h
و	w
ي	y
ة	a (and -at)
ال	al- (and -l-)

Long vowels

ا or اى	ā
و	ū
ي	ī

Short vowels

—̣	a (fathā)
—̣̣	u (ḍamma)
—̣̣̣	i (kasra)

PREFACE

On February 11, 2011, President Hosni Mubarak resigned from office after 18 days of popular demonstrations across the country. Young activists, inspired by the sudden removal of Tunisia's president Ben Ali from power a month or so earlier, played an important role in triggering these street protests, spreading protest calls via the Internet and text messages, painting anti-Mubarak graffiti on the walls and distributing thousands of leaflets across Egypt. Subsequent events took everyone by surprise, including the activists, as they witnessed a revolutionary mass emerging across the country. The protests erupted in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other cities on Tuesday, January 25, but it was not until Friday January 28, when the government cut virtually all Internet traffic in Egypt, that most cities across the country witnessed unprecedented waves of street protests which the police tried to disperse using violent means, deploying rubber bullets, shotguns, water cannons and tear gas to no avail. By evening, the land forces of the Egyptian military stepped in and, effectively, replaced the police as the state arbiter of public order until – and beyond – the demise of President Mubarak as the representative of state power.

I travelled to Cairo soon after the protests started, and witnessed the daily demonstrations on Tahrir Square until Mubarak's resignation. As a frequent traveller to Egypt, having first lived in Alexandria in the late 1990s, I had never imagined the historical scene unfolding before my eyes. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians, from different social and ideological backgrounds, occupied public spaces in central Cairo. They established voluntary committees to organize traffic, raised Egyptian flags in the windows and painted anti-Mubarak graffiti on the city walls. At the height of the protests Tahrir Square came to epitomize the symbolic gist of a popular revolution and its collective aspirations that had brought Egypt's public life to a temporary standstill. "People want the regime down!" (*al-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām!*)

was a slogan the protesters had appropriated from Tunisia and directed at Mubarak, his regime, and all the misgivings it incorporated. The slogans of “Leave! Leave! Leave!” (*irḥal! irḥal! irḥal!*) would alternate with “Bread! Freedom! Social Justice!” (*īsh! ḥurriyya! ‘adāla iḡtimā‘iyya!*) for days and nights on end.

On Tahrir Square, then sealed off with make-shift barricades and check-points set up by a voluntary Committee of Organization (*lagnat al-niḡām*), the atmosphere of heightened solidarity and benevolence was almost tangible. People distributed food and water to one another, offered seating places to strangers, helped with setting up tents, joked and burst into spontaneous song. At the peak of the revolutionary moment, young women spoke of the strange absence of sexual harassment or even innuendo inside the square – otherwise a frequent occurrence in Egypt’s urban public spaces. Former strangers were now friends, unified by the bonds of solidarity and collective endurance of “outside aggressors” machinated by the ruling National Democratic Party to reoccupy Tahrir Square and other urban spaces across the country. Everyone talked about politics, past events and of their experiences during what they openly called a popular revolution. Heated and vivid, yet immensely hopeful, debates emerged on shared futures and appropriate lines of action. Many had lost a friend, relative or acquaintance, and grief, pride and determination intertwined as soon as the discussions turned to the thousands of “martyrs of the revolution” (*shuhadā’ al-thawra*) who had either been injured or killed in clashes with the police and Mubarak’s supporters. The Tahrir protesters, young and old, men and women, seemed to enjoy the micro-scale polity they had established and fought for: something which appeared at least momentarily to be Egyptian society as it could be.

I had encountered similar sensibilities even before the revolutionary moment. In April 2008, a few days after the localized uprising in the Nile Delta city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra that ended in several casualties and detentions, I walked through the narrow side streets of central Cairo with Muhammad, a young blogger whom I had accidentally met a year earlier. We were coming from his workplace at a leftist human rights organization, and he told me that he was wanted by the police. The events of al-Mahalla al-Kubra had coincided with a campaign by several opposition movements to stage a general strike in the country – the first such attempt since Egypt’s independence in 1952. The personal threats he faced concerned a number of people who had taken part in a Cairo-based voluntary network that provided legal, logistical and media support to the detainees and their families in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Negotiating our way through the dimly lit side

streets and alleys, away from the grid of commercial streets that govern the cityscape of Cairo's downtown, he said that, for now, he was safe: a friend had offered him a place to stay, as he could not go home because of the risk of being arrested by the police on the way. As he told me, "It's very difficult to find someone who can do this and who is not involved in politics. But luckily I got hold of this one."

Amidst the social upheaval and personal turbulence, he was a changed person. Even back at the office, he was more quick-witted and humorous than normal. The frustration he had endured from time to time was seemingly replaced by a vivid sense of now having a meaningful part in what was happening around us. Moving from an alley to a wider side street containing a string of garages and car repair shops, he sang love songs and burst into sudden laughter, the origins of which eluded me. I was particularly struck by his repeated efforts to take care of my health: "Henri, please promise me, never smoke cigarettes while walking, it's really bad for your health, it's really bad for your heart especially!" Facing risks for his personal safety, and experiencing the immediacy of the authoritarian state, he seemed more "alive" than before. Only years later, I realized that the young activists' sense of caring for others and here, literally, for my heart beat, can be seen as an extension of a deeper human experience – that of a meaningful life – which is part and parcel of the political engagements examined by this study.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been said about young Egyptians who participated in the historic events of 2011. Some observers, especially foreign journalists, went to Egypt to celebrate the young protesters who “spearheaded” the uprising. Even before Mubarak’s resignation, the New York Times ran the headline “Wired and Shrewd, Young Egyptians Guide Revolt”, thereby drawing attention to Egypt’s young revolutionaries:

They are the young professionals, mostly doctors and lawyers, who touched off and then guided the revolt shaking Egypt, members of the Facebook generation who have remained mostly faceless – very deliberately so, given the threat of arrest or abduction by the secret police. [...] Yet they brought a sophistication and professionalism to their cause – exploiting the anonymity of the Internet to elude the secret police, planting false rumors to fool police spies, staging “field tests” in Cairo slums before laying out their battle plans, then planning a weekly protest schedule to save their firepower – that helps explain the surprising resilience of the uprising they began. (Kirkpatrick 2011)

While some observers readily assigned the main roles and agencies in the making of the events of 2011 (Alexander 2011: 31-46) to young people, others were critical of prevailing media narratives that the young urbanites were the main subjects in the revolutionary events (El-Mahdi 2011; Winegar 2012). Critics were quick to point to longer standing processes of contentious politics and social movements such as prodemocracy mobilizations against Mubarak’s authoritarian regime or the workers’ strike movements that emerged in different areas of Egypt’s economy towards the end of the first decade of the millennium (Beinin 2011, 2012). Nonetheless, soon after Mubarak’s ousting, Egyptian anthropologist Selim Shahine documented the

appearance of a new segment of young Egyptians who had lived through a post-revolutionary process wherein “the traditional social divisions are taking a back seat, as people experience a new sense of connectedness along the lines of age and generation” for living through “the same historical conditions” (Shahine 2011: 2-3).

In comparison with the exponential increase in scholarly interest in “young revolutionaries” in Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa (Honwana 2013; Joseph 2013), ethnographic studies of Egypt’s oppositional youth activism before 2011 are few and far between.¹ With this study I hope to make a contribution to this lacuna, with the general aim of understanding what it was like to be a young opposition activist in the late Mubarak era. In this light, this study represents an attempt to look back to the years before the 2011 popular uprisings, often termed the “January 25 Revolution”, when the hoped for end of Mubarak’s rule was still little more than a shared dream for the young activists. Analysis is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt which took place between 2007 and 2011. In what follows, I will look at, and beyond, the public processes of contentious politics in which young activists were involved at the period, while also exploring the more experiential dimensions of their everyday lives. In other words: How did they strive to gain new political roles and visibilities in the late Mubarak era? Why did they engage in public political life in the first place? What did they view as meaningful activities in the context of their everyday lives, and why? How did their experiences of being young shape their roles, visibilities, and experiences in politics? This is the kind of curiosity with which I have conducted this research.

However, before presenting the specific research questions below, and discussing the analytical avenues I pursued to explore them, let us first look briefly at the historical conditions under which Egyptian youth lived their lives prior to 2011.

1.1. COMING OF AGE UNDER ONE PRESIDENT

The young activists, whose lived experiences this study examines, were in the main born and raised under Mubarak’s presidency. Hosni Mubarak (b. 1928) became President of the Arab Republic of Egypt (*Jumhūriyyat Miṣr*

1 A bibliography compiled by Fiona Friedli includes nearly 400 titles in English and French on the popular uprisings in Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, that were published in 2011 and 2012 alone (Friedli 2012).

al-'Arabiyya) under exceptional circumstances in 1981. His predecessor, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated by Islamic Jihad only two weeks earlier, on October 6. As an act of good will, Mubarak released hundreds of political prisoners from jail, making a pledge to Egyptians that under his rule Egypt would prosper. Indeed, today's Egyptian youth were accustomed to hearing about the "social contract" during Mubarak's successive governments and its public promises to steer Egyptians towards social welfare and democracy – in that order (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). Public authorities made repeated claims to pursue social and economic reforms – in areas such as literacy, education, healthcare and other public services – which were projected as prerequisites for the functioning of democracy and political pluralism. To put it polemically, Egyptians were perceived by their leadership as not yet ready to practice democratic politics and their social and economic development was the first priority.

1.1.1. Narrow margins for dissent

As with many countries in the Global South, Egypt's centralized and corporatist state structure derives from its colonial past and the emergence of a national political elite since independence in 1952 (Sa'id 2005).² President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a leading figure in the Free Officers, who led a coup d'état in 1952 against the Khedive monarchy and the British, soon monopolized the political power held by the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). He was a charismatic leader and enjoyed wide popular support in Egypt, and his visible role in the Non-Aligned Movement, coupled with his Arab Socialist and anti-imperialist stances, would also resonate in other Arab countries, including Syria and Yemen (Hourani 1991: 407-411). Nasser's project of building a self-reliant public economy and nationalizing private ownership – in cotton, gas, and vital revenues from the Suez Canal which Nasser nationalized in 1956 – and his project to build a large middle class was coupled with new educational reforms that allowed the working classes new opportunities for higher education and upward social mobility. In addition to the construction of the High Dam of Aswan in 1963 that provided self-reliance in electricity, the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952 which

² Abdelrahman defines state corporatism as "a model in which interest associations are dependent on and penetrated by the State, and thus maintained as auxiliary organs of the State" which "has the capacity to bestow public status on leaders of these organizations in order to secure the compliance of their members" (Abdelrahman 2004: 36-37).

offered land ownership to near-landless peasants was among Nasser's most celebrated innovations, much to the detriment of landowning families of the pre-independence era (Vatitakis 1980: 390-399; Bush 2009: 52-54).

In parallel with a number of socioeconomic reforms, Nasser developed a centralized state structure which, coupled with freedom-restricting laws, monopolized political life into the 1970s and beyond, leading, according to Maye Kassem (2004: 11), to "one of the most resilient personal authoritarian systems in the world". The centralized political system dates back to the early 1950s when the RCC controlled all aspects of political life, especially after Nasser increased the persecution of political dissenters on surviving an assassination attempt by a Muslim Brotherhood member in 1954. In 1956, he established the National Union and, in 1962, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) as its successor, at the apex of a single-party system, and jailed many of his opponents, including Islamists, Communists and Liberals. In 1977 Anwar Sadat, who became president after Nasser's death in October 1970, introduced the Political Parties Law (Nr. 40 of 1977), effectively dissolving the ASU in favour of a restricted multiparty system; many of those who rose into leadership positions remained at the apex of person-centred hierarchies into the new millennium. The new parties were the leftist National Progressive Unionist Party (*Ḥizb al-tajammu' al-waṭanī al-taqaddumī al-wahdawī*, or Tagammu), Liberal Socialist Party (*Ḥizb al-aḥrār al-ishtirākīyīn*) and the Egyptian Arab Socialist Party (*Ḥizb Miṣr al-'arabī al-ishtirākī*) though Sadat changed the latter's name to the National Democratic Party (*al-ḥizb al-waṭanī al-dīmūqrāṭī*, or NDP) in 1978.

During Mubarak's reign, the ruling NDP, headed by the president, consolidated all important positions in Egypt's public political life. Although the bicameral parliamentary system, encompassing the People's Assembly (*Majlis al-Sha'b*) and the Shura Council (*Majlis al-Shūra*), was endowed with a legislative position by the constitution, it served in a mostly consultative role, discussing and passing laws designed by the ruling party elite. In the 2000s, the latter increasingly comprised the Policies Secretariat (*amānat al-siyāsāt*), headed by the president's youngest son, Gamal Mubarak. Although parliamentary elections provided the political opposition with opportunities to advance alternative claims and visions for legal reforms, the political parties themselves harnessed meagre constituencies. In 2005, the voter turnout in the People's Assembly elections was estimated at 23% of eligible voters, and, in 2010, less than 15% (Sika 2012: 183). According to a survey in 2009, 16% of Egyptians between 18 and 29 years of age had voted in the past (Population Council 2011: 140). In general, Egyptian elec-

tions were more about the candidates' promises of economic distribution of goods and services to their local constituencies, rather than ideological policy outcomes (Boutaleb 2004; Shehata 2008; Ibrahim 2006). Moreover, the NDP effectively had the right to issue new party licenses through the Political Party Committee (PPC), and, as a practical rule, the PPC denied license for promising party initiatives on the basis of the Political Parties Law (Law Nr. 40 of 1976) – relegating a number of promising initiatives to the status of “party-in-waiting” (for official licence) including the neo-Nasserist Karama (Dignity) Party and the moderate Islamist Wasat (Centre) Party (Gohar 2008; Norton 2005). The PPC's decisions were at times overturned by the rulings of the High Administrative Court, as happened, for instance, with the liberal Ghad (Tomorrow) party in 2004, indicating the degree of autonomy from executive powers which the Egyptian judiciary enjoyed during Mubarak's era. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, for instance, the judges practiced their constitutional right to supervise the polling stations, but only after a decade-long legal struggle that was supported by a number of opposition parties and civil society activists (El-Ghobashy 2012).

At the outset of his presidency, Mubarak promulgated the State of Emergency that was in place until 2011 and beyond.³ It placed extensive powers in the hands of the executive branch, principally the ruling National Democratic Party, the military and the police forces, to control many aspects of Egypt's public life (Kassem 2004a; Albrecht 2013). Under the State of Emergency, which was renewed every three years, the police could place anyone in administrative detention for 15 days “pending investigation” which, in turn, could be repeated for a period of up to 6 months, and civilians could be tried before the military courts. Under the penal code, the police could detain anyone “who shouts or sings in public with the purpose of inciting dissent” or distributes “false or instigating news, information, or rumours that disturb the public peace, frighten people, or harm the public interest” or “anyone inciting the overthrow of the ruling regime in Egypt, or expressing hatred or contempt” (Articles 98b, 102, 102b, and 174 of the penal code) (Kassem 2004a: 57). These broadly written articles allowed Mubarak's successive governments “much room for interpretation and leave political opponents with participatory constraints” (ibid.).

During Mubarak's presidency, the largest opposition group was the Muslim Brotherhood which, while being outlawed, entered the People's Assem-

³ The Emergency law (Nr. 162 of 1958) was first introduced by Nasser in 1958.

bly through electoral alliances with the Liberal Wafd party in 1984 and with the Amal (Labour) Party in 1989. Since the 1980s, however, some of the 25 syndicates (*niqābāt*) that represented the educated professionals – such as lawyers, doctors, engineers and journalists – provided alternative venues for political opposition (Wickham 2002: 176-203), while the labourers' trade unions were incorporated under the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), the state-controlled umbrella organization that Nasser established in 1957. In reaction to the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood through the syndicates, the NDP modified the Law of Professional Syndicates (Law Nr. 100 of 1993) in 1995, placing severe conditions on the syndicates' internal elections, bringing some to a temporary standstill.

Egypt's state security apparatuses, the draconian legacy of Nasser era, had swollen by the time of Mubarak's late presidency, with the different security branches that fell under the Ministry of the Interior amounting to 1.7 million personnel by the end of his rule. Two security branches in particular were concerned with constraining public dissent during the Mubarak era, namely, the Central Security Forces (CSF) and the State Security Investigations (SSI). The Central Security Forces (*amn markazī*) filled the role of "riot police" that controlled demonstrators in public spaces while the State Security (*amn al-dawla*) was infamous for intelligence practices that included using informants in opposition movements, and different forms of torture during interrogation. In the 2000s, State Security also benefited from digital surveillance tools such as high-tech software purchased from Europe (McVeigh 2011). These two police branches functioned to yield a truly panoptic form of social control (Foucault 1977) over society and public dissenters, at times enforcing the so-called Assembly Law (Nr. 10 of 1914) which was promulgated at the outbreak of World War I to criminalize the gathering of more than five persons in public places. These policing practices also prevented meaningful contact and communication between political dissidents and their target audiences, the Egyptians at large, while cultivating a sense of being surveilled in both. In sum, different forms of intimidation and physical punishment by certain police officers, coupled with the impunity of the perpetrators and their superiors, amounted to a social fact which Egyptians, not only the young, had internalized from early on and with which they were compelled to live.

Since the 1980s, the growing number of civil society formations – including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), rights advocacy groups, community development associations and religious associations – played a

dynamic role in public life (Abdelrahman 2004; Ben Nefissa et al. 2005).⁴ The activities of civil associations were, however, sequestered by Nasser-era legislation (Law Nr. 32 of 1964) which placed severe restrictions on their registration and activities. In 2002, the new and modified “NGO Law” (Nr. 84 of 2002) was also contested since it authorized the Ministry of Social Affairs – as the state arbiter of civil society activities – to monitor the associations’ internal elections, to freeze their assets and to dissolve their governing bodies. The Ministry also regulated NGOs’ rights to hold public seminars and raise funding either nationally or from abroad. In spite of the constraints over their operational space, however, an increasing number of NGOs and the burgeoning human rights movement advanced vocal criticism against the incumbent authorities by holding public seminars and issuing reports on the human rights situation in Egypt. Furthermore, some rights advocacy groups, which were denied official “NGO status”, in part bypassed the restrictive legislation by registering themselves as private firms. Since the 1990s, the government and the governmental press periodically accused human rights advocates of accepting foreign funding for the purpose of harming Egypt’s image abroad, or even serving the interests of other countries, especially those of the “West” and their foreign policy “agendas” in the Middle East (Pratt 2006; Alhamad 2008: 39-40).

1.1.2. Living through neoliberal times

Today’s young Egyptian citizens came of age in a period that witnessed the coinciding processes of neoliberal economic reforms and the securitization of public life. At the turn of the new millennium, Mitchell (2002: 296) observed:

Alternative claims, costs, visions, and agendas had to be kept out of the picture, using various combinations of persuasion, argument, threat, and violence. Those pursuing alternative political agendas in Egypt had very little space for maneuver before the economic reforms, although the judiciary, the press, opposition political parties, religious groups, universities, human rights organizations, and professional associations all offered limited arenas

⁴ According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, there were some 15,000 registered NGOs in Egypt in 1996 (Abdelrahman 2004: 121).

in which people could criticize the authorities and challenge aspects of the state's political program. The economic reforms were facilitated by a continuous narrowing of these limited opportunities for dissent.

In the 2000s, Egypt fared high in terms of official figures. Between 2001 and 2010, economic growth was estimated at an average of 5%, peaking in 2007 at 7.2%⁵ though the neoliberal restructuring of the national economy benefited select segments of Egyptians rather than the population at large (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009).⁶ Egypt entered the globalized market economy in earnest in the 1970s. In 1974, President Sadat's "open door" (*infitāh*) economic policies of state-led liberalization marked a shift from the Nasser-era emphasis on the developmentalist goals of Arab Socialism – such as state-led industrialization, a large public sector and a self-reliant economy – towards its integration into the globalized market economy. Moreover, in the context of the Cold War, Sadat's rule gradually aligned the previously Soviet-friendly Egyptian government towards the Western sphere of influence in terms of political, economic and development cooperation. American foreign aid flows to Egypt, for example, were secured on highly political premises when Sadat signed the Camp David peace agreements with Israel in 1979. At the same time, the 1970s' austerity measures – cutting public expenditures in services, schooling and state subsidies of daily commodities – created new trajectories of economic growth and affluence which in the 2000s did not ameliorate the livelihoods of the majority of Egyptians – some 90% of the population (Beinin 2008). Families of the withering middle classes had to endure the downsides of a neoliberal economic restructuring that was often couched in the rhetoric of development, sustainable growth and, even, modernity (Amin 2011: 85-100; Mitchell 2002). During Mubarak's presidency, the restructuring of the national economy, as the condition for loans and development aid from international donors such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, in practice accentuated the processes of socioeconomic polarization and benefited only the privileged few, which included the political and business elites, large landowners and the military establishment (Kienle 2001; Springborg and Henry 2011).⁷

5 Global Finance Magazine: Egypt. Source: <http://www.gfmag.com/gdp-data-country-reports/280-egypt-gdp-country-report.html#axzz31vfY3tmR> <accessed 1.5.2014>

6 In the mid-2000s, 43.9% of Egyptians lived on less than 2 USD a day (Chaaban 2009: 55).

7 The Egyptian government implemented the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program

In the first decade of the new millennium, especially after 2004 when Mubarak nominated Ahmed Nazif as Prime Minister, neoliberal reforms accelerated. The government privatized many public sector companies, and salaries could not keep up with high inflation rates which were subject to fluctuations in the globalized market economy, leading to a gradual rise in the prices of daily foodstuffs and housing. In rural areas, wealthy families were gradually able to purchase or occupy farming land, often with the help of local authorities, due to the reversal of Nasser's land reform which had been taking place since the early 1990s (Bush 2009: 58-62). By the 2000s, the real estate market had become a lucrative "fast-cash" business for venture capitalists and foreign investors, while the military establishment dominated both the construction and real estate sectors in Egypt, playing an important role in the emergence of new gated communities in the desert around Cairo that drew the new neoliberal classes from traditional bourgeois neighbourhoods in the capital city (Mitchell 2002; Denis 2006). Meanwhile, the livelihoods of many Egyptian families who were less affected by the "trickle-down effects" of neoliberal reforms were in part balanced by remittances from migrant workers who had been working in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the Persian Gulf countries, Europe and the United States since the 1970s. The remittances, however, often fluctuated according to political and economic crises: in 1991, for example, Egyptian workers who had been invited to Iraq had to leave in anticipation of the Gulf War though were offered new job opportunities in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries (El-Sakka 2010).⁸

By the 2000s Egyptian society and its economy had diversified into a myriad of clusters, securing the welfare of new segments of Egyptians at the expense of the majority. On the winner side of the neoliberal reforms were not only the "new bourgeoisie" who had benefited from Sadat's *infitāḥ* policies but an increasing number of business elites who had acquired monopolies in different economic sectors such as the steel industry, construction, media and naval traffic. Importantly, the making of neoliberal Egypt has coincided with, and in part contributed to, the growth of a parallel Islamic sector – in the context of Islamic revival (*al-ṣaḥwa al-islāmiyya*), or a growing religious concern and practice – that harnessed popular support

(ERSAP) in 1991 after negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank.

⁸ According to El-Sakka, the remittances to Egypt's economy between 1985 and 2009 amounted to an average of 4.22 billion USD, an average of 5.9% of the GDP. In the 2000s, the largest amounts came from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and the United States, and in Europe, from Great Britain, Switzerland and Germany (ibid.).

and influence in several areas of society and politics (Munson 1988; Tripp 1996). Since the 1970s, Islamic welfare associations compensated the deteriorating levels of public services in rural and impoverished urban areas – in terms of schooling, healthcare, orphanages and legal aid – that were left unattended due to the scarcity of public funds. The conservative Salafist and piety movements, often with tacit state approval on the condition they did not interfere with politics, drew resources and influence from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and combined their social work with proselytization (*da'wa*) activities (Ben Néfissa 2002; Ismail 2006: 66-95).

1.1.3. The new culture of protest in the 2000s

Many of the young activists who feature in this study were sensitized to public politics in the context of an unprecedented wave of public mobilization during Mubarak's presidency (Shehata 2008; Hopkins 2009; El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009; El-Mahdi 2014). Between 2000 and 2002, the break-out of the 2nd Palestinian Intifada instigated the first instances during Mubarak's presidency whereby Egyptians, not only the young, organized themselves into protracted collective actions beyond state tutelage, collecting food, clothes, blood and other forms of humanitarian aid for the Palestinians. At the time, diverse political forces managed to put aside their differences, paving the way for the Egyptian People's Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) in which various opposition groups – Leftists, Liberals, Arab Nationalists and Islamists – forged tactical alliances for the support of the Palestinians (Schwedler and Clark 2006; Abdelrahman 2009). In 2003, the outbreak of the US-led war in Iraq witnessed the largest street demonstrations in Egypt since the 1970s, in which tens of thousands of protesters flooded to Tahrir Square on March 20, only to be violently dispersed the following day (Schemm 2012). For many Cairenes, including school pupils, university students as well as opposition politicians, the anti-war demonstration was the first experience of public protest on this scale, and discussion among protesters quickly framed the Mubarak regime as Washington's closest ally and the largest recipient of US foreign aid in the world after Israel, some two-thirds of which went to the military.

By the end of the decade, the new cycles of public mobilization were increasingly turning attention to domestic affairs (El-Mahdi 2009). In 2005, President Mubarak amended Article 76 of the Constitution in order to allow the first multicandidate presidential elections, to replace the plebi-

scite by parliament members, since independence. During the electoral period, the Egyptian Movement for Change (*Ḥaraka miṣriyya min ajl al-taghyīr*) – commonly known through its central slogan as the Kifaya movement (“Enough”) – gained public prominence for its repeated street protests against the renewal of Mubarak’s presidency and his alleged plans to transfer presidential office to his son Gamal Mubarak. The prodemocracy movement that rallied around the central demand – “No to renewal, no to succession!” (*lā li-l-tamdīd, lā li-l-tawrīth*) – and the protesters’ direct criticism of the head of the state was at the time unheard of in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East. The Kifaya movement, and the parallel initiatives of its “spin-off” groups such as Writers and Artists for Change, Journalists for Change, Workers for Change, and Youth for Change – which I shall discuss in more detail in this study – would vitalize Egypt’s public political life in a series of protests, confrontational public seminars, garnering media presence in Egypt and abroad (Browsers 2007; Shorbagy 2007). Ultimately, the parliamentary elections later that year reinstated the NDP dominance over the People’s Assembly, while the Muslim Brotherhood got an unprecedented 19% (88 seats of 454).⁹ The electoral period provided the political opposition with new opportunities for public dissent and mobilization which, however, has gradually withered since 2006 while international policymakers, especially those from Washington, have placed less emphasis on democratic opening in the region since Hamas won the parliamentary elections in Palestine.

After the 2005 elections reinstated Mubarak for a fifth six-year term in office, periodic protests spread beyond the capital and big cities, taking form in localized protest groups around “bread and butter” issues: clean water, land rights and rejection of the dominance of the NDP and State Security at university campuses (Bush 2009; Dessouki and Galal 2007). Workers’ strike movements, in particular, multiplied in various areas of Egypt’s public sector – from railway workers and textile factories to real estate tax collectors – to demand pay-rises and better working conditions. Some academics argued that the prodemocracy coalition and protest movements of the mid-2000s promoted a new culture of civil disobedience, and that street protesting helped to break the “barrier of fear” and raise “the ceiling of expression” in public life (Shorbagy 2007; Browsers 2007). Others give less credit to urbanized middle-class protesters and emphasize the

9 Since the 1990 Elections Law, elections have selected 444 members, while the President has had the right to nominate 10 members in the People’s Assembly.

role of Egyptians' grievances in terms of socioeconomic demands such as pay-rise and better working conditions (Beinin 2009). In 2010, the prospect of Mohamed ElBaradei's presidential candidacy and new forms of online activism reinvigorated public political life and brought fresh incomers to the wider prodemocracy movement.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEMATIC

While scholars have followed these wider processes of contentious politics in the late Mubarak era, and especially since 2011, little ethnographic research has been conducted on the young opposition activists' everyday lives and experiences during the period. This study is motivated by an interest in what it meant to be a young opposition activist in the late Mubarak era and what public political dissent entailed for the activists themselves. What made them resist an authoritarian regime through speech and action and put their bodies on the line for democratic struggle, despite prevailing social sentiments that such activities were, at best, in vain? While I do not pretend to provide overarching explanations for these phenomena, the following research questions are explored:

1. In order to change society, what did the young opposition activists regard as meaningful activities? Why?
2. How did being young shape their experiences of politics?

1.3. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS

For Max Weber, the question of "what is meaningful action" was a life-long theoretical interest which laid a basis for today's interpretive sociology (Bendix 1977). In this thesis, however, I do not aim for such generalising theoretical achievements but, rather, for the specific goal of understanding what it was like to be a young opposition activist in the late Mubarak era. I have adopted the notion of *political engagement* as a heuristic device to aid discussion of the different themes that emerged during fieldwork and from the empirical material. By implication, I suggest it is, if not an alternative,

then at least a complementary analytic to *political participation*. This shift in emphasis aims to accomplish two things. First, it takes cue from the debates that problematize the concept of political participation, in particular under authoritarian settings in the Middle East (Singerman 1997a; Lust-Okar and Zerhouni 2008; Alhamad 2008; Bayat 2010). As such, it offers a relatively open analytical terrain and a way look beyond public political processes and towards the more informal areas of social life. Second, it aims to draw attention to the experiential dimension of the activists' everyday lives and serves as a general reference to personal and collective activities that were oriented towards public political life but were not necessarily exclusive to it. It thus refers to a relatively flexible analytical domain that enables us to explore the ways in which young activists experienced opposition politics and the things that mattered for them in the context of their everyday lives (Jackson 1996; Kleinman 1998).

1.3.1. Beyond public political processes

Since the 1990s, increasing numbers of social scientists have revisited the conventional scope of *political participation* understood as activities whereby citizens choose public decision-makers for representative bodies, and aim to influence public policy outcomes and their implementation (Bee and Guerrina 2014; Barret and Brunton-Smith 2014). The need to revisit the scale and forms of political activities conventionally discussed under the rubric of political participation is a response to the manifest “democracy deficit” in the global North, measured by declining levels of people’s participation in public political processes, such as low levels of voter turnout in elections, and membership in associations, trade unions and political parties. Some argued that the loosening of social bonds – or reduced “social capital” (Putnam 2000) – among citizens results from incrementing processes of social fragmentation, individualism and lack of mutual trust in society; while others were swift to point out that people do engage in different forms of political behaviour but no longer accept the formal political institutions of the nation-state as their main loci of redress (Beck 1997; Ellison 1997; Norris 2009).¹⁰ In this context, the notion of *engagement* has

10 For instance, Ulrich Beck (1997: 52) introduced the notion of *subpolitics* to capture these new realities: “Outside the officially classified political sphere – in business, science, technical laboratories, and in private life – there is a great deal of activity, arguing, bargaining, deception, separating, uniting, loving, and betrayal, but none of that is [...] done according to the legitimate rules of politics;

been at times viewed as a more encompassing analytic, drawing attention to less visible forms of political participation – or “latent participation” – such as general interest in current affairs, voluntary activities, following the news and so on (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Norris 2009: 636-638). A review of the current social science literature suggests that there is often overlap in terms of agency and its attributes between, on the one hand, *participation* and *engagement* and, on the other, qualitative terms such as *civic*, *political* and *public*: it seems any combination of these can be operationalized by way of conceptual stretching to fit them to the subject matter at hand (Erik and Amnå 2012: 284-287).

While not specifically aiming to compare young Egyptians’ experiences with the social processes and histories that inform these debates, this study benefits from their analytic import when examining the different kinds of activities that evolved beyond public or formal political processes. To say the least, my preference for the concept *engagement* reflects the conditions under which my research subjects were born and raised whereby political participation (*mushāraka siyāsiyya*) – such as voting in elections or political party membership – were largely viewed as inconsequential for social and political change. Singerman emphasizes that:

The success of narrow-based regimes to control political participation should not blind scholars to the strength of people’s ability to adapt, resist, and even prevail. If opposition to a regime is too risky and dangerous, and therefore not publicly articulated, it does not mean that political activity has disappeared or that people are apathetic or apolitical. Rather, it presents a challenge to look harder, and certainly to look outside of conventional political venues and historical accounts. (Singerman 1997b: 81; op. cit. in Alhamad 2008: 34).

It has been suggested that one way to discuss political activities under authoritarian and postcolonial settings in the Middle East is to differentiate between *formal* and *informal* avenues to public life (Singerman 1997a; Alhamad 2008; Albrecht 2008). This formulation acknowledges that alongside organizational forms of collective action – such as NGOs, trade unions and political parties – there are multiple and overlapping modalities of collective action and locally rooted conceptions of affiliation (Springborg

there is no mandate, no party organization, and no dependence on the consent of the governed.”

1975; Hann and Dunn 1996; Antoun 2000). Alhamad (2008: 35) argues further that it is important to “prioritize the reality on the ground rather than to find a fit for existing definitions or theories of political participation”:

[I]n environments where the political space is circumspect [...] the populace often resorts to alternate channels, such as informal networks that arise in lieu of, or alongside, the formal institutions.

In Cairo, for instance, landmark ethnographies suggest that although most people do not connect to formal organizations or public political processes, they can secure access to services through informal social networks – through kin, family and neighbours – such as women’s pooling practices in popular or working class (*sha‘bī*) neighbourhoods (Singerman 1997a; Hoodfar 1999). On the one hand, these informal networks are often fluid and interstitial, and require constant interactions and social and economic exchange from their members. On the other, they potentially connect local residents to different areas of society and to personalities of social standing, including bureaucratic officials and public decision-makers. Indeed, Singerman (2006) goes so far as to propose that the family should be viewed as the most enduring social unit in Egyptian society against which different processes of social, economic and political changes should be analysed, and not vice versa. In this study, the attention paid to informal social networks and less visible forms of sociality is not intended to belittle the role played by civil society organizations in public political life. It, rather, acknowledges that even public political actors, not only local residents in informal areas of sociality, can and do resort to informal social networks in order to gain access to public life.

More recently, Bayat (2010) has proposed that people living “under the threshold”, even without direct connection to one another, may engage in collective actions by virtue of their similar practices. He uses an added distinction between *passive* and *active* networks as a way to explain the emergence of social nonmovements: people can connect through passive networks as “instantaneous communications between atomized individuals, which are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities directly in public spaces or indirectly through mass media” (ibid.: 22; Bayat 1998: 15-21). These commonalities result from their collective social positions and shared practices, such as assuming land and illegally wiring electricity among the urban poor, or social tastes and lifestyle choices among the young. The significance of passive networks lies in the fact that vast num-

bers of identical practices are hard to subject to control from above. In contrast, *active* networks emerge through concrete social ties between people who are “brought together deliberately” through commonalities such as claims, ideology or association and as such are much more exposed to outside pressure and state surveillance. While the latter imply youth activism structured around particular public demands, youth nonmovements emerge as passive networks “on street corners, at shopping malls, or in colleges” when young people tacitly “identify their collective position by spontaneously recognizing similar fashions, hairstyles, and social tastes” (Bayat 2010b: 22); given sufficient critical mass, this can contribute to cultural and social change. In this context, reclaiming “youthfulness” can serve as an important source of youth discontent in the Middle East. For Bayat, this quality sets youth movements apart from other forms of collective actions by the young, such as student movements or youth branches of political organizations. Thus defined, the central aspect of youth movements pertains to processes whereby young people are collectively promoting youthful *habitus*, or “defending and extending the conditions that allow the young to assert their individuality, creativity, and lightness and free them from anxiety over the prospect of their future” (ibid.: 18).

In light of the above analytical avenues, in this study I mainly focus on informal and active networks among young opposition activists in Cairo. It is to say that they came together and, while acting on the fringes of formal organizations, devised their own initiatives and ways of doing opposition politics, meeting in different places around the Greater Cairo area, and engaging in collective activities in several ways. In Chapter 3, for instance, I will discuss the emergence of two youth movements that gained public prominence during Mubarak’s late presidency, namely, Youth for Change and April 6 Youth Movement and in part ascribe to Bayat’s conceptualization of youth movements and its concurrent use of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) – as a specific set of dispositions, tastes, and lifestyles – in order to highlight aspects of practice that set the young activists apart from their elder peers. I will continue this discussion in Chapter 4, following the observation that different social cleavages existed among the members of youth movements, intersecting in ways that disposed some towards public political life more easily than others. These distinctions also played out in everyday interactions among young activists, drawing attention to the variety of personal and collective experiences, life trajectories and future prospects among the young protagonists themselves. We shall later see that youth movements encompassed different forms and modalities of collective action, including organizational forms that at least momentarily galvanized the fluidity of

personal relations among their members as a way to coordinate their collective acts of public political dissent.

1.3.2. Activities that matter

In Arabic, the kinds of public political activities in which young activists engaged refer to what is generally termed “political action” (*‘amal siyāsī*) – or even “participation in political action” (*mushāraka fī ‘amal siyāsī*) – comprising, in the main, different forms of political activism (*nishāt*) such as demonstrations (*muḏāharāt*), protests (*ih̄tijājāt*) and blogging (*tadwīn*). As such they gained somewhat ambivalent connotations in the late Mubarak era, carrying forceful references to public political life as a contested and distant social sphere that was for most Egyptians something to avoid. Being oppositional (*mu‘āriḏ*) in the late Mubarak era came with potential personal and professional risks (Singerman 1997a: 4-5), but it involved much more than periodic acts of public dissent; it also meant living a precarious life while being, doing and experiencing things with others on a daily basis.

This thesis draws inspiration from social phenomenology, suggesting that political engagements be viewed as particular *experiences* of engaging with public political life, and as ways of being and acting in the world with the aim of transforming it. It serves to orientate the discussion of what young activists regarded as meaningful activities more closely to the context of their everyday lives. For Kleinman (1998: 358-359), experience refers to the “felt flow of interpersonal communication and engagements”; furthermore,

[i]t involves practices, negotiations, contestations among others with whom we are connected. It is a medium in which collective and subjective processes interfuse. We are born into the flow of palpable experience. Within its symbolic meanings and social interactions our senses form into a patterned sensibility, our movements meet resistance and find directions, and our subjectivity emerges, takes shape, and reflexively shapes our local worlds.

Central to social phenomenological approaches to human experiences as “intersubjective mediums of social interactions” is the notion that the conditions for their emergence are both culturally particular and shared by the persons who live their lives together in their immediate social environment,

be it a local neighbourhood, a village or an interacting network (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996: 170-172). Experiences thus entail a certain consciousness of the self and others as being and acting together in the world. In this view, human consciousness in itself refers to an intentional act that entails there being no such a thing as pure consciousness in isolation from the social world; rather, it is embodied and always directed at something: an object, a person, a thing in the world as it appears in the lived flow of “palpable experience” (Gallagher 2007).

Experiences in this view are not things acquired from the vantage point of particular individuals, but unfold through and with others or, as Jackson puts it, “*within* relationships and *between* persons” (Jackson 1996: 26). Although experiences take place in the present, they are immediately transformed into things, actions and events that have just passed. They are “lived” insofar as they accrue meanings from the self and the world, forming human sensibilities and subjectivities, making us who we are. Subjectivity in this sense, Jackson comments, “entails a reaching beyond the self”:

Insofar as experience includes substantive and transitive, disjunctive and conjunctive modalities, it [subjectivity] covers a sense of ourselves as singular individuals as well as belonging to a collectivity (Ibid.)

Lived experiences thus conceived do not consist of contrasting modalities of being but of dialectical moments between the self and the world, and they are inherently intersubjective (ibid.: 29). They thus provide ingredients for how human beings live their lives from the vantage point of their life-worlds, which Schutz defines as “the quintessence of a reality that is lived, experienced, and endured” while also referring to:

...a reality that is mastered by action and the reality in which – and on which – our action fails. Especially for the everyday life-world, it holds good that we engage in it by acting and change it by our actions. Everyday life is that province of reality in which we encounter directly, as the condition of our life, natural and social givens as pregiven realities with which we must try to cope. (Schutz and Luckmann 1989: 1; Jackson 1996: 18-21)

Social phenomenological (and radical empiricist approaches) to human experience are at times criticized for an excessive methodological indi-

vidualism that risks reproducing first-person perspectives of how the world appears to the individual at the expense of paying attention to the social conditions that shape lives (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 9-11). I have already suggested that the historical conditions – or the wider processes of socioeconomic and cultural change under which Egyptian youth lived their lives – did matter, and not the least in terms of the young activists’ opportunities to engage in public political life.

Thus, this thesis does not advance a phenomenological analysis in the strict sense of the term. Considering political engagements in reference to the ways in which young activists sought to engage with collective life – or being and acting in the world with the aim of transforming it – is, however, an attempt to understand the meanings they attached to their everyday activities. It is also an acknowledgement that their experiences while seeking new roles and visibilities in public political life evolved beyond the contours of instrumental rationality and “means to an end” calculation conventionally attached to political participation (Weber 1919; Singerman 1997a: 5-8). To inquire into the experiential dimension of their everyday lives is also to accept that their political engagements were inseparable from the other issues, concerns and exigencies connected with coming of age in the late Mubarak era. Consequently, this study looks beyond an understanding of the modern nation state and its formal political processes as the main constitutive framework for meaningful activities towards the ontology of life itself. It invites us to explore the issues of everyday sociability and ethical reflection as part and parcel of the young activists’ daily experiences, and how their political subjectivities were formed during the timeframe examined. In Chapter 5, I will examine these issues through the notion of friendship, suggesting that such relations served for many young activists as important and intimate informal networks through which political experiences were mediated, providing them with an additional social layer that connected them to public political life. In Chapter 6, I explore more closely their ethical reflection and practical judgments when committing themselves to public political dissent while negotiating between the different exigencies of life.

1.4. WHY RESEARCH YOUTH IN EGYPT?

In light of the 2011 events and the political turmoil that has taken place since then in Egypt and regionally, this question seems like an oxymoron.

To be sure, the events of 2011 amounted to a popular uprising which did not concern the agencies and experiences of young people alone. Descriptive analysis of oppositional youth activism in the run-up period, however, sheds light on the making of these historic events, and provides empirically grounded insights into the lives and experiences of young people during one of the most critical periods in Egypt's modern history. At the same time, in this study I explore the ways in which young Cairenes were involved in the risky opposition politics of the late Mubarak era. How did being young shape their experiences when engaging in public political life during the period? This research question aims to examine how their young age and the ways in which they regarded themselves as young shaped their everyday activities when seeking new roles in public political life. Indeed, a guiding assumption is that there was something about their youth that disposed them to experience the world differently to their older peers, including the opposition politicians.

As a Muslim-majority society, Egypt witnessed similar demographic realities as other postcolonial societies in the Middle East and North Africa, such as the apparent "youth bulge" whereby almost a third, or 28%, of the total 80 million population were aged between 15 and 29 years in 2007 (Assaad and Barsoum 2007: 16). This demographic reality, coupled with the concerns of youth unemployment, urbanization, social polarization and potential radicalization have yielded a wealth of academic and policy-oriented research that has framed youth as a developmental challenge, both as a threat and an opportunity for social change and social reproduction (Herrera 2006a; Chaaban 2009). The new millennium witnessed the emergence of unprecedented numbers of young people not only in Egypt, but globally, whereby 1.3 billion people aged between 12 and 24 were living in the Global South (Chaaban 2009) but, while the notion of "youth" came to saturate mainstream development policies and practices, young people themselves remain conspicuously absent in terms of setting the development agenda in their own right (Herrera 2009; Huijsmans et al. 2014). At the same time, the restricted focus on chronological age or age cohorts (such as those between 15 and 29) does little justice to the culturally specific experiences of what it means to be young (Clark-Kazak 2009).

In this light, "youth" can be seen first and foremost as a social category, the scope and content of which are contested and often defined by those who do not fall in into the category themselves (Bourdieu 1993: 92-102). In this study, I acknowledge that the experiences of being young in many ways encompassed youthful lifestyles, tastes and dispositions, but also

entailed living through a culturally informed life stage or, as Bayat (2010: 116) notes, a “distinct social location between childhood and adulthood, where the youngster in a relative autonomy is neither totally dependent (on adults) nor independent, and is free from being responsible for others” (e.g. Meijer 2000). Moreover, the prolonged period of youth can be seen as largely machinated by the modern education system that “serves as a key factor in producing and prolonging the period of youth, while it cultivates status, expectations, and, possibly, critical awareness” (Bayat 2010: 119). Being young thus refers to both a position and a process of social becoming, enabling perspectives onto how people perceive themselves as young while navigating towards the roles and responsibilities that are considered part of adulthood (Vigh 2006). In this sense, the experiences of being young in the late Mubarak era were also shaped by the pursuit of employment and, one day, a family of one’s own, although the new millennium had witnessed increasing difficulties for young graduates to find work and, for men especially, to save for the costs of marriage in order to make these life transitions (Singerman 2007; Herrera 2010). Although the life chances and livelihood prospects of young Egyptians were in many ways shaped by gender, socioeconomic background and locality, public constructions of youth as political actors in Egypt are traditionally gendered and refer mostly to well-educated young men from the urban middle classes (Farag 2007).

Moreover, paying attention to youth as a culturally and socially specific life stage also acknowledges the issues of youth socialization, social reproduction and generational renewal in society (Herrera 2006a, 2009; Huijssmans et al. 2014). Egyptian society in the 2000s was largely dominated by gerontocratic power relations, whereby men in their 60s and above remained at the top of person-centred hierarchies. Most private and public institutions, including the government and private firms, military establishment and religious institutions were, and in the main continue to be, ruled by elderly men. In addition to party politics, gerontocratic power relations also dominated in others areas of public life, including the fields of professional journalism (in both print and broadcast media) and artistic production (Winegar 2006; El-Bendary 2010). At the turn of the millennium the prospects of generational change and social reproduction were topical issues not only in Egypt, but in other Middle Eastern states, and included public political life at the highest level. In Morocco the crown had already passed from King Hassan II to his son Muhammad VI in 1998 and, in Jordan, from Hussein to his son Abdullah in 1999. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad became president after his father Hafez al-Asad died in 2000. In the new millennium the succes-

sion scenario that would bring Gamal Mubarak to the presidency was also tangible in Egypt, and subject to much public speculation, but one that was rejected by wide segments of Egyptians, including the opposition parties and movements, and also the young activists studied in this thesis.

1.4.1. Focus: Young activists in the capital city

According to a survey, some 2.3% of Egyptians between 10 and 29 years of age engaged in voluntary activities in 2009, and nearly 4% of Egyptians between 18 and 24, while two-thirds of these activities consisted of charity and religious associations (Population Council 2010: 18; Population Council 2011: 139). This study thus examines a very narrow segment of Egyptian youth. It mainly focuses on young people living in the Greater Cairo area who were in the main unmarried men in their 20s and belonged to the relatively well-educated urban middle classes. The majority had acquired higher education in public universities, some “upper class” youth in private universities, and still others had acquired diplomas in vocational institutes. Some young activists in this study belong to the political classes through kin, others to the educated urban middle classes, while others belong to more disenfranchised segments of the population. While most activists were young men, the youth activism of the 2000s encompassed a relatively large number of young women. Living in the capital city of Cairo, the central hub of Egypt’s political, economic and cultural life, and a regional capital of importance, they were more directly attuned to global flows of ideas, tastes, influences, technologies and people – and therefore more cosmopolitan – than, say, young Egyptians living in rural areas or impoverished urban districts (Ibrahim and Wassef 2000; Schielke 2008).

The young activists in this study largely belong to Egypt’s secular opposition. By secular in this context I am not referring to their personal religious convictions, but to their normative preference for a “civil” (*madanī*), if not a ‘secular’ (*‘almānī*), state rather than a religious state as the ideal arrangement of state-society relations in Egypt. In practical terms, this means relegating the power of legislation to elected representative bodies, without a heightened role for religious moral authorities in deciding on legal matters. Moreover, while 2000s’ youth activism emerged on the fringes of political parties that promoted ideological rhetoric and political platforms, most young Cairenes in this study found common grounds by virtue of sharing, as Shehata (2008: 6) puts it, “a general commitment to the values of human rights, pluralism, democracy, and social justice” instead

of rigid ideological doctrines. I agree with Shehata's observation in that the majority of the young activists of the period "focused more on consensus building and action, rather than on theoretical ideological squabbles" (ibid.). Many would, however, position themselves as members of different political trends, often in terms of "ideology" (*īdiālūjiyya*) or "current" (*tayār*). Thus, in contrast to Islamists (*islāmiyīn*), the general trends among them included Leftist (*yasāriyīn*), Liberal (*librāliyīn*), Arab Nationalist (*qawmiyīn*) or, the Nasser version of Arab Socialism, Nasserist (*nāṣiriyyīn*). While important variations exist within and between these standpoints, these trends resonate with the wider pattern of the political landscape in the post-1967 Arab World (Abu Rabi' 2004). In this study, I do not regard them as fixed identities or affiliations, nor do I focus on studying ideologies as such, but consider them – together with other social divisions – as daily references as young activists negotiated routes into Egypt's public political life in the late Mubarak era.

1.5. OUTLINE

This thesis is structured in a way that differs from many doctoral theses in Development Studies at the University of Helsinki because it does not include a separate chapter on theory. I have suggested above that the empirical material compelled me to consider a number of analytical perspectives in order to better understand what it was like to be young activist in the late Mubarak era, an issue that will be further discussed in Chapter 2, which focuses on the ways in which I conducted this research and the methodological and ethical choices it involved.

Chapters 3 to 6 present the study's principal analysis. In Chapter 3, I explore the processes whereby young political activists emerged as potent members of wider anti-Mubarak mobilization in the 2000s, discussing the emergence of new youth movements and the formation of a generational consciousness among their members. In Chapter 4, I examine in more detail their actual practices directed towards resisting the state grip on public life, with further reference to the shaping of the differential opportunities of the young to engage in public political life, meanwhile suggesting why coalition building has often been problematic. In Chapter 5, I look more closely at the activists' everyday lives and discuss the roles and values friendship relations played in political activism. In Chapter 6, I examine the moral ter-

rain on which young activists placed themselves and others, and the ethical considerations they faced when engaging in public political dissent. Finally, in Chapter 7, I provide the concluding remarks for this study, and some suggestions for further inquiry.

2 ETHNOGRAPHY AS EXPERIENCE

As the unimagined happened, and President Mubarak resigned from power in February 2011, Egypt's young revolutionaries were at the centre of global attention. Journalists, analysts and academics flooded into Cairo to offer their take on the "Arab Spring", seizing a historic and rare opportunity to observe a post-revolution society in flux, although many academics were quick to respond to what they saw as widely circulating misrepresentations of what had really happened. Rabab El-Mahdi, a political scientist at the American University in Cairo, noted that the analysts' focus on Cairo-based "yuppies" – the relatively rich, educated and privileged political activists – created a "new imaginary construct of 'youth'" as the main protagonist of the revolution (El-Mahdi 2011). She observed that the primacy given to young urbanite elites effectively neglected the varied interests, experiences and life trajectories of Egyptians living, for instance, in impoverished urban neighbourhoods and rural areas. For El-Mahdi, the narratives confirming that Egypt's revolutionaries are "just like 'us'" in the West – nonviolent and IT-savvy, or modern, liberal and cosmopolitan – served to Orientalize the revolution and misrepresent the multiplex and volatile social dynamics that led to the popular uprising (Onodera 2011b). Soon after Mubarak's resignation in 2011, sociologist Mona Abaza argued that the structural and global inequalities in academic research, and in research funding especially, help to reproduce (neo)colonial practices of knowledge production. In her view, the role of local academics was often reduced to "service providers" for European researchers who, at the end of the day, "remain pervasively as the 'knowing subjects' whereas non-Europeans continue to be the 'objects of observations and analyses of European theorists'" (Abaza 2011).

These concerns strike at the methodological core of this study on the political engagements of young activists in the late Mubarak era. Indeed, many of them were young, urban, secular and in many ways privileged,

but by no means all were in this category. Having lived in Egypt in the late 1990s, and conducted ethnographic research in Cairo for twelve months between 2007 and 2011, I feel privileged to have witnessed some of the makings of the January 2011 events from a rather close perspective. Privileged “access” alone, however, hardly guarantees the quality of my claims to understand their lives and experiences. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which this research was conducted, including the methodological and ethical choices it involved along the way. In the first section, I examine the processes whereby my interest in the topic developed, and how I related to participants during the course of fieldwork. My research experience was not necessarily a seamless or a cumulative process, although reflecting on my own experiences and positioning during fieldwork has been useful in generating new research questions and when analysing the empirical materials. In the second section, I discuss the data and methods of analysis in more detail, and explicate on the ethical choices that underpin this study, especially with regards the issue of safeguarding the activists’ anonymity.

2.1. FIELDWORK

Ethnographic method holds the promise of seeing beyond the surface of public political processes and into the microsocial contexts in which the young activists’ lives and experiences unfold (Scott 1990; Auyero and Joseph 2007). Immersion in the social worlds of young activists over a prolonged period of time, and sharing a number of discussions and experiences with them along the way, were crucial in gaining an understanding of their political experiences and practical concerns which would have been painstaking to reach through “one-off” interviews. On the other hand, ethnography as a form of qualitative inquiry was for me less a methodological choice than it was a personal way of being, acting and trying to better understand the experiences of young Cairenes who were involved in public political life in the late Mubarak era. In this vein, the question is not “if” but “how” my personal persuasions and dispositions, personal biography, cultural and educational background, emotions and opinions shaped the research process (Ådahl 2007: 28-33; Stronach et al. 2007; Possick 2009). Indeed, the ethnographer’s main research instrument is his or her embodied self which is carried through the different stages of the research process – from one’s original choice to pursue a certain research topic, through the methods used in data collection and analysis, to the final written output itself.

2.1.1. On the problem of “voice”

At the outset, I had rather personal and normative expectations of this thesis. Quite simply, I wished it to give “voice” to Egypt’s prodemocracy movements. In 2004, when I first enrolled in a postgraduate program at the University of Helsinki, I was working on a part-time basis in a Leftist peace and human rights organization in Helsinki. Partly for this reason, I wanted to study Egypt’s prodemocracy movements and when I enrolled in a graduate school in 2007, I decided to focus on what appeared to be one of the most vocal civil society formations, the Egyptian Movement for Change. A pilot field trip to Egypt in early 2007, however, encouraged me to reorient the research focus towards the undertakings of young Cairene activists who, while they played dynamic roles in the wider prodemocracy movements, at the same time seemed in some ways detached from the formal arena and institutions of the political opposition. This was a methodological choice, since experienced opposition politicians were often busy with their daily tasks, while the young activists had more time to “hang out”, and I had also connected with them more at a personal level. Furthermore, at the time there was very little ethnographic research on Egypt’s young activists and making their voices heard, I believed, would in part raise awareness of their democratic struggle.

During my fieldwork in Egypt, I carried the imagery of voice into my research activities, producing, at times, somewhat interesting reactions. Consider, for instance, an online chat with Fadwa (35) during the main fieldwork in 2008, at a point when I was anxious that I had not interviewed ‘enough’ women activists.

Me: I think any account of political activism in Egypt falls short without the voices of politically active women (non-active as well)

Fadwa: I know you are sincere about the voices; but it sounds quite funny

I had met Fadwa during the pilot field trip in 2007, and she had helped out with arranging interviews. This small online exchange is telling of the ways that I used “voice” even when explaining my research to people with whom I became friendly over time, although in the interviews I asked respondents to talk about their “experiences” (*tagruba*, pl. *tagārib*). It also

points to the ways in which my “activist” background was a reoccurring dimension in fieldwork, affecting my self-positioning when socializing over time with the youth whose experiences I wished to study. Fadwa, like many others, knew this side of my personal past: that I had participated in and at times helped to organize anti-war demonstrations in Finland, and written about the human rights situation in the Middle East for Finnish journals.

At the same time, the use of voice as a metonym for democratic claims, especially by marginalized actors, seems to persist and circulate in academic, journalistic and policy-oriented development reports. It is so embedded in studies of the marginalized that, at times, it is difficult to disassociate it from the globally circulating imageries of authenticity, emancipation or deliberative democracy (Göker 2011). On the other hand, my anxiety about the lack of young women’s voices corresponded with a strand of postcolonial feminist critique, as articulated by Mohanty (1984), which argues against those who write, despite good intentions, about “Third World Women” but treat them simultaneously as a coherent group with similar interests and desires. This line of criticism – against homogenizing and easily consumed narratives, lumping different positions, opinions, experiences and life trajectories under a totalizing rubric – can be extended to discussing “Egyptian youth”, or the “young activist”.

Later, I problematized my desire to “give voice” and how it had shaped this research. In retrospect this endeavour was based on a number of assumptions. They proceeded, by and large, on the imagery of voice as a token for authentic experience, or as something that can be heard by outside audiences or captured in the first place (Jackson 2003; Mazzei and Jackson 2009). The young people I had the chance to meet and talk to in Cairo were more than able to speak for themselves, to express their opinions, and to analyse their lives and experiences in society and politics on their own terms. Retrospective criticism, however, cannot erase the fact that my initial desire to give voice was the basis for doing this research and that this desire has not so much completely vanished as been transformed during the process. At the minimum, it oriented me towards a pluralist view of youth activism by way of exploring the differential opportunities and uneven access the young Cairenes had when becoming involved in public political life.

2.1.2. Being in Egypt once again

Undoubtedly, ethnographers rarely conduct research on topics, people and phenomena in which they are not initially interested. Motivations are often multi-layered, and for me, in addition to learning about and better understanding the young activists' experiences in authoritarian settings, a further incentive to embark on this study was that I had studied Arabic in Alexandria in the late 1990s, and had since aspired to return to live in Egypt again. When moving to conduct fieldwork in 2008 with my family, including a toddler, Cairo provided a whole new set of experiences compared with previous student life on the Mediterranean coast. Today's Cairo has a population of 19.4 million and merges five different municipalities in the largest urban conglomeration in the Middle East after Istanbul. It is a truly global city that encapsulates the contradictory processes of globalization: the growing connectedness with global flows of capital, peoples, ideas and technologies, and coinciding processes of social polarization and impoverishment (Sassen 2005; Singerman and Amar 2006; Singerman 2009a). The constant ebb and flow of foreigners over the centuries – merchants and traders, colonial administrators and armies, tourists, journalists, and researchers alike – have made Cairo a historical locus of the Orientalist gaze, of global markets and power politics, and of regional news media and cultural production (Vignal and Denis 2006; Sadek 2006). In a country where tourism generates important flows of foreign capital, being a foreigner provided us with wider freedoms, opportunities and access to many areas of social life than available to most Egyptians (Ong 2006).

During fieldwork in 2008, we lived in the residential area of Doqqi, Giza, located on the opposite side of the Nile from downtown Cairo. Conducting fieldwork with family and a child was simultaneously rich and reassuring, challenging as well as informative. The people we met were in general wholeheartedly loving towards toddlers, and my son, bearing an Arabic name Nour (“Light”) received a lot of positive attention wherever we went. People in the neighbourhood and also some activists would call me *abu nūr* (“Nour’s father”) as a reference to the social status of having a family and also being an “earner” (*kāsib*), both of which represented, for many, important life aspirations. Although I conducted much of the research activities in and around the downtown part of the city, as a family we formed the habit of regularly visiting a number of different areas in and outside Cairo, enjoying “weekend tourism” in Alexandria, Aswan, Luxor, Ismailia, Suez, Port Said, and Port Fuad. We also visited a number of malls, such as City

Stars in Nasr City and First Mall in Giza, and the Carrefour supermarkets in Cairo and Alexandria, while I had the opportunity to visit Cairo's neo-liberal "satellite cities" including Media City in 6th October City and the gated communities of Rehab and Madinati in New Cairo. For comparison, we also explored several popular neighbourhoods such as Masr al-Qadima, Sayyida Zeinab, Hada'iq al-Qubba, Imbaba, and El-Munib in the Greater Cairo area. This form of experiencing different sides of Cairo, and Egypt, was highly beneficial in terms of developing a sense of the local matrices of privilege and class difference, and getting to grips with the multiple lived realities that global Cairo encompasses.

Living with family during the main fieldwork certainly shaped the research experience. For instance, in August 2008 I attended an opposition event at the Journalists' Syndicate in Cairo. While it was ostensibly a memorial service for Dr Abdel Wahhab el-Messiri, the coordinator of the Kifaya movement who had recently passed away, it turned into an opposition event with speeches from the podium. After the memorial service, a number of young people held a protest at the Syndicate's entrance. For me it came as a surprise and, judging by the initial absence of Central Security Forces, it came as such for the authorities, too. I felt a bit intimidated, especially when I remembered that I was carrying my notes, two mobile phones, and a Visa card that served at the period as the economic "lifeline" for my family. I decided to leave and observe the protests along with other city commuters from the other side of the street. Back at home, I wrote:

Were I only responsible for myself, I may have stayed there and also, on different occasions I may have acted otherwise. [...]
But, on the other hand, I realise that my allegiance and feeling of responsibility lies with my family and son, which also feels quite comforting. [My spouse] noted that perhaps the demonstrators don't ask their spouses' permission to participate in demonstrations, or that this doesn't represent an issue within family as the [male] activists take part in any case. This is perhaps an issue I need to look at and, for instance, ask about from 'K' who is married.

On another occasion, in June 2008, I needed a quiet moment to reflect on how the research was going, so I took a methodology book (Bernard 2006) and went for lunch by myself. After a while I took a respite from the book and looked through the window. There were two young girls – one toddler,

the other aged 5 at the most – sitting in ragged clothes on the pavement. Seemingly siblings, the elder was taking care of the toddler, holding her in her arms, cuddling her, combing her hair; while the toddler had an unusually idle, absent and joyless look in her eyes:

I felt so miserable myself, and so privileged, as I had been so desperately skimming through my methodology book and trying to over-stuff myself with a rather tasteless lasagne. What I am to do with my own research-related problems, while there were children like them experiencing everyday life from the level of the street?

These isolated moments illustrate the ways in which, firstly, this thesis has been produced with the help of a number of people, including family, relatives, friends, activists and fellow scholars with whom I have had the opportunity to discuss this research as it has progressed. Secondly, these kinds of personal experiences were at times beneficial in helping me generate new questions and reflect on analysis of the empirical material. For instance, the incident outside the Journalists' Syndicate sensitized me to inquire further – in both interviews and analysis – into the role the family played for young activists. I had hitherto discussed the subject with young women, and heard stories of how some concealed their activism from their families, while others did not, but this experience prompted me to further discuss the issue with the men whom I knew who were either engaged or married. This, in turn, led into examination of the kinds of differential privileges – or, “class differences” – with regards livelihoods and life chances that existed among the activists themselves.

Indeed, my experiences during the materialization of this thesis have far from consisted of a unilinear and progressive process. As Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) remind us, ethnographic research usually involves a lot of improvisation, unexpected turnings and different sets of emotional rides. Although I do not include many auto-ethnographic narratives in this study, reflections on my own positioning and practices of knowledge production have been informative when analysing the empirical materials.

2.1.3 Multiple entanglements

My prior knowledge of Arabic was helpful in getting through daily life and most interviews. In 2008, I took lessons in the Egyptian dialect so as to

become more familiar with the local idiom and expressions although, on some occasions, it felt inappropriate to pursue an interview in Arabic as some “upper class” youth spoke impeccable English. Knowledge of Arabic was, however, vital for connecting with the majority who spoke little English or other foreign languages.

During the pilot trip in 2007, I attended the Cairo Anti-War Conference, an event that had been organized in Cairo since the outbreak of the Iraq war. It was a good opportunity to meet young opposition activists, and with some I have cultivated personal relations ever since. Furthermore, during the later fieldwork periods, they introduced me to others with a “snowball” effect, which informed me of the ways and networks in which different activists were connected to each other.

In contrast to most daily encounters with Egyptians, the young activists with whom I spent time rarely inquired first whether I was Christian or Muslim but, rather, were more interested in my political and ideological affiliations. I, however, did not want to be identified as a strong supporter of any particular group or ideology and at first tried to evade these questions. I soon realized that – in the moral worlds of political commitment that were pregnant with claims to democracy, rights and freedom – it was not possible, desirable or ethical to withhold voicing an opinion on issues that were important to them. Doing so could also easily have been interpreted as a lack of moral values, or that I was not genuinely interested in what they said or did. Therefore I usually gave a short biography of my “activist” past in Leftist (*yasārī*) circles and campaigns in Finland, while emphasizing that I was first and foremost a humanist (*insānī*) and did not belong to any political party; I would add that I wanted to examine as many and different points of view as possible for the purposes of my study. This explanation was in many ways accepted as it provided evidence that I was not indifferent to the issues and values that were important to them. In addition, there was a tacit understanding that we had been at least partially connected through the global networks of solidarity since the turn of the millennium. Discussions on political and group affiliations were in many ways informative and helped me to understand group formation and social interactions among the young activists.

Thus, during fieldwork, I was associated with being a former activist, humanist and non-partisan Leftist. At the same time, it was methodologically necessary to try to maintain good or at least “working” relations with members of different groups, and most people were understanding about my general aim of acquiring as holistic a comprehension as possible of youth activism in the more general sense. During the main fieldwork in

2008, when socializing with young activists, I felt it was inappropriate to voice my own opinions too strongly in the daily debates on, for instance, the role of religion as the source of Egypt's constitution or the arguments over which president had been better for Egypt: Nasser or Sadat. By 2010, I had already acquired a rather dynamic view of their interpersonal tensions, and relations among some were by then estranged for different reasons. As Julia Elyachar (2005: 31-32) reminds us, ethnographers get entangled – unwittingly or not – in the very social networks they are poised to examine. At times I felt socially torn between different expectations and relationships, but these kinds of situations would, again, provide resources for more specific questions and analysis of the relationships among the activists themselves.

In 2008, having conducted a number of interviews, it had also become clear that such exchanges were not “neutral” situations for public political actors. Several people I interviewed had previous experiences with foreign journalists and expressed a wish that I too should publish their names (Onodera 2011b). Their media appearances provided prime opportunities to get political messages and “their story” across. Anwar, a social-liberal activist in his late 20s, told me in November 2010 that “human interest” reporting – of foreign journalists in particular – can often be one-sided and include factual errors. He referred to an article in a US-based newspaper that featured a particular activist, whom we both knew, where it was erroneously claimed that he was the founder of April 6 Youth Movement, one of the main youth movements that would actively participate in the “January 25” uprising two months later. Anwar regarded giving interviews as ‘writing history’ as each statement bears consequences for future audiences wishing to find information on public events. While giving interviews emerged as part and parcel of political activism in itself, he preferred academic research as it usually provides more impartial narratives. For others, the distinction between researchers and journalists was not always so clear, or at least so pertinent. In some cases, our conversations were their first experiences of being interviewed. At times I was assumed to be a foreign journalist and after one interview with Islam, a university student, he asked me: “So, you won’t publish our chat in the Egyptian Gazette, will you?” He was referring to the government’s English-language daily, despite my prior assurances that the interview was for research purposes.

These above reflections underline ambiguities between the differing professional ethics of “safeguarding anonymity” and “protecting sources” which the young opposition activists had to negotiate when dealing with

researchers and journalists alike. Learning about this kind of sensitiveness oriented me, later on, to problematize the interview situations themselves and be more sensitive in analysing some of the claims and arguments that were made during personal interviews.

2.2. EMPIRICAL MATERIALS AND ANALYSIS

This study is based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork which I conducted during four trips to Cairo between 2007 and 2011. As explained above, I conducted the preliminary study in March and April 2007 (3 weeks) which helped me to narrow down the research focus. I gathered most of the empirical material for this study during the main fieldwork between March and December 2008 (10 months). During the subsequent trips in November and December 2010 (3 weeks) and in January and February 2011 (3 weeks) I conducted further participant observation and follow-up interviews. The main empirical material consists of field notes and personal interviews, and my main analytical tool was thematic analysis.

2.2.1. Primary materials: Field notes and personal interviews

My field notes can be divided roughly into three types: (1) descriptions of events, social situations and places; (2) auto-ethnographic reflections on my own experiences and the research process; and (3) a series of “concept papers” on themes that emerged during fieldwork. In early stages of research, I rather frantically transcribed nearly everything that had happened during the day, a process that proved too laborious to sustain; later I focused on addressing the several issues that were tied to youth activism such as everyday events and detailed descriptions of places and situations. I also kept a field log for organizing daily life: meetings, phone calls, missed calls, as well as the prices of different goods and services (Bernard 2006: 392-394). The log also provided a place for jottings. I wrote most of the field notes, jottings, and handwritten interviews onto my laptop in cafeterias, libraries and at home. In both the field notes and the log I used abbreviations for specific persons.

My second collection of empirical materials consists of records of personal interviews. It is in many ways problematic to present the interviews in a strictly categorized way, since I met the respondents on a number of occasions and in different situations, and the daily informal discussions with

them, as well as with others, were usually much more informative along the way. Altogether I interviewed seventy five persons. Fifty five interviews were with young activists, students, volunteers and NGO professionals, who were members of, or volunteered with, a number of civil society initiatives and campaign networks, nine of whom were women.¹¹ The remaining twenty interviews I conducted with older opposition politicians, civil society professionals and academics.

The personal interviews with the young respondents were predominantly semi-structured and took between 30 minutes and four hours. I usually focused on three areas of investigation: how they became involved and interested in politics; their past experiences and what they were currently doing; and what they hoped would happen in the future. We usually met in places chosen by the interviewee, which were mostly public and semi-public spaces in the Greater Cairo area such as cafés, restaurants, street corner, party premises and NGO offices. Some interviews were set up beforehand, others were more impromptu encounters. I began the interviews by introducing myself and explaining the topic and the purpose of my study, that is, PhD research that would later be turned into a book. As it happens, conversations often went off in different directions, and the intended three topics were not always equally addressed. We often compared the differences between Egypt and Finland (or the “West” or Europe) in terms of political freedoms, what it was to be young, and life experiences in general. In 2007 and the early stages of 2008, I used a digital recorder during interviews. It was a practice that I could maintain with some, especially civil society professionals and older opposition politicians, but I later decided to drop it because, first, many young respondents did not want us to record our exchanges and, secondly, it hindered the flow of conversation.

Secondary materials

I have followed a number of news sources both in and outside Egypt throughout the research process. During fieldwork, I developed the daily practice of buying the private nongovernmental newspapers – such as

11 Out of the 55 young respondents, those who identified themselves with a political current, included 13 Leftists (11 men, 2 women), 5 Arab Nationalists (3 men, 2 women), 12 Liberals (9 men, 3 women) and 9 Islamists (7 men, 2 women). This typology is simplified and refers to the time of the interview, as do their campaign or group affiliations between 2007 and 2011, including April 6 Youth, Busla, Committee for the Support of the Families of al-Duweiq, Democratic Left, Egyptian Movement for Change, ElBaradei Campaign, Free Front for Peaceful Change, Front to Defend Egyptian Protesters, Gaza Solidarity Network, Nasserist Thought Club, Popular Committee in Defence of the Lands of Imbaba, Revolutionary Socialists, Solidarity, and Youth for Change.

Al-Badīl, Al-Dustūr, and al-Miṣrī al-Yawm – and the establishment-friendly Al-Ahram. I also occasionally read English language papers, such as Al-Ahram Weekly and Daily News, which catered for the expat community and were often more direct and open in their coverage of current affairs. The social media has also been highly useful in terms of keeping in touch with activists and following the online discussions on Facebook groups and Twitter. Moreover, I took a number of photographs with my mobile phone during fieldwork in Egypt, and it has been at times highly useful to retrospectively “go back” to the situations and, for instance in the case of protests, to determine exactly what the banners said.

In addition, I have also benefited from earlier trips to Cairo, especially a seminar that was organized by the Finnish Institute in the Middle East in Cairo in January 2006. We were given talks by a number of Egyptian scholars and civil society professionals on current affairs, and I have at times returned to these notes. Another similar event was organized by the Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies in Cairo and Alexandria in June 2008, which also included a number of topical lectures by leading Egyptian scholars and publishers. I have also had formal and informal discussions with scholars and Egyptians in Italy, Tunisia, United Kingdom and Finland between 2006 and 2013.

2.2.2. Analysis

When analysing the field notes, I first organized them into a Microsoft One-Note program that allows for a simple lay-out and a search function for large sums of textual and visual data, including field notes, transcriptions, photographs and screen clips of www-pages. I then adopted an open coding practice on different themes, such as daily activities, social contexts and dissent practices, developing the habit of listening to the interviews as part of my everyday life. Both would yield a number of themes on their own which I then balanced by transcribing parts of the interviews, at times fully, while looking for differences and similarities in the empirical material. This, accompanied by further reading on the emerging themes, helped me to cut out certain strands of analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003). At the same time, I have reflected on the ways in which my personal biography and persuasions have shaped how I have conducted this research and arrived at certain analyses (Jackson 1996: 10-15). During the process, I have prioritized ethnographic knowledge – gained through interviews, interactions and shared

experiences with research participants – over a single analytical framework, which has oriented me towards four analytical avenues and their interrelated topics, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

2.3. ON RESEARCH ETHICS

When conducting this research, and finalizing its written output, I have used as my guidance the ethical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (2009). I have tried to safeguard the wellbeing of the respondents to the best of my ability, acknowledging during the different stages of collecting the field notes and personal interviews that they do not only amount to rich empirical data but, more importantly, to sensitive information about the young people's lives, experiences and opinions. The material I have gathered during field research has been at my disposal only. During fieldwork, I secured it on my computer with a finger-mark censor and a password. Back in Helsinki, Finland, I have stored it in my personal database at the server of the University of Helsinki and held personal copies at home. In today's academia, it is increasingly common to establish shared data bases for the social sciences. In Finland, this task is allocated to the Social Science Data Archive at the University of Tampere. For the time being, I have no intention of sharing the empirical materials I have gathered, except for the brochures, leaflets and posters collected during public events, such as Cairo Anti-War Conferences and the coinciding Cairo Social Forums in 2007 and 2008.

In personal interviews, I explained the topic of my study to interviewees and that its goal was the attainment of a PhD degree in the Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland. I also explained that I would not use their real names, or if I did, I would first ask their permission to do so. I expressed clearly that I did not want to pursue topics or issues they did not feel comfortable with, which seldom happened. In a few cases some did not want to discuss certain topics, and others chose not to be interviewed, preferences which I duly respected. During interviews and everyday encounters, I did not disclose what others had told me earlier, although I would at times mention different views that I had heard as a way to enrich the discussions on particular topics and events. At times, at the beginning of an interview, I was pressured to list others with whom I had exchanged views and, in these cases, I would mention famous activists, or the "usual suspects" to whom any foreign researchers might wish to talk. In some cases I chose not

to pursue a particular research strategy during fieldwork, even if it seemed interesting and fruitful, because I was partly responsible for my family's safety during that period of research. I also attended a number of meetings, seminars and conferences, as well as private gatherings, but I have opted out of describing them in detail in cases where my researcher status was unclear. Despite safeguarding their anonymity, I have sent sections of this study to be read by those involved when finalizing the manuscript.

2.3.1. On safeguarding anonymity

The post-Mubarak era has witnessed renewed animosities between, on the one hand, the state authorities and, on the other, some of the young activists and revolutionaries who have continued to protest against the “remnants” of the Mubarak regime since 2011, including military rule, further media restrictions, detentions, imprisonment and even loss of life. This has left many young Cairenes who aspired to attaining greater justice, rights and freedoms, and whom I met and talked to during fieldwork, disillusioned and still lacking a say in the making of a newly emerging polity at the time of writing. In these volatile circumstances that have been rife with unforeseen consequences and political turbulence, I have judged it better to follow the principle of safeguarding the full anonymity of research participants in this thesis, and refer to them with imaginary forenames, and state their age with a difference of +/- 2 years. I have also substituted minor biographical details (e.g. place of residence) without making a major difference to the respondents' profiles. This choice is not unproblematic, not the least because during fieldwork many expressed the wish that I publish their real identities: justifying my choice not to do so perhaps requires further explanation.

During Mubarak's late presidency, several young Cairenes who engaged in opposition politics went to great lengths to hide their identities from State Security services (Onodera 2011b) who monitored their daily lives, actions and communication, and kept personal files that could potentially haunt them for the rest of their lives. Others, especially young women, were equally, if not exceptionally, conscientious about concealing their political dissent from their families. Some resorted to using a variety of different nicknames on the Internet's social networking sites, or in the family, neighbourhood and different friendship circles, and at the university and workplace. For others, being as public as possible was a choice from the beginning. Writing on weblogs and taking political stances as identifiable persons potentially

provided some safety against the risks involved in contentious politics. For instance, to be a renowned “activist” – the newly emergent and enigmatic figure in Egypt’s public life in the 2000s – could prove beneficial in cases of police detention, and help in attracting media coverage and acts of solidarity in Egypt and abroad. Furthermore, acting in one’s own name bordered on an act of defiance; it was a statement that one did not admit to doing anything wrong and, hence, had nothing to hide. Thus, “becoming public” often marked an important watershed in the activists’ life trajectories. Anonymity was, however, rarely an either/or issue but a daily practice of selective self-exposure at the carefully managed boundaries of one’s public self, and an act of self-positioning in the local moral worlds of courage, resistance and sacrifice.

As an inter-related issue, the anonymity of research subjects is hard to maintain in a limited social setting and, at times, has countered my aspirations to discuss certain themes at a sufficient level of detail. In the late Mubarak era, the circles of young prodemocracy activists in Cairo were, after all, a rather close-knit community, albeit one that was expanding and also prone to internal conflicts. That almost “everybody knew everybody” – including friends and foes – bore testimony to the limited space allowed for political opposition under Mubarak’s authoritarian rule. However, an ethnographic study aiming at empirical accuracy and “thick description” of the minutiae of daily life faces difficulties without disclosing at least a minimum of biographical detail such as age, gender, marital status, education, profession, family background or membership in a specific political group. These details have been important in placing and validating the analysis in its rightful context. However, when discussing the formation of small youth-based groups and, for instance, the young activists’ life trajectories, even a small combination of biographical detail could make him or her recognizable. In sum, the issue of anonymity is in many ways problematic when studying public actors in the context of ongoing contentious politics, and places conditions on validating analysis that is based on observations in limited social settings. I have however followed this course, despite the risks of reproducing the silences of specific persons and groups about which El-Mahdi and Abaza, in their own ways, have cautioned us, as discussed above.

3 THE MAKING OF GENERATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

On November 28, 2010, I followed the unfolding of the first day of parliamentary elections at the Huda Sha'rawi Elementary School in Doqqi, Giza. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and the liberal Wafd Party had gathered at the main entrance. Some had waited vainly for three hours to get to the ballot box. The gates remained shut. "The liars will have their pay on the Day of Resurrection!" shouted an elderly woman veiled in *khimār*, like most of the Muslim Brotherhood's female supporters, wagging her finger at members of the electoral committee on the other side of a high concrete wall. In contrast, Wafd supporters were less audacious and mainly men of different ages, wearing uniform T-shirts and caps printed with the party logo. During the period I spent at the scene, it became evident that opposition candidates were not being given a chance at this particular ballot box which belonged to the NDP candidate Amal Uthman, the longstanding Minister of Social Affairs in Mubarak's government who took charge of civil society activities in the 1980s and 1990s (Kassem 2004b: 66-69).

As the crowd swelled outside the gates, a grey-haired teacher came to the fore in a fierce show of frustration and bravery. He held his daughter's hand and shouted: "How dare you! Now that my daughter has come of age, I wanted to take her to vote, to practice her constitutional rights for the first time in her life, but look at you, you closed the doors in front of us!" As soon as he had thundered away, a middle-aged woman approached me and explained that the gates remained shut for regrettable but legitimate bureaucratic reasons. I sensed she saw in me a foreign journalist, or an electoral observer of some kind, but before we had even entered into conversation, a young veiled woman pulled me away by the shoulder and whispered deci-

sively: “Don’t talk to her. Don’t you see she’s working for them!” I recognized her as Mona (24), an April 6 Youth activist, whom I had met before on a few occasions. On voting day she had crossed Cairo with her group of friends to an area far from her home neighbourhood in North-Eastern Cairo, where where her official voting area was.

For Mona, voting was out of the question in the present circumstances: parliamentary politics belonged to a distant and fundamentally corrupt sphere, and she did not share with the teacher any expectations that casting a vote would have impact. Indeed, she anticipated that the results would be rigged, as elections had been all her life. For Mona and her friends it appeared more worthwhile to act as self-organized observers, along with most young prodemocracy activists on that day, and to challenge the virtual ban on journalists and news media in voting places. In Doqqi, they presented themselves as locals or as curious passers-by who had casually paused in their activities to see what was going on. In the case of irregularities or, rather, the normalcy of electoral “fraud” – as there was at this polling station – they passed the news on through available channels, mainly their mobile phones. Several civil society initiatives, in turn, compiled such information from diverse parts of the country, issuing it as press releases, reports and online mapping graphics.¹²

Effectively, this continuous stream of information from individual observers on polling stations amounted to the main alternative coverage of the contested parliamentary elections of 2010. It documented numerous cases of voters and press being denied entry to the voting premises, of voters being bribed or intimidated, and of violent clashes between rival candidates’ supporters in contested constituencies. The NDP gained over 90% of the seats in the People’s Assembly after the prodemocracy movements and opposition parties had either boycotted the elections or rejected, like Wafd and the Muslim Brotherhood, the few seats they gained after the first voting round. Thus was constructed the NDP-majority parliament in anticipation of the 2011 presidential elections that never took place due to the historic turbulences that followed less than two months later.

The personal and political roles Mona and her friends adopted in November 2010 were not inconsequential. These were young women in their early 20s, observing the electoral process in the guise of local passers-by: in short, political dissidents attempting to search for and produce alternative

12 The largest civil society formations to compile this information were the Egyptian Alliance for Electoral Monitoring and the Independent Coalition for Electoral Monitoring.

information as a way to evaluate the legitimacy of the election results. Their political engagements were contingent upon a decade-long process whereby young people became the most dynamic members of the prodemocracy movements in Egypt.

* * *

In this chapter, I argue that generation and generational consciousness are useful categories for understanding the emergence of youth movements in the 2000s.¹³ Thus, I largely ascribe to the claims that, even prior to the ousting of Mubarak from power, a certain generational consciousness was in the making among young Egyptians (Bayat and Herrera 2010b: 24; Lei Sparre 2013). The youth movements that had emerged by the mid-2000s, mostly on the fringes of larger processes of contentious politics, were important precedents in this respect. They created new modes of being political, and found ways to resist socialization into the conventions and formal, person-centred bureaucracies of the established political opposition. A closer inspection of these processes, however, reveals intergenerational dynamics – both conflicts and solidarities – in public political life. In this light, the so-called “1970s generation” of former student activists and segments of Egypt’s human rights movement provided important precedents and practical support for the young protagonists of the 2000s, although the degree of autonomy the latter created for themselves was not easily attained but, rather, involved constant acts of legitimizing and making one’s self in public life. In this vein, a phenomenological approach to consciousness as an *intentional* act (in that it always refers to things, events and objects in the world) helps to unravel the fact that both “generation” (*jīl*) and “youth” (*shabāb*) are not only analytical concepts but also locally used emic notions that inform the ways in which the young make sense of their place in the world. “Generation” provided them with the shared sense of destiny or, rather, the lack thereof, while “youth” provided a semantic vehicle on which they strove to load reinvigorated and subversive content.

Consequently, in the first section I discuss the concept of generation and the sense of an absence of future prospects that was shared by young Egypt-

13 Parts of this chapter draw on my article “The kifaya generation: Politics of change among youth in Egypt” published in *Suomen Antropologi: The Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 34(4): 44-64 (Onodera 2009) and “Raise your head high, you’re an Egyptian!” Youth, politics, and citizen journalism in Egypt” published in *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology* 5(2): 1-22 (Onodera 2011a).

tians at the period – including both those who were involved in politics and those who never participated in public dissent. Then, in the second section, I discuss the emergence of oppositional youth movements through two of its most vocal formations in the 2000s, namely, Youth for Change and April 6 Youth. In the third section, I examine the ways in which their members saw their place in the generational dynamic, and strove for greater autonomy in order to do and experience politics on their own terms.

3.1. GENERATIONAL APPROACH

Generation has been suggested since the 1990s as a neglected analytic for discussing the intersection of social cleavages such as social class and gender, thereby serving as a basis for collective identity formation and a source of social change (Edmunds and Turner 2002a, 2002b; Bayat and Herrera 2010b). My interest in the issue emerged from encounters with political activists themselves, both young and old, men and women. The ‘youth question’ was increasingly debated in Egypt’s public life in the 2000s and, in this context, the concept of generation, or *gīl* (pl. *agyāl*) in Egyptian Arabic, played a constitutive role. Young activists rose to public prominence as active members of the wider prodemocracy movement in the mid-2000s and, at the latest, in the aftermath of the opposition movement’s call for a general strike on April 6, 2008. Several analysts and public commentators commented on the rise of the “Internet generation” or “Facebook youth”, sometimes ridiculing the latter as irrelevant and, at other times, attributing to them a greater socio-political role than even the protagonists themselves necessarily conceived of having. Importantly, many young activists referred habitually to “we, the youth” (*iḥnā shabāb*) and “our generation” (*gīlnā*) in their everyday talk and political rhetoric, thereby indicating both a distinct and in many ways disenfranchised social location in the present as well as willing subjects with a legitimate right to influence the future on their own terms.

3.1.1. Generations and social change

The sociological study of generations is largely attributed to the work of the German sociologist Karl Mannheim (Pilcher 1994: 482-484; Turner 2002). In his essay “The Problem of Generations”, Mannheim suggests that generations should not be regarded merely as age cohorts but more as a function of

the prevailing mood in society, encapsulating certain attitudes, actions and worldview at a particular point in history (Mannheim 1952: 276-319), and produced by the sharing of formative experiences of rapid systemic change and political turmoil like war, famine and economic depression (Edmunds and Turner 2002a). For Mannheim, mere historical contemporaneity does not, however, suffice to transform generations into sources and actors of historical change. In addressing this problem, he distinguished between “generation as location” and “generation as actuality”, and argues that the former, which largely consists of an age cohort, “only contains potentialities which may materialize, or be suppressed, or become embedded in other social forces and manifest themselves in modified form” (ibid.: 303). In contrast, the “generation as actuality”, which Turner (2002) terms active generation, has the potential to develop into an engine of social change, as individuals are bound together through concrete social ties and shared experiences, and collectively participate in the making of their common destiny through existing social, political and intellectual currents (Mannheim 1952: 303-304).

In other words, rapid systemic changes and traumatic events in society produce formative experiences for age groups, whose members share a generational consciousness of their situation and resist socialization and acculturation into the given dominant cultural and social conventions. The members of active generations are not necessarily homogenous; indeed, they are more likely to be internally divided into different subgroups, which Mannheim terms “generation units”, bound together by response to their generational location. Thus, there can be any number of such units within a generation that can be, and often are, antagonistic towards one another (ibid.: 304-312). In studying the political cultures of different generations, Turner (2002) makes an additional analytic division between active and strategic generations. While both can make contributions to social change, strategic generations gain moral or hegemonic leadership in society and monopolize social and cultural resources, and thus restrict the opportunities and life chances of members of following generations (e.g. Edmunds and Turner 2002a: 16-18).

In recent years, Middle East scholars have increasingly underscored the analytic of generations as a beneficial vantage point to locate agency in the processes of social, political, and cultural change (Erlich 2000; Whidden 2005; Herrera 2009; Lei Sparre 2013). Haggai Erlich, in his study of the student movements of the mid-1930s, goes so far as to argue that “tensions and conflicts between ‘political generations’ provided a main sociopolitical

dimension in the making [of] the 20th century Arab and Islamic history” (Erich 2000: 48). During the colonial period, young Egyptians were at the forefront of nationalist struggles for independence, including the popular uprising against the British in 1919 (Whidden 2005). They also engaged in new anti-colonial movements, such as the Young Men’s Muslim Association, Young Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist-oriented Egyptian Movement for National Liberation, so as to channel their grievances against monarchic rule and British colonial domination (Botman 1991: 116-128). According to Erlich, the nationalist student movements of the mid-1930s generated a political generation on the basis of shared formative experiences in the face of rapid social changes and political upheavals: in the case he studied, the Great Depression and the fury of educated middle classes at the failures of local parliamentarism to advance the project of anti-imperialist struggle and national liberation. During the interwar period urban and educated middle-class youth would also form the basis for Egypt’s modernist cultured classes that were actively involved in the fields of cultural production, public life and state administration (Ryzova 2005). Moreover, the Free Officers in 1952, including the future presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, were recent graduates from the Military Academy, and emerged as a strategic generation and the post-independence ruling elite (Migdal 2001: 76).

Before the 2000s, the largest youth mobilization took place in Egypt’s universities in the 1970s where student politics were already vitalized by the national defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967. It prompted wide-scale student mobilization against the Israeli occupation of Sinai and the Gaza strip, hitherto under Egyptian supervision, as well as the West Bank and Golan Heights. Ahmed Abdalla, a student union leader in the early 1970s, explains that the “1967 generation” was constituted of those who came of age under Nasser’s presidency and emerged after the national defeat at the hands of Israel as a result of young Egyptians’ disillusionment with the “world view and the ideas and concepts they had been brought up on and had cherished” (Abdalla 2000: 71). In the period between the Six-Day War of 1967 and the October War of 1973 with Israel, student politics were dominated by Marxist and Arab Nationalist tendencies but when Anwar Sadat became president in 1970 he released thousands of young Islamists from prison to counter the Leftist dominance at universities (Wickham 2002: 95-97; MERIP 1973). Sadat’s *infitāḥ* policies of economic liberalization demonstrated a major shift from the Nasser-era goal of national self-reliance and a substantial public economy towards the principles of a

free market economy. The gradual pursuit of foreign capital, accompanied by simultaneous cuts in state subsidies and rising prices in staples such as flour, rice, sugar, petrol and cooking gas, worsened the living standards of most Egyptians, culminating in the “Bread Intifada” (*intifādat al-khubz*) in January 1977 when students joined protesters from Cairo’s popular (*sha‘bī*) neighbourhoods on Tahrir Square, as similar demonstrations took place in other cities (Farag 2007). This sequence of events ended in scores of people being killed and injured by military forces. Two years later, in 1979, Sadat signed the Camp David accords, widely contested by Egyptians as a “sell out” which effectively cut diplomatic ties with other Arab countries until 1989. Before being assassinated by Islamic Jihad on October 6, 1981, Sadat ordered the arrest of some 1,500 of his political opponents, ranging from Communists through Nasserists to Islamists, whom Mubarak released upon becoming president; many of these later assumed important roles in Egypt’s public political life.

Indeed, during Mubarak’s presidency, the so-called “1970s generation” (*jīl al-sab‘īnāt*) of former student activists gradually dispersed into various areas of public life, including publishing, trade union politics, opposition parties as well as vocal civil society formations such as Egypt’s human rights advocacy groups, and, since the turn of the millennium, the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) and the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya) (Browsers 2007). Thus, although an important dynamism developed between the 1970s generation and the young activists – an issue I shall examine more closely below – it is important to bear in mind that the young Egyptians of the first decade of the 2000s grew into maturity in different historical circumstances.

3.1.2. “Silent but with much to say”

At the very outset of my fieldwork, I became painstakingly aware of the marginalised – if not deviant – positions the young prodemocracy activists took in terms of the sentiments of acquiescence that prevailed in public life. Meeting with and befriending a number of “normal” young Egyptians, who distanced themselves from anything “political” (*siyāsī*), helped me to understand the practices of public dissent and the dissident sensibilities which the young activists promoted in public life. While sharing the latter’s level of education, social backgrounds and anti-regime attitudes, the majority of young Egyptians I met during fieldwork in Cairo, Alexandria and

elsewhere, could never imagine themselves participating in acts of public political dissent. Layla (25) – a young female professional with no experience in politics – presented perhaps the most extreme views of the perils and the lack of future prospects she felt that she and her generation were experiencing. By summer 2008, when I met her on a number of occasions, she had graduated from the University of Ain Shams in Cairo. After university, she had a few short-term job contracts, but eventually found “clean” office employment in the private sector with a relatively high salary of 600 L.E. per month. She was, however, not satisfied with her job and took a number of “self-study” courses, especially in IT and human resources, which were vital additions in a CV to compete in the private labour market.

Her daily life revolved around work and the home. Being unmarried, she lived with her family in a middle-class, yet crowded, neighbourhood in Giza, saving for the future. The rare occasions when she went out for reasons other than work comprised meetings with friends and colleagues in a café, looking for an apartment for her soon-to-be married sibling, or watching a blockbuster movie with friends in shopping-malls like the luxurious City Stars in Nasr City. Much of her “free” time was spent helping her mother with domestic chores – cleaning, cooking, washing, etc. – in which her brother never participated. She complained that “today’s generation” – referring to young men in their late teens and early 20s, including her brother – have major flaws in that they have not learned to take responsibility for themselves or for others, they do not have role models and nor do they have real goals in their lives. Her vision of society in the future was extremely grim, to the point that she had stopped watching the news and stopped a once daily practice of buying the al-Dustūr newspaper. Alongside pursuing a career, she found escape in reading a huge number of novels.

Despite the privilege of having a well-paying job, Layla told me that, during her lifetime, the future prospects for young Egyptians such as herself had gone “from bad to worse” – to the point of “non-existence”:

There is no youth condition to start with (*ḥālat al-shabāb khalāṣ*)!
We have lost our rights, and our dreams have been stolen. Our generation blames the generation that preceded us (*gīl illī ‘ablinā*) for remaining silent although the country was getting worse by the day, the government is now more oppressive, and the country, even its lands, is sold to businessmen and foreign companies. The generation before us destroyed it but keeps on holding on their high positions.

Her grim views of her generational location, if not destiny, were not dissimilar to the many young activists I spoke with during fieldwork. Tariq (26), who had been an active member in the Kifaya movement, bemoaned to me in July 2008 about the dire conditions through which Egypt's youth were navigating, only to discover that the trajectories of social mobility and life to which they aspired were beyond reach:

Egyptian youth are under enormous pressure. For 20, 25 years now the generations of youth have minded their own business and kept away from public activities (*lam yithakkū li-l-'amal al-'ām*). What they all dream about is that they graduate from university and get a job... [even] a low-paid one, just anywhere, and try to live their lives. But very soon they discover that they are unable to work, that they are unable to live.

Islam (23), a student at al-Azhar University, explicated similar stories of his generation's predicament. An aspiring author, he had expressed his views, mainly in the form of sarcastic short stories, on his personal weblog online and by August 2008, when I interviewed him, he had gathered a small but devoted following. As a literary person, he resorted to the Rubayat of Salah Jahin – one of Egypt's foremost colloquial poets – to describe the current state of today's youth in Egypt, as he experienced it:

anā shāb lākin 'umrī walā 'alf 'ām
I am a thousand years, yet I am young

waḥīd walākin bayna ḍulū'ī zahām
Alone, yet in my heart lives a throng

khāyif walākin khawfi minnī anā
Afraid and knowing it's myself I fear

akhrus walākin qalbī malyān kalām
Silent but with much to say¹⁴

14 Translation by Nehad Salem (Jahin 1996: 11).

Despite their different personal trajectories, Layla, Tariq and Islam had very similar views of the state of their generation, pointing to the shared sense of the impossibility of living the lives they wish to live and the blind alley down which they saw no reasonable alternatives. Layla and Tariq touch on an important dimension of their shared generational consciousness: Egyptian youth were experiencing a deep contradiction between, on the one hand, life aspirations that stem from middle class sensibilities in relation to what they feel they are due and their expectations as to lifestyle, livelihood and the prospect of being happy, and, on the other, narrowing prospects for attaining them. Their views echo what several observers have suggested through survey-based studies and in-depth interviews with young Egyptians of the period. For instance, Herrera (2006b) observes a similar sense of powerlessness and transference among youth from the urban middle classes which, she notes, “theoretically constitutes the backbone of the modern nation”:

They want to feel useful, to earn a livelihood, find love, have a home and build a family. While seemingly simple desires, these goals for the most part are hopelessly out of reach. There is an overwhelming sentiment of “being stuck,” of not knowing how to get to the future, of facing insurmountable obstacles.

Herrera (*ibid.*) further observes that these young people exhibit strong feelings of social injustice and hampered future lives:

Many respondents allude to the fact that, while they are alive, they do not feel they are living; they do not possess what they consider a life. Living would require certain conditions of freedom, justice, opportunity and respect which they find largely absent in their lives. These young people express simple desires for individual fulfilment: those of stability, love, family, employment, and housing and, to a lesser extent professional satisfaction. Life then begins with justice and the ability to live a dignified present that can lead to a stable future. For from justice will follow opportunities and the genesis of change.

In a similar vein, Assaad and Barsoum (2007: 29) suggest that the majority of young Egyptians in the 2000s refrained from public “high-level” politics. Students feel themselves excluded from decision making processes

that affect their lives and, thus, many have “become cynical and unwilling to participate in what they perceive to be a closed system”. Young graduates also have highly negative attitudes towards the state and its paramount security services:

Social disparities, widening gaps between rich and poor, a sense of limited future prospects given high unemployment rates among graduates, and the difficulties in forming families create a general sense that the system is corrupt and caters only to privileged elite. Besides, for many youths, the main contact with the state is through the police, who are widely considered to be hostile and needlessly violent. (Ibid.)

Still at university, Layla witnessed a number of student protests that were mostly organized by young Muslim Brothers during the 2nd Palestinian intifada (2000-2001) and the US-led war in Iraq (2003). At times the protesters directed attention to Egypt’s internal predicaments and, in particular, to the presence of State Security that had dominated different aspects of student life at Egypt’s universities since the turbulent 1970s (Shehata 2008: 3-4). She and her friends had considered the student protesters and, later, the anti-Mubarak protesters on Cairo’s streets “crazy people” (*magānīn*); the real and only result of their actions was to beg trouble from the authorities: “They are just shouting at the wall, their voices do not carry (*ṣawṭhum mish biyawṣal*). Actually, I hope that their voices are not heard [by the authorities], because if they were, it would make the situation even worse!”

The difference between Layla, on the one hand, and Tariq and Islam, on the other, is that the latter participated in youth movements that emerged in Egypt’s public life during the 2000s. Tariq, coming from an already politicized family, would be further politicized during the 2005 presidential elections in the ranks of Youth for Change. In 2008, Islam, for his part, would become an occasional participation in a then nascent movement called April 6 Youth.

3.2. EMERGENCE OF YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN THE 2000S

In the 2000s, the youth movements emerged on the fringes of larger processes of contentious politics. As I have already discussed in the Introduction, a new “culture of protesting” began to emerge based on the experiences

of the popular mobilizations in support of the 2nd Palestinian intifada in 2000-01 and, in 2003, against the US-led Iraq war. Although these instances provided many young Egyptians, including school children, with their first experiences of public protesting, it was not until 2005 that the young organized themselves along generational lines in the prodemocracy movement, beyond the contours of party politics or university campuses. In this section, I will consider two youth movements which were important predecessors in this respect, namely, Youth for Change and April 6 Youth.

3.2.1. Kifaya youth: setting a precedent

During fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, the majority of young opposition activists identified with the innovation that characterizes Youth for Change (*shabāb min ajl al-taghyīr*) (Onodera 2009). While functioning as the semi-official “youth wing” of the Kifaya movement, despite close ties and constant negotiations it remained in the main an independent group. It was initiated in 2005 under the auspices of the Socialist Research Centre in Giza but soon encompassed a variety of partisan and nonpartisan members from across the political spectrum with direct links to both formal and unlicensed political parties associated with Kifaya, namely the liberal Ghad (Tomorrow), neo-Nasserist Karama (Dignity), and leftist Islamist Amal (Labour) parties and, to a lesser degree, centrist Islamist Wasat (Centre) and Nasserist parties and the Trotskyist Revolutionary Socialists. The majority of members were so-called independents (*mustaqilliyīn*), including university students, young professionals and the unemployed. Their claims to “independence” were relative in the sense that while they rejected association with existing formal organizations, such as political parties, they ascribed, to varying degrees, to ideological trends: Leftist, Liberal, Arab Nationalist, and a few Islamists. While exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, Youth for Change activists themselves estimate that membership was about 500, with 50-100 core activists in Cairo. Members were mostly well-educated, unmarried men in their early 20s with family backgrounds in the urbanized middle classes. Despite prevailing social norms that discourage the participation of young women in public protests, Youth for Change attracted a considerable number who came from wealthier and more liberal family backgrounds than their male peers.

Youth for Change gained public prominence after May 25, 2005, the date of the referendum on Mubarak’s constitutional amendment (Article 76) that,

in principle, would allow multiple candidates in the coming presidential elections. Several opposition movements, including the Kifaya movement, called for a boycott of the referendum, a day that came to be called “Black Wednesday” due to the violent attacks mounted on protesters and passers-by by the police and plain-clothes “thugs” (*balṭagiyya*) who also sexually harassed three women at the Journalists’ Syndicate in Cairo. Youth for Change swiftly initiated a string of protests around the Greater Cairo area. On June 15, 2005, its members, especially the blogger-activists, played key roles in organizing a successful protest in front of the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab which reveres the memory of Zeinab, Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter and patron saint of Cairo where they appropriated the popular belief that by dusting the shrine’s premises one can demand justice against a wrongdoer. A week after the “brooming event”, the young activists joined a similar candle-lit vigil by St. Mary’s Church in Old Cairo. They sometimes coordinated these kinds of street performances with the Kifaya movement and other movements “for change”, as well as parallel initiatives such as The Street is Ours and Shayfeenkum (“We are watching you”).

Youth for Change also promoted the innovation of “rapid protests” in the run-up to the presidential elections. They assembled in popular areas of Cairo – such as Nahya on August 21, and Rod al-Farag on August 26, 2005 – for a mere 5-30 minutes at a time. “It was like guerrilla tactics in urban warfare,” a former member and secular-leftist blogger Hafiz (28) remembers, since public assembly of more than five persons was prohibited: “pioneer activists” first made sure that the area was safe from security control, and “minders” watched their actions from a distance. The exact location was kept a secret until the last moment when organizers escorted others there personally or through mobile phones. At times, the protesters aimed to talk to local residents and passers-by about their daily hardships and encourage them to join the wider pro-reform campaign. Youth for Change activists especially argued for connecting the somewhat abstract, Kifaya-movement demands for constitutional democracy, freedom and human rights with pressing socioeconomic issues such as unemployment, high prices, poor housing and deteriorating services.¹⁵

15 These tactics refer to what is called in social movement theory “frame bridging” since, as Gunning and Baron put it, “Youth for Change activists recognised that the masses would not be mobilized unless they saw the link between their daily concerns and the toppling of Mubarak” (Gunning and Baron 2013: 56). For example, the slogans of Youth for Change in the popular quarter of Nahya, Giza, in August 2005, are indicative of this form of articulating political demands with socioeconomic needs. They included: “O Mubarak, in the name of seven million unemployed, your candidacy is invalid!”, “Down with Mubarak!”, “Boycott the elections!”, “Mubarak’s rule is invalid!”, and;

Compared with the elder opposition politicians and movement elites, Youth for Change members operated more through interpersonal networks, meeting in a variety of places (e.g. coffee houses, parties and NGO offices) and communicating through emails and blogs. Indeed, they were more attuned to the use of the latest communication technologies which proved to be important tools in organizing popular opposition to the National Democratic Party and President Mubarak in the summer of 2005. The young activists distributed protest calls via SMS messages, web-banners and email lists, as well as streaming video clips from demonstrations and confrontations with the police (occasionally captured by national private press) to international human rights organizations and media outlets such as Human Rights Watch and the Washington Post. They also drew on vernacular cultural resources as well as locally rooted grievances to create new strategies of political action, deliberately using the Egyptian dialect in banners, leaflets and web-based communications. They distanced themselves from literary Classical Arabic – the official language of the state as well as religion, giving the air of formality to everyday conversations – which many Egyptians regard as an obstacle to their participation in the political realm (Haeri 2003: 151).

Said (34), a Revolutionary Socialist, who for a period acted as Youth for Change's general coordinator and, consequently, represented the group in the Kifaya movement's Coordination Committee, recalls that mobilization tactics of direct street action remained a contested issue between the young members and some of the Kifaya movement's older leadership. His argument, which echoed that of many of his peers, was that:

...you have to go to popular areas (*manāṭiq sha'biyya*) and mobilize citizens there, and engage yourselves in their daily struggles (*ma'ārikhum al-yawmiyya*)... that you, really, engage yourself in their battle (*tashtabik fī mawqa'athum*). Then, follow them up so that they will one day participate in the struggle of your own.

In late March 2007, Said had just been released from detention due to campaigning for a national boycott of the referendum on constitutional amendments – drafted by the ruling NDP – a week after it was passed in Parliament. Although Youth for Change had by then been largely dis-

“Enough! Rising prices... Water pollution... Dictatorship... Bread queues...” Source: <http://www.norayounis.com/2005/8/23> <Accessed 23.6.2008>

banded, he defended the same stance of direct action and drew on the common euphemism of the “street” (*shāri‘*) in reference to popular sentiments:

The street will join us only when it knows that we participate in its struggle and its economic and social demands such as the local residents’ daily struggle over a loaf of bread (*lu‘mat al-‘īsh*) and pay (*murattab*), or getting the needed clothing and books for their children at school.

Said maintained that the “political events” (*iḥtifālāt siyāsiyya*) under the rhetoric of “towards democracy” or the periodic protests calling for the downfall of Mubarak in downtown Cairo would not suffice to build trust between the prodemocracy movements and their wider publics. While his stance on public mobilization tactics was poignantly Trotskyist in its basis in Marxist analysis of social change, his frustration at the conventions of opposition politics – such as indoor seminars, confined protests in downtown Cairo, and the use of established news media channels – was a view I encountered with most former members of Youth for Change. This view also echoed the lesson many activists had learned from their personal engagements in the 2000s: in order to build up a critical mass against Mubarak it was vital to relocate unlicensed protests away from the conventional protest sites at the city centre. Although Kifaya movement leaders at times disagreed with direct street actions, they would join in Youth for Change activities once they had proved successful. Before voting day on September 7, 2005, the youth wanted to organize a number of localized protests which would then march and join one another on Tahrir Square. As one member remembered:

We wanted to make a big demonstration but Kifaya refused, and said it’s too risky, because we kept having reports from the Ministry of Interior that anyone trying to this will be collected and put in trucks and into detention, and it seemed like it’s totally going to be the case. But still we insisted, went out to the streets, and had one of the biggest demonstrations.

The voting day marked the peak of protest activities, while an estimated 10,000 protesters joined the anti-Mubarak rally: a “big number” by Egyptian standards. Several secular opposition parties boycotted the elections along with the Kifaya movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood won

an unprecedented 88 parliamentary seats (19%). Nonetheless, the State of Emergency was renewed, once again, in May of the following year, while the government was preparing widely contested anti-terrorism laws to eventually replace the emergency legislation. New constitutional amendments that helped to secure the NDP victory in 2010 parliamentary elections were passed through the People's Assembly, and then a referendum was held in March 2007, when several opposition parties and groups boycotted the ballots, and when Said and some of his activist friends were briefly detained.

In the late 2000s, the experiences of Youth for Change circulated as individually and collectively memorized narratives of collective action, resistance and consequent disillusionment. The 2005 elections reinstated Mubarak as president for his fifth six-year term in office, and the NDP retained its overwhelming majority in Parliament. In the aftermath of the 2005 Egyptian elections and the Islamist Hamas' victory in Palestinian general elections in early 2006, the foreign press and strategic allies like the US State Department gave less attention to democratic reform in Egypt, while the Ministry of Interior increased restrictions on public protesting. During the "Judges' Crisis" (*azmat al-quḍā*) in spring 2006, Youth for Change activists mounted their final wave of public actions in response to allegations by two judges that the parliamentary elections were fundamentally "flawed" (El-Mahdi 2009: 99-100; Said 2007; Bernard-Maugiron 2009). As the government took action against the judges, public debate expanded to encompass the judges' right to supervise elections which had been in place since 2000 and, more broadly, the independence of the judiciary in the face of encroaching executive powers. In April and May 2006, Youth for Change staged solidarity protests in front of the Judges Club in Cairo. The police arrested some 60 of its members for periods ranging from a couple of days to several months although many of the detainees did not belong to political parties and were simply disillusioned by the lack of moral and practical support from older opposition leaders.

The spring of 2006 was busy with collective protest actions, but the period also restructured, in an important way, social networks among the young activists themselves. For some, the extended detentions in shared cells fostered new ties of friendship and solidarity between, for instance, secular-leftist activists and Muslim Brothers. They shared food, mobile phones, books and other utilities and, in short, endured a collective experience of imprisonment. For others, the imprisonment came to represent an overpowering personal crisis, especially when it involved experiences of

physical and psychological violence during interrogations. Some walked out extremely disappointed in their fellow activists who, at a time of crisis when solidarity is of prime value, chose to disown them on grounds of political and personal differences. At these particular junctures, the only persons to be trusted were their closest friends, family and human rights lawyers.

After the Judges' Crisis, Youth for Change members grew disillusioned with the purpose of protest activity and lost heart due to the strengthened security constraints over street activities. The group's internal organization had also become a contested issue between partisan and nonpartisan young people as the latter remained somewhat uninterested in ideological strife and competition for various committee positions within the group itself. After the group's disintegration, the partisan sector refocused its efforts on various arenas provided by established networks and personal contacts during their involvement in the prodemocracy movement. Some have joined, or returned to, existing political parties and groups such as the Karama Party, Amal Party, Democratic Front Party and Revolutionary Socialists. The nonpartisan started working in private firms, newspapers and civil society organizations or focused on their own campaign initiatives; others distanced themselves from public politics altogether, choosing to pursue their studies and careers or prioritizing their new responsibilities as parents. The majority of occasional participants, as one activist recalled in 2008, "simply vanished". Another disengaged former member also mentioned that his personal involvement in protest actions effectively cost him his small trade and created difficulties in renting an apartment due to records kept by the security services.

Thus, by the time of my fieldwork in Egypt in 2007 and 2008, it was clear that the main fronts of political and social struggle operated beyond the streets and public spaces of Cairo. Thousands of textile workers had mounted massive and successful strikes against the Misr Spinning and Weaving-company in the Delta city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra (Beinin and Hamalawy 2007); similar strike movements had emerged to demand pay rises and allowances in other industrial cities, such as Tanta and Helwan; farmers were mobilized in protest movements against large landowners and local authorities in the Nile Delta (Bush 2009); local residents, for instance in Alexandria, Cairo, and Giza, had resisted their forced evictions; and university professors and students were organizing their own initiatives (Dessouki and Galal 2007; Geer 2013). In the summer of 2007, various locally-based action movements arose to demand clean water and sanitation services from the authorities while, in December 2007, real estate tax col-

lectors staged a successful ten-day strike – the first strike by public sector workers since Egypt’s independence.

3.2.2. The strike day as “a turning point”

The single most important event that rekindled the interest of young activists in public politics was the popular uprising by textile workers and local residents in al-Mahalla al-Kubra on April 6-7, 2008. It was preceded by public calls by various opposition groups for a simultaneous general strike and nationwide solidarity actions, against a backdrop of worsening socio-economic conditions and the ongoing “bread crisis” that, for many, demonstrated Egypt’s failure to adjust to fluctuations in the globalized market economy. The prices of wheat and other daily commodities had skyrocketed during the preceding months, and people by the dozen were either injured or killed in daily clashes in front of subsidized bakeries. The political opposition and private press evoked memories of the Bread Intifada of 1977. Importantly, the strike event also encouraged former Youth for Change members as well as previously demobilized youth into public political dissidence.

On April 6, 2008, as the Central Security Forces filled central Cairo with troops and wagons, Huda (18) – a veiled university student – was sitting in an *ahwa* (pl. *ahāwī*, a popular coffee shop) with her new Facebook friends. Like many of her peers, she had no prior experience of political activities but was deeply touched by the bread crisis and stories of women and children fighting over a loaf. She had come to witness a popular uprising on Cairo’s streets but her experiences fell short of expectations. Police officers forced her and her companions into a wagon and subsequently interrogated her for fifteen hours at a local police station. After the initial shock, she simply could not believe the extent of control and injustice inflicted upon them. Her immediate response was to pray for God “to take me out”. Upon her release, she returned home a new person: “It opened my eyes, and I loved Egypt more than ever before, everything about it, even the traffic jams (*zaḥma*).” She did not subscribe to a political ideology or party: “I am just an Egyptian girl who loves Egypt, the greatest country in the world – and who believes that change is possible even if one does it alone.”

According to prevalent norms within society, young and unmarried women were – and are – expected to participate in domestic work and, to say the least, stay away from public anti-government actions. Huda, there-

fore, considered herself privileged: her parents allowed her to participate in protest actions. Despite her detention, the family let her stay out late in the evening which allowed her to take part in campaigns, protests and informal discussions in downtown Cairo which political activists would frequent on a daily basis. Such family endorsement was rare and deflected the normative gaze and rumours that late home-comings of a young unmarried woman could easily generate in the neighbourhood and the extended family. Many of Huda's female peers hid their political activities from their families for fear of disciplinary action and home arrest. On the other hand, young women activists from wealthier and more liberal family backgrounds seemed virtually unaffected by these normative sanctions. Following her arrest on April 6, Huda joined the April 6 Youth Movement (*shabāb 6 abrīl*) in an attempt to fight prevailing social injustices.

The April 6 Youth was formally established on June 28, 2008, at the Journalists' Syndicate in Cairo. As indicated by its name, its members paid tribute to the largest popular uprising and the first general strike attempt in recent Egyptian memory. Initially they mobilized around a Facebook group – established by Ahmed Maher, a former Ghad member and Youth for Change activist – that attracted over 70,000 members in the few weeks before and after the strike day. The online group offered an arena for heated debates, action calls and statements to its members. Although the group's membership rose gradually in the late 2000s, its initial membership base was much more modest. During my time in Cairo in 2008, the active members who participated in street campaigns and protests numbered about fifty in Cairo, although local groups began emerging in other cities such as Alexandria, Tanta and El-Fayoum. At the outset, its core members included a number of former Youth for Change activists with pre-existing ties with opposition parties, such as Ghad and Labour, while the majority were new to politics – university students, young professionals and a few unemployed – who joined in the group via Facebook or mutual friends.

Despite salient links with existing opposition groups, April 6 Youth asserted its autonomy from political parties and rigid ideologies. Its members claimed to be united, much in line with Huda's account, in their patriotic love for Egypt. They generally felt that Egypt no longer belonged to them (*maṣr mish bitā'itnā!*) and that Mubarak's regime was based on, as Fahmy (2002: 242) calls it, “an alliance between the state, the military, and selected segments of the bourgeoisie who have established direct links with foreign business interests”. They also rejected Egypt's natural gas deal with Israel. They also criticized the government's dependence on US economic

and military aid and its intemperate attempts to attract foreign direct investment into the country.

After the group was officially established, its members joined various campaigns in support, for instance, of journalists who face libel charges, such as Ibrahim Eissa, and they also organized “solidarity visits” to Tus-sun (Alexandria) and Abu Regeila (Cairo) where local residents were facing forced evictions. They protested for the release of detained bloggers in Cairo, local farmers in Serando – a small village in the Nile Delta – as well as the 49 persons who were arrested in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in April 2008. Beyond public protests April 6 Youth members engaged in daily communications and debates in Facebook groups, email lists and other electronic fora. They also launched parallel, web-based conferences with articles and speeches by several opposition leaders and activists during the NDP’s annual conferences in 2008 and 2009. Compared with response to their Internet-based dissidence, the Central Security Forces were quick to deter any street actions.

The appearance of April 6 Youth inspired mixed opinion within the political opposition. On the one hand, older Kifaya and other opposition leaders welcomed the group as a follow-up to Youth for Change that brought new vitality to street protesting. However, some partisan youth – Leftists and Nas-serists in particular – did not see the group as a meaningful actor and argued that urban “Facebook youth” cannot make real impact without a wider support from, for instance, the workers’ strike movements. Some young Nas-serists also complained to me that the new group did not provide concrete alternatives to, or a future vision of, changes and policies for a post-Mubarak society. Moreover, analysts at the time doubted the long-term survival of the group, arguing that Internet-based activism can wane as easily it coalesces, and has meagre resonance with the wider offline publics (Faris 2008).

April 6 Youth activists were, however, highly reflexive about this constraint from the outset. Hamdi (26), a former Ghad and then April 6 Youth activist, told me that transforming digital contentions into concrete actions presented the main challenge for the group, a problem that was constantly discussed among its members. On the other hand, he argued against the need to promote a rigid political ideology or political platform with policy proposals and the like. In 2008, when I first met him, he expressed the hope that localized protest movements and the numerous opposition forces in Egypt would unite into a subversive and critical mass that would lead to the downfall of Mubarak’s regime through non-violent popular uprising. This scenario represented a common aspiration among secular opposition

groups, including the Kifaya movement, prior to the 2011 presidential elections. In 2008, Hamdi envisioned, should Mubarak's regime fall, a provisional government could rule the country for a transitional period of two years before organizing a free referendum based on a new constitution representing a negotiated consensus of all the political forces in Egypt. As with many of his peers, Hamdi favoured a combination of elements from different political ideologies: from the Left, he adopted the principle of prioritizing the poor (*al-inḥiyāz ma'a al-fuqarā'*); from the Islamists he took the social values (*qiyam al-muḡtama'a*) and moral codes; from the liberals he appropriated the central principle of freedom (*ḥurriyya*); while from Arab Nationalists (*qawmiyīn*) he borrowed the value of loyalty and allegiance to Egypt (*al-intimā' li-maṣr*) and the Third World or, currently, the "global South". During the 2005 elections, Hamdi was at university but never joined Youth for Change; he did, however, publicly declare himself a member of Kifaya. After he joined the April 6 Youth in 2008, the police detained him several times. Before meeting me, his last visit to prison lost him his job.

3.2.3. The 2000s: Diverse trajectories

In the run-up to 2011, April 6 Youth emerged as arguably the most enduring youth movement in the late Mubarak era. Both Youth for Change and April 6 Youth were, however, important predecessors to later youth activism. Firstly, they both sensitized previously disengaged youth to public political dissent, many of whom continued their efforts through their own initiatives or as new members of existing opposition groups, political parties and campaign networks. Secondly, they provided the young with shared experiences, narratives and social memories which forged concrete social ties not only among young Cairenes but also with more established opposition politicians, journalists and civil society professionals. The acquisition of these personal contacts and networks enabled some to find full or part-time employment in the publishing industry and civil society organizations, thereby providing them with the privileged position of continuing their activism as part of their job description. Moreover, some worked or volunteered with a number of civil society formations such as public campaign initiatives, offering their technical "know-how" to establish and maintain campaign www-sites and servers.

Towards the end of 2000s, however, there were two further political processes that mobilized youth, both the already politicized and those who were new to politics, into public political dissent.

ElBaradei's bid to presidency

The first coincided with the appearance of Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, in Egypt's public life in 2010. His arrival on the political scene mobilized a number of young people and liberal activists, including April 6 Youth, the Democratic Front Party youth and the "Nour wing" of the Ghad Party, as well as former Muslim Brothers who were frustrated with their conservative leadership. All campaigned in support of ElBaradei's demands for constitutional change and his bid as a challenger of the regime in the presidential elections that were planned to take place in 2011. Reports of Mubarak's ailing health increased common belief in the "succession scenario" (*tawrīth*) – Gamal Mubarak's "grooming" as next president – while the political opposition was devoid of leading national figures that could gain undivided support from the various oppositional parties and movements and, importantly, the wider Egyptian public.

ElBaradei's presidency became a rallying point for diverse opposition groups and prominent public figures, among them Alaa al-Aswany, the acclaimed author of *Yacoubian Building*, Hamdeen Sabbahi, the leader of Karama party, and George Ishaq, the Kifaya movement's former coordinator. Current and former members of April 6 Youth would also take part in organizing a successful "welcoming rally" near Cairo International Airport on the day of ElBaradei's arrival. Soon after his return, ElBaradei established the National Association for Change (NAC) (*al-jam'iyya al-waṭaniyya li-l-taghyīr*) that began to rally around amending Articles 76, 77 and 88 of the Constitution so as to assure more open competition for the presidency. Consequently, the NAC launched a "one million signatures" call that also campaigned for the support of ElBaradei's presidency and wide political reforms such as an end to the State of Emergency, the judicial oversight of the upcoming parliamentary elections, and the limit of presidency to two terms. One of ElBaradei's campaign coordinators estimated in November 2010 that three out of four volunteers were under 35 years of age and were predominantly educated youth from urban middle classes. The NAC's campaign's strategy had, from the outset, been to reach out to "average Egyptians" and they preferred, much in line with Youth for Change

and April 6 Youth, to stage surprise protests and to collect signatures in the popular neighbourhoods. In late 2010, however, ElBaradei declared that his demands for constitutional changes were not being met and he resigned from the presidential race, much to the dismay of his supporters.

“We are all Khaled Said”

The second event that injected new dynamism back into street protests and youth activism before the contested 2010 parliamentary elections – when Mona and her friends acted as independent observers – was the death of Khaled Said, a 28-year-old Alexandrian man, at the hands of police on June 6. He was taken from an internet café and beaten violently on the street before being taken to a local police station. Officials initially explained that he had choked on the marijuana he was allegedly carrying, a claim that was later refuted by photographs from the morgue, showing his fractured skull and disfigured face; meanwhile it was speculated that Said had been persecuted by the local police because he had distributed a video clip showing police officers distributing drugs among themselves to sell (Herrera 2014a: 48-50).

Said’s case went viral online, and the initial protests in Alexandria broadened to a wider public debate on the police violence and torture that were part and parcel of control practices in Mubarak’s security state. The Facebook group called “We are all Khaled Said” (*kullinā khālid sa‘īd*) played a crucial role in instigating repeated anti-torture protests and campaigning. Two days after its launching on June 10, 2010, the group had attracted 50,000 members, a number which rose to over 200,000 in less than two weeks, and offered a constant feed of dissident messages and images of social justice, and an expanding virtual space for online debate. Importantly, the group partly resolved Hamdi’s concern with the challenges of bridging online activism and offline actions by initiating a campaign of “silent stands” to commemorate Said’s death in Alexandria, Cairo and other cities along the Nile and the Mediterranean coast. Each person would take a book, usually the Quran, and read it in silence on the waterfront, at a safe distance from others, as a tribute to Khaled Said and other victims of police violence in Egypt. This was a conscious tactic to circumvent the ban on public meetings involving more than five persons. It proved successful, as hundreds of people, predominantly but not all young, would line up with total strangers on the pavements across the cities, in an individuated yet collective act of public dissent. Eventually, the police began to disperse these silent protest-

ers, thus making their contested role as enforcers of emergency powers and the status quo further evident to the public.

In 2010, the group's administrators were operating in the safety of anonymity. After the "January 25" uprising, it was revealed that they were two young Egyptians, Wael Ghoneim, a Google executive based in Dubai, and Abdelrahman Mansour, an activist. Ghoneim had previous experience in administering the Facebook group of the ElBaradei campaign (Herrera 2014a: 64). The two young administrators of the Khaled Said group developed highly sophisticated communication strategies, using the latest online marketing ideas and tools in order to get the timing and content of their messages "right" (ibid.: 47-69). According to Herrera, the group iconized Khaled Said as a martyr (*shahīd*) as both an "aggregate portrait of an idealized Egyptian youth" and a "heroic champion of justice, a cyberactivist who was killed trying to fight the security forces" (ibid.: 150).

Ad hoc activities

An additional asset at the disposal of young Cairenes was, quite simply, that they had more time to volunteer in opposition campaigns and different acts of public dissent. While organized groups such as political parties and NGOs, often took some time to agree on appropriate lines of action, draft press releases, organize seminars and so on, young activists – especially young men who had few family obligations and could socialize in male-dominated places in the evenings – were prepared to engage in public events that needed a quick response.

On September 14, 2008, I witnessed a sit-in protest in front of the City Municipality in central Cairo. Some fifty protesters, mainly women and children, were demanding alternative housing after the military forced them to leave provisional shelters in al-Duweiqā, one of the city's most impoverished informal districts (*'ashwā'īyyāt*). A major landslide had destroyed their homes there a week earlier and resulted in more than one hundred reported deaths among their relatives, friends and neighbours; informal estimates held the numbers closer to five hundred. The police periodically encroached on the lawns of Abdeen Square where the protesters had settled themselves but faced energetic abuse, especially from young mothers who blamed the police and the city authorities for mismanaging the crisis. Bloggers and journalists mingled at the scene, along with young activists – some mobilized in an ad hoc Committee for the Support for the Families of al-Duweiqā. The activists had promised to stand by the families in

case the police suddenly decided to evict them. Some provided the families with basic necessities – food, drink and blankets – so that they could continue with the protest activity. Others arrived to photograph and interview the protesters and hurried to publish the news online. Sitting on the lawn, I felt somewhat intimidated by the police presence and the fact that we were being cordoned off with metal fences. I expressed to Ahmed (23), a young blogger and occasional April 6 Youth member, how bewildered I was by the courage and perseverance these women demonstrated in the face of the police. Ahmed replied that they reminded him of a song by System of a Down, an American rock band he truly adores:

*I've got nothing, to gain, to lose
All the world I've seen, before me passing by
You don't care about how I feel, I don't feel it any more*

The final line in particular had stayed in his mind, providing meaning to the scenario unfolding before our eyes: “They don’t have anything to lose, no home, their children and relatives have died, so why should they care about what the police do?” Later on, when next we met, he played with these words in English – “I feel that I don’t feel; I don’t feel that I feel...” – although we normally conversed in the Egyptian dialect. He used this wordplay to explain something that I could not quite capture at the time. I understood, however, that it expressed his inner state and feelings, or the lack thereof, and the way he connected to the world.

3.3. THE QUEST FOR AUTONOMOUS POLITICAL ACTION

Edmunds and Turner (2005) suggest that the media spectacle that surrounded the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001, coupled with the unprecedented numbers of young people globally, gave rise to a global generation, whose generational consciousness was no longer tied to sharing direct experiences; increasingly, their formative experiences have been mediated through globalized information flows, the mass media, satellite channels and the Internet. In Egypt, the US-led global “war on terror” in Iraq, coupled with the continued Israeli occupation of Palestine, instigated unprecedented waves of public mobilization in Egypt that provided young Egyptians with shared formative experiences and social memories of civil disobedience and self-organized public mobilization. In addition, the continued public protests by

the workers' movements, farmers and local residents across the country carried forceful reminders of ongoing social polarization in neoliberal Egypt, which was aggravated by the global financial crisis (2007-2008).

In this context, it is useful to retain a twofold analytical view of youth as a position and a process which, as Vigh (2006: 34) argues, enables us to view the making of generational consciousness by young people as "bound together by formative experience and interpretive horizons, constituted by their historical becoming as a specific generation growing up in specific circumstances as well as defined by their mutual position in the intergenerational order".¹⁶ For the members of Youth for Change and April 6 Youth, an integral dimension of their collective experiences was to construct a generational boundary between themselves and older political generations. They managed, at least momentarily, to carve out alternative social spaces – mainly via unlicensed public protest and the social media – that allowed them to gain new visibility and roles in public political life. But it required their constant efforts to establish their presence and legitimacy as political actors and to experiment with direct street tactics, public rhetoric, political tools, online dissent and, simply, alternative ways of being political. As far as the new youth movements are concerned, these efforts involved, first, a collective escape from the institutional action alternatives provided by organizational hierarchies, such as political parties, trade unions and certain segments of professionalized civil society. Secondly, their members sought to create less bureaucratic forms of hierarchic power relations, and to engage simultaneously in various ad hoc campaigns, networks and more individualized forms of direct action that conjoined virtual and physical spaces.

3.3.1. Generational consciousness

Against this background, I suggest that the generational consciousness forged by the young opposition activists of the period was structured on three interrelated registers of meaning. Firstly, they habitually referred to "our generation" (*gīlnā*) as a distinct social position and realm of experience that they regarded as largely disenfranchised and neglected in prevailing society. These views echoed the grim generational prognoses of Layla – the young female professional who considered political activists "crazy".

¹⁶ Vigh makes use of Mannheim's original thesis to arrive at this synthesis, the aim of which is to fuse analytical approaches to youth as a "demarcated site for construction of ideas and praxis" and as a "period of liminality, a life stage or status" (ibid.).

Theirs was a generation that was born under Mubarak's rule and raised in the hope that life had the potential to provide, if not luxury, at least the chances of being content. Its members were disenfranchised in public life, and their rights and freedoms were neglected by the police state apparatus; a generation whose members saw their life chances diminishing day by day while the status quo profited the political and economic elite, a small segment of Egyptians for whom the future provides the promise of further comfort, security and privilege (Wardany 2012). For activists, especially the more privileged, the aspiration was not always for socioeconomic well-being, but also for the chance to experience freedoms and enjoy rights they feel they are due, and to acquire a sense of being heard and represented by the state authorities. Thus, on the face of it, these young Cairenes targeted the ruling elite, including President Mubarak and the NDP, as well as the military and business-related ruling elites. Clearly, they claimed the share in public politics and decision-making that they felt they were due. At the same time, however, youth movements challenged the wider gerontocratic and person-centred hierarchies that prevailed in Egyptian society at large, including in the political opposition. The majority of political parties, trade unions and civil society organizations were ruled by men in their 60s and older. In the new millennium, generational tensions were a public concern not only in Egypt. In Syria, Jordan and Morocco, father-to-son successions had already taken place, and nepotistic generational turnover was expected to take place in myriad forms in public and private institutions, not only at the apex of state power.

Secondly, young activists found it poignant that they had gradually acquired a certain "political awareness" (*wā'ī siyāsī*) during their lives: seeing Egyptian society as "it is" and as a source of imagining an alternative future. For some, the family had played an important role in their political awakening, while for others it was university, friends and exposure to the Internet which had provided them with alternative information and interpretive schemes – such as the online lyrics of a favourite band. Since the mid-2000s, youthful critique did not only take place within the secular-oriented opposition but also manifested itself in the emergence of a young generation of Muslim Brothers, including bloggers (Lynch 2007), who rejected the conservative values promoted by their gerontocratic leadership. Towards the end of the decade, the Internet and the social media would open up new avenues to global influences and provide increasing numbers of young Egyptians – or the "wired generation" (Herrera 2014b) – additional opportunities for networking and acquiring alternative knowledge of current affairs. This is an issue I shall return to in Chapter 4.

Thirdly, despite important differences in their personal life trajectories, young activists' generational consciousness invested politically reinvigorating and subversive meaning in youth (*shabāb*) itself. They resisted being socialized into the given conventions of opposition politics, such as restricting their political engagements to indoor seminars and policy-formulation and other "paper work". They largely viewed the latter as afflicted with a myriad of internal problems, ranging from stagnancy and lack of action to, as some put it, "traditions" (*taqālid*) and weakness (*ḍa'f*) that had not thus far been overcome. Importantly, the subversive meanings they attached to their life-stage of being young not only targeted the political opposition, but were created against the backdrop of prevailing narratives of "youth apathy" and "youth idleness" in Egypt's public life (El-Sharnouby 2012). Against these depictions, they attributed the qualities of energy (*tāqa*), vitality (*ḥayawiyya*), enthusiasm (*ḥamās*) and activism (*nishāt*) to the category of youth. In comparison to their contemporaries, those who participated in prodemocracy movements cultivated qualitatively different and more hopeful aspirations connected to the fact that they were young. They were in the main convinced that "we, the youth" (*ihnā ish-shabāb*) can and should play central roles in public political life as its inheritors.

3.3.2. Intergenerational dynamics

Despite the tensions between activist youth and the previous generations, an important dynamic of intergenerational solidarities emerged during the 2000s. There were several ongoing processes, movements and social networks which helped to lay the bases – ideational, discursive and material – for the emergence of youth-based movements in the 2000s.

1970s generation

A study of prodemocracy mobilization in the 2000s in Egypt would fall short without acknowledging the key roles played by members of the 1970s' generation, introduced above (e.g. Shorbagy 2007: 179-182). Born in the post-independence era, they were politicized through student union politics in the turbulent 1970s, some sharing the experiences of imprisonment during Sadat's period in office. During the 1980s and 1990s, some assumed active roles in Egypt's public life, including the publishing industry and

civil society organizations.¹⁷ Others became prominent in professional syndicates that represented one of the few available avenues for opposition politics at the time (Wickham 2002).¹⁸ An important number of 1970ers also joined political parties and have played, since the 1990s, integral roles – as members of the “middle generation” (*g̃l al-wasaf*) between older leadership and younger cadres – in establishing new off-shoot initiatives, such as the Karama Party from the Nasserist Party, the centrist-Islamist El-Wasat Party from the Muslim Brotherhood, both in 1996, and the liberal Ghad Party from New Wafd Party in 2001.¹⁹ These party offshoots demonstrate that earlier intergenerational strife was an additional dimension of ideological discords and personal politics within the political opposition and party life before the 2000s. They also bear witness to the importance of political generations as a source of dynamism and social change in Egypt’s political life, as indicated earlier (Erlich 2000).

If the student movements had withered away due to State Security control of campus life since Sadat’s presidency, interpersonal relations among former members of student movements were retained as “abeyance” networks (Taylor 1989; Duboc 2011), the strength of which was reconfirmed at the turn of the millennium. The 1970ers were involved in establishing a number of political coalitions that were part and parcel of the burgeoning “new culture of protesting” after the turn of the millennium. During the 2nd Palestinian Intifada, they played integral roles in forming the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada. Subsequently, these interpersonal networks in Cairo and the governorates laid the social basis for anti-war mobilizations during the war against Iraq in 2003 and the prodemocracy movements in the mid-2000s. Although similar “cross-ideological initiatives” took place in the 1990s, the pro-Intifada and anti-Iraq war movements represented important moments of public mobilization whereby members from different ideological groups forged public political

17 These include, among others, Ahmed Abdalla, who was a prominent student union leader in the early 1970s, establishing his own youth association El-Geel (Generation). Leftists Ahmed Seif al-Islam and Aida Seif al-Dawla engaged in prominent human rights groups, or the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre and El-Nadeem Centre, respectively.

18 These include, among others, the cofounder of the El-Wasat Party, Abu El-Ela Madi, and Socialist Kamal Khalil, who were involved in the Syndicate of Engineers, while MB’s Muhammad Abu el-Quddous was part of the Syndicate of Journalists. Kamal Abu Eita from the Karama Party would later spearhead the movement for the independent labour union of Tax Collectors in late 2007.

19 Amin Iskandar was a cofounder of the Karama Party, and Abu El-Ela Madi cofounder of the Wasat Party. Ayman Nour, who established the Ghad Party, was a student union leader in the early 1980s. Under Mubarak’s leadership, the Karama and Wasat Parties never acquired a party license from the PPC, while the Ghad Party acquired a formal license in 2004.

coalitions and worked together (Abdelrahman 2009; El-Hamalawy 2007; Browsers 2007).

Moreover, the 1970ers played key roles in initiating the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya) in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2005. The Kifaya movement's older leaders, who held offices and had access to resources, helped Youth for Change members access personal office space, resources for printing, meeting venues and so on. In late 2004, as the movement's founding document, the Declaration to the Nation (*Biyān ilā al-umma*), was in preparation, another initiative – the Popular Campaign for Change (or *Hurriyya al-'ān*, “Freedom Now”) – was simultaneously taking shape as an alternative platform with more Leftist and Marxist orientations and membership base. By the time of the Kifaya movement's first demonstration in December 2004, the two initiatives had been virtually merged under the same slogan and demands, although an internal tension between different ideological currents continued to evolve within the movement.²⁰

Politicized parents

For the young who were born and raised under Mubarak's presidency, having family and parents who were already politicized was a crucial asset. Many of those who could continue their political dissent and who became prominent activists in their own right had family members, often parents, from the 1970s' generation. Tariq's father, for instance, was a prominent figure in the Karama Party and Tariq had been socialized into opposition politics from an early age. Those like him had joined oppositional events since childhood, enabling their acculturation into an oppositional ethos, rather than the prevailing popular sentiments that necessitated and required youth to avoid politics. As Huda's political experiences suggested, family endorsement of public dissent was even more crucial for young women than for their male peers. In general, many prominent young activists – who often played the roles of “trendsetters” in Egypt's youth activism – were, through their personal biographies and family endorsement, disposed to contentious politics. Some of their parents belonged to the 1970s generation, others

²⁰ Towards the late 2000s, the internal division among the 1970ers would run parallel with the emergence of a number of opposition initiatives. In 2010, George Ishaq, Mustafa Galil, and other former Kifaya leaders aligned themselves with ElBaradei's National Alliance for Change, while the old structures of the Egyptian Movement for Change were, by November, relocated from Ishaq's office to Abdel Halim Qandil, a Nasserist journalist and co-founder of Kifaya movement. In turn, the Left-oriented members of the 1970s generation joined in establishing a new movement in July 2010, calling it the Popular Democratic Movement for Change.

played active roles in civil society campaigning and trade unions while still others belonged to the “cultured class” (*muthaqqāfīn*) of journalists, authors, artists and academics. Thus, different forms of economic and cultural – and, by extension, symbolic – capital were important assets for some young Cairenes in terms of continuing their public political dissent over a prolonged period of time.

Human rights advocates

In addition to the 1970s’ generation, the important role of Egypt’s human rights movement should be acknowledged as an additional support network and predecessor to today’s political activism. Many of the student activists of the 1970s played active roles in Egypt’s human rights organizations and advocacy groups. Ahmed Seif al-Islam, for instance, was a prominent human rights lawyer in the 2000s, and was involved in several high-profile cases in support of detainees and workers’ right advocates. Aida Seif al-Dawla cofounded the El-Nadeem Centre for Victims of Torture which offered psychological services to torture victims, mostly “average citizens” rather than political activists. Egypt’s human rights advocacy groups also provided channels of public influence for those who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. Although limited in numbers, Egyptian human rights NGOs advanced vocal criticism against the practices of Mubarak’s police state and reported on continued human rights violations in the country. Advocacy groups such as the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights became the target of public slander levelled both by the government and other civil society activists, facing accusations that ranged from damaging Egypt’s image abroad to accepting foreign funding for Western agendas, (Abdelrahman 2004: 136-138; Pratt 2006). The famous case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the founder of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, was but one in which public figures with human rights rhetoric and connections to foreign organizations were put in jail or intimidated.

In the run-up to 2011, an additional “safety network” emerged to support individuated protesters and activists, namely, the Front for the Defence of Egypt’s Protesters (*jabhat al-difā’ ‘an mutazāhīrī miṣr*) (FDEP). It was a loose network that comprised a number of human rights groups and individual actors, including bloggers and journalists. Moreover, the FDEP involved a number of young lawyers, journalists, and civil society professionals who were socialized into opposition politics on the basis of their vocation. It was formally established in 2010 as a network of 34 civil society organizations

and advocacy groups in the context of a legal campaign led by the Center for Economic and Social Rights that demanded a minimum wage of 1,200 L.E. per month. The FDEP emerged on the basis of a network of civil society groups and activists in the late 2000s that provided legal and logistical aid to al-Mahalla al-Kubra detainees and their families in 2008. Before major events, such as April 6, 2008, or the 2010 parliamentary elections, the EFDP would publish a list of “emergency phone numbers”, circulated by activists online, which included those of rights lawyers who could be contacted in cases of arrest or detention. During demonstrations, the FDEP members collected information about arrested persons, and then allocated a lawyer to follow up the case not only in Cairo but also in other parts of the country such as Alexandria and Aswan. Seif al-Islam, who then worked as the HMLC’s director, told me in June 2008 that this had been one of the most important and concrete ways in which the HMLC had supported the prodemocracy movements and the workers’ strike movements since the turn of the new millennium. He noted that times had indeed changed since no such services existed when he was jailed in the 1980s. He had a direct comparison: his son Alaa Abdelfattah, a prominent blogger-activist, had been detained during the Judges’ Crisis in 2006 but had rapidly acquired an online campaign calling for his release by fellow activists in Egypt and abroad.

3.3.3. Activist habitus

I once asked a secular political blogger, Mahmud (27), who was detained for a prolonged period during the al-Mahalla al-Kubra uprising, whether he was a member of any opposition group or political party. I sensed that he was somewhat offended by the framing of my question, and he went on to explain:

You have to understand that I am an activist, not a member in any group or party. To be an activist, you have to understand this: it means that if you see any kind of injustice anywhere, at any time, you have to go there and try to help. If it’s the political prisoners, you go and protest. If it’s the university students against rising fees, you go and join them. If it’s the poor people, you go and support them. Sometimes you can’t do much, but even small things can be very important. Sometimes the only thing you can do is to be present, like with the families of al-Duweiqqa. If there

are enough activists and journalists around, the police may not get violent. Sometimes, the only thing you can do is to take a photo and send it onwards; to write on your blog so as to make things exist. Otherwise no one hears anything about what's happening in this country.

Since his release, Mahmud has continued blogging, and deliberately covers the workers' strike movements and cases of police brutality in Egypt. While both younger and older opposition activists shared many political demands and grievances with regards social illnesses in Mubarak's Egypt, the former asserted their presence within the opposition not only through assuming a degree of autonomy for youth-based political dissent but, importantly, through the ways in which they *were*, and not only through what they *did* (Bayat 2010: 120). In comparison with older opposition politicians, young activists were more oriented to direct street actions and preferred to socialize and plan future campaigns on the fringes of public opposition events – in staircase corridors, on lounge sofas and the like – rather than following official programs and listening to premeditated political speeches. They communicated in Egyptian dialect online and offline, used slang words and expressions, and wore trendy loose jeans and T-shirts rather than collared shirts and trousers. They used the new ICTs while some of the older politicians scarcely used computers. They drew on global youth cultures and were as likely to listen to, for instance, American rock bands or Bob Marley as Sheikh Imam – the revolutionary singer who inspired the students' protest movements in the 1970s. Thus, while the members of the new youth movements seemed to draw inspiration from the experiences of earlier political generations, they were in the process of reinventing “youth” as self-claimed agents of social change.

Indeed, the emergence of youth activism in the 2000s accompanied the appearance of a certain activist habitus (Bourdieu 1977; Bayat 2010) that carried a new composition of dispositions, tastes, sensibilities and political practices that construed a generational boundary, thereby enabling horizontal solidarities to emerge among young people. Conceived in this way, the young Cairenes' activist habitus and outward self-comportment often distinguished them from the members of previous political generations. But the same cannot be said of the daily situations when mixing with their non-activist peers, or other young Cairenes, who filled the very same urban spaces, listened to same music, and frequented the same shops, cafés and street corners of Cairo's city centre. In the 2000s, there were few out-

ward markers of “activism”, unlike in the post-2011 period during which certain “revolutionary outfits” – such as the Palestinian white-and-black scarf (*kūfiyya*) – have proliferated in the cityscape to the point of becoming trendy. In the Mubarak era, young opposition activists rarely expressed their political dissent or opinions through clothing, in contrast to youth sub-cultures in European and Northern American societies (e.g. Brake 1985: 11-15). A young artist explained to me in 2008 that “Egyptians do not need things like T-shirts” to make their point, as they are verbally so expressive. On the other hand, I would presume that the outward markers of political dissent – such as an anti-Mubarak T-shirt at the time – would most likely have attracted “unwelcome” attention from the police officers on the street.

However, although the young activists’ outward costume rarely hinted at their dissenting views, talking to them sooner or later made it fully apparent: their daily lives were filled with “talking politics” in ways which amounted to subversive acts in themselves. It is true that many young Cairenes would commonly voice their dissatisfaction with the incumbent authorities and political power, finding expression in multiple ways from daily expressions of frustration and complaint to running jokes and ridicule. In contrast, however, the conversations among activists were often pregnant with anecdotes of their political experiences and past events, such as recent seminars or street protests, encounters with the police or *baltagiyya*, shared experiences in detention, and their subversive analyses of contemporary society and its powerholders. Importantly, they talked politics in terms of future action. Their conversations ranged into the future tense towards what might be possible, often going beyond the mere rhetorical level of a simple but very crucial question: “What can we do?” (*hana‘mil ayh?*).

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have described the processes whereby Egyptian youth movements of the 2000s emerged on the fringes of larger processes of contentious politics, most notably wider prodemocracy mobilization and the workers’ protracted strike movements, but gradually managed to assume new roles in public political life. Both Youth for Change and April 6 Youth were important instances in this respect, merging, at least temporarily, young Egyptians from different backgrounds and affiliations into collective actions: forging alliances, largely beyond the formal political institutions. Both youth movements had local chapters in the governorates outside the capital and invited hitherto demobilized youth into opposition politics

by expressing a generational consciousness which in part helped to lay the social basis – as shared formative experiences, social memory and interpersonal networks – for later waves of youth activism towards the end of the decade, including the young volunteers in the ElBaradei campaign. In doing so, the new youth movements promoted the collective sense of belonging to “our generation” (*gīlnā*) as a disenfranchised social location in the intergenerational order, while also providing reinvigorated meanings to “youth” as a subversive political category, and in some ways a privileged experiential realm, ready to conduct public political dissent on its own terms. Although the young activists benefited from being connected to earlier political generations, most notably the 1970ers and human rights advocates, the ways in which they assumed new roles in the wider prodemocracy movement coincided with their acquiring a certain activist habitus that carried a new composition of dispositions, tastes and practices. Collectively they both rejected apathy and refused to be assigned to the accustomed avenues, spaces and forms of political participation that did not serve their ideas and preferences for meaningful political action. In the next chapter, I will probe this issue more closely, specifically exploring the different modes of political agency propagated by the young.

4 YOUTHFUL RESISTANCE

On the evening of 4 November, 2008, a dozen members of April 6 Youth, both men and women, decided to organize a street action of their own that was, as I was told earlier, “something completely different” (*hāga tāniyya tamāman*). They wanted to celebrate the Egyptian Day of Love (*īd al-ḥubb*) – a national alternative to Valentine’s Day that was claimed to be more attuned to Egyptian culture, social values and patriotism. By the time I joined them on Tahrir Square, the State Security forces had prevented them from congregating a few blocks away on Nile Corniche. Surrounded by plain-clothes police, they were seemingly excited but by no means desperate, and engaged in a lively debate as to what they should do next. An officer who was, presumably, judging by his authoritative gestures, in charge of the police operation, told the young activists repeatedly not to go on with their plan. Finding it impossible to continue, some of them stayed downtown while others jumped on taxis and busses, and hurried to Al-Azhar Park where the police eventually arrested and questioned them, and confiscated their belongings: a few cardboard banners and dozens of red plastic hearts that they had intended to distribute to passers-by.

However inconsequential this street action might have seemed, it had required considerable prior preparation. Some of the organizers had come up with the idea and devised an online call. Others had searched for YouTube links and the lyrics of several patriotic songs they intended to sing in public and, again, published these online. Some had collected money from peers and bought the gifts they intended to distribute to Cairo’s commuters, while still others had produced pieces of cardboard with the day’s greetings and the movement’s name written on them. Their aim was to greet passers-by with “Happy Day of Love” and to talk about their recent initiative: the April 6 Youth, “the youth who love Egypt”.

During my time in Egypt, I witnessed and heard of several street actions that were planned by young Cairenes but that never actually took off. By “taking off” I mean that, since the authorities’ careful tolerance of public

protest during the electoral period in 2005, the security apparatuses, as a rule, did not allow these collective actions to enter urban space as public events. Some of the “Day of Love” protagonists had already been arrested in Alexandria on July 23, 2008, the national holiday commemorating the 1952 July Revolution. They had congregated on a public beach to try and fly a kite resembling the Egyptian flag, and to sing the national anthem among other holiday-makers. In September 2008, a week after the landslide in al-Duweiqqa, the police prevented a small protest by young Communists and other Leftists on Talat Harb Square in downtown Cairo, which was aimed at raising city commuters’ awareness of the ways in which the public authorities had mismanaged the on-going “humanitarian crisis”. The Central Security Forces and plain-clothes officers incarcerated them, which resulted in a few bruises and an ID check, and the police forcibly confiscated camera-phones from passers-by who happened to take photos from the other side of the street. On 28 September, 2008, young Leftists were compelled to cancel some street theatre at the last minute on a busy street in Imbaba, a popular (*sha‘bī*) neighbourhood in Giza, due to police pressure. The street action, organized by a network-based Popular Committee in Defence of the Land of Imbaba, aimed to portray the injustices being experienced by thousands of local residents who faced the risk of being evicted from their homes to make way for a road leading to the future Giza Airport, and neo-liberal projects of “beautification” and “development” on the banks of Nile.²¹ Local NDP figures, including the head of the municipality, appeared at the scene to make a simple statement: “This is forbidden!” (*Mamnū‘!*).

In the late Mubarak era, state reactions to these stunts seem somewhat “oversized” for what they were supposed to control: periodic stunts by young people on the street. But they are highly illustrative of the narrow line between what was allowed, and what not, in the urban spaces of Greater Cairo. On the Day of Love, Ahmed – the strident fan of System of a Down – decided not to go to Al-Azhar Park with the others. He disagreed with their sudden change of plans: the places where the event was to take place had been published online, and he did not want to go out of his way to beg further trouble from the authorities. Instead, we went to one of his favourite *ahāwī*, the popular coffee shops in the quarters and alleyways of

21 Since 1990s, the (re)building of new housing and business districts in Cairo have evolved in tandem with the evictions, with relatively low incentives, of local residents in popular (*sha‘bī*) neighbourhoods and informal districts (*‘ashwā‘iyyāt*) (Bell 2009). In Imbaba, residents were offered new homes in 6th October City, a satellite city west of Cairo. One local Committee member told me that the offer was unappealing because it would uproot families from the vicinity of their relatives, neighbours, jobs or, quite simply, their homes.

the downtown area, a few steps away from its main commercial streets. He later told me it gave him a relative sense of safety: its clientele, including many young activists, at least knew “who’s who” and which waiters were potentially government informants (*‘umalā’ al-ḥukūma*). He characterized downtown Cairo as his “space of freedom” (*misāḥat al-ḥurriyya*) in contrast to the impoverished neighbourhood on the northern outskirts of the city where he lived with his parents, and where he would not publicly disclose his real interests and political activities.

As I befriended Ahmed in 2008, his stories of the everyday presence of the police (*shurṭa*) revealed the multiple and refined boundaries that young opposition activists were constantly obliged to bear in mind. They were almost certain that, sooner or later, State Security would secretly listen to their phone conversations and keep records of their activities. Engaging in public dissidence, such as unlicensed protests, holding banners and distributing leaflets in public spaces, carried the risk of detention, violent interrogations and imprisonment, and their future lives – for instance, when looking for a job or an apartment – could be hampered due to personal files in the Ministry’s archives.

Indeed, the state security apparatuses went to great lengths to deter any contact between political dissenters and those who were their immediate audiences and targets for public mobilization: discontented Egyptians. Indeed, beyond the marginal elite who lived with impunity in relative freedom and abundance, most Egyptians were impoverished, a condition that cultivated a widespread sense of subordination, injustice and indignation: a popular anger directed towards the incumbent authorities that was coupled with fear of retaliation should they publicly voice their dissent. Many of the young activists whom I have discussed thus far were at the forefront of testing and transgressing these social barriers, often putting their bodies on the line, and trying to find cracks and narrow opportunities as best they could. It was exactly this social interface with the people (*sha‘b*) which provided the young activists of the 2000s with their prime challenge and opportunity and, in consequence, the main arena for acting out their youthful understandings of meaningful political action.

* * *

Youthful dissent in Egypt’s public life in the 2000s, including that of youth movements, exhibits many of the traits, qualities and characteristics of the transnational activism that emerged at the turn of the millennium (Della

Porta and Tarrow 2005; Bennet 2005; Zahran 2007; Juris and Pleyers 2009). Many young Cairenes resorted to similarly innovative uses of direct street action, the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and horizontal organizational forms which were also recurring features and ideals in the context of the wider anti-Mubarak movements (Shehata 2011). The emergence of today's transnational activist practices – which Juris and Pleyers (2009) call “alter-activism” – has also encompassed the subversive practices of taking over public spaces, to establish “activist camps” in public parks and squares for instance, as a way to create alternative social spaces for discontent, communion and resistance

In this chapter, I discuss many of these features of youth activism but differ from the model in one crucial aspect: living, acting, and coming of age in Mubarak's Egypt was in many ways predicated on the social fact that discontent was not to be expressed in public space. Transgressions of this social norm were met with the might of Mubarak's regime, including methods of intimidation, detention and physical violence. In order to explore the ways in which young activists could, therefore, negotiate and, at times, transgress these boundaries of conspicuous conformity I will, in what follows, expand the analytical scope from the contours of political opposition and its intergenerational dynamics toward the wider social environments and communicative spaces (or public sphere) in which they lived.²² In the first section, I discuss the young activists' political practices in more detail, arguing that in many ways they represented “tactical” efforts (de Certeau 1980, 1984) to find alternative modes of being political in terms of both political conventions and state control over public contention. The second section builds on the premise that, ultimately, not all young people were equally positioned to acquire or to act upon an activist habitus; rather, their opportunities for political dissent were, importantly, structured along social cleavages such as class, gender and cosmopolitanism. The third section is based on the observations that the emergence of youth movements in the 2000s was by no means self-evident; further, that they provided their members, insofar as coalition politics is concerned, with both tiresome experiences and a learning curve of how to “do politics” with others. Meanwhile, along with the persistence of internal strife akin to that afflicting the established political opposition, the processes of internal division, coupled with

22 Parts of this chapter draw on my article “Raise your head high, you're an Egyptian!” Youth, politics, and citizen journalism in Egypt”, published in *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology online* 5(3): 1-22 (Onodera 2011a).

the expanding audiences and social media users online, created a certain heterogeneity in responses, offering young Egyptians alternative avenues for political dissent towards the end of the decade.

4.1. TACTICAL TRANSGRESSIONS

Acquiescence in the face of police directives represented a prevailing social norm against which young activists positioned themselves in Egypt's public life. In comparison with other countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, Egyptian youth enjoyed relative freedom in terms of conservative religious moral authorities (Bayat 2010: 130). The government allowed them to engage, up to a point, in diverse activities such as sport, leisure, music and charity work as long as they did not interfere with politics (Lei Sparre 2013). Layla, the young professional whom I introduced in the previous chapter, observed that the parents of her generation had raised their offspring to “walk beside the wall” – noting not only that the children should keep away from the hazards of Cairo traffic, but also that they should mind their own business and not engage with whatever happens on the “street”. In the 2000s, Layla mentioned, parents would further instruct them to enter the wall itself so as “not to see, not to hear, not to feel anything”. In my observation, the metaphor of the wall (*al-ḥīṭa*) was a recurring reference to the public authorities. For Ahmed, who had learned to cope with the immediacy of state surveillance, the metaphor of the wall carried yet another lesson: “The walls have ears”. It was part of his practical knowledge that “if they [the police] want to arrest you, they can do it anywhere, at any time”.

Under these circumstances, how could the young activists challenge the barriers to public political life? As I have discussed above, many strove to do things on their own, and to experiment with alternative ways of being political in relation to the gerontocratic practices within the political opposition. In the wider framing of Egypt's prodemocracy movement, the people (*sha'b*) – with the “average Egyptian” (*al-muwāṭin 'ādī*) as its individuated core – were their prime target for public mobilization. Evoking the metaphor of “the wall” in a different context to that of state power, young activists were particularly concerned with finding cracks and frictions as best they could so as to get closer to the people themselves. In many ways they were at the forefront of challenging the panoptic gaze (Foucault 1977)

which the state security apparatuses practiced in the public sphere. It is in this sense that some of the practices which aimed to transgress the prevailing norm of conspicuous conformity can be termed “tactical” (de Certeau 1980, 1984).

4.1.1. On the use of tactics

De Certeau’s notion of “everyday tactics” (1980, 1984) offers a useful frame for discussing the young activists’ experimental and resourceful political practices in the late Mubarak era. In an attempt to overcome the age-old social scientific dilemma between structure and agency, de Certeau introduces a corresponding dialectic between strategies and tactics: strategies comprise the sustained efforts of “the powerful” to separate itself from its social environment and to consolidate its panoptic position as a mechanism of othering and surveillance (ibid.; Mitchell 2007: 99-100); while tactics refer to everyday forms of resistance by those – “the weak” – who are subjected to the authority of the powerful and its hegemonic strategies. By their very nature tactics never turn into strategies, but they do help to create autonomous spaces for the subjected others in the wider discursive field framed by the powerful. As such, tactical practices involve innovative ways of exploiting the symbolic, material and temporal resources at hand and, as such, are “always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (de Certeau 1984: xix). Because tactics are intrinsically experimental, de Certeau argues, their effects cannot be ascertained. Their force, however, depends on invisibility (or “disguise”) and the right combination of what he terms the “opportune moment” (*kairos*) and the symbolic reserve of “memory” (de Certeau 1980). In this sense, tactics result in multiple outcomes and unintended trajectories, including new articulations of meaning.

De Certeau’s interest lies in the use of ruse and trickery: deceptive and cunning practices (or *metis*) which the ordinary people (or “the weak”) exploit and thus resist the given in their lives. Tactics in this sense also refer to the ways in which people strive to feel more “at home” and to adjust their immediate social surroundings accordingly.²³ De Certeau’s was a hopeful

²³ *Perruque* is among the most known tactics de Certeau introduced, referring to situations in which employers, while working, “steal” time for their “own things” – which could today concern the likes of surfing on the Internet’s social networking sites at the office while pretending to work. In this way, *perruque* does not only deflect the panoptic gaze of superiors but also challenges capitalist relations of power and production, namely, the logic of surplus value (de Certeau 1984: 24-28).

commentary against the social determinism he saw in much of the social sciences of his time. He was especially critical of Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu (1977) for projecting totalizing narratives across the social world and, in particular, over human agency, that were difficult to overcome from within their own social science “discourse” (de Certeau 1984: 46-60). His focus rests on the practices of “ordinary people” and everyday life as the main site of resistance. Although young activists were by no means “ordinary” Egyptians, his notion of tactics casts useful light on their attempts to avoid being socialized into the conventions of political opposition and the predetermined lines of action that, for instance, their middle-class background would encourage them to adopt.

Thus the notion of tactics helps in appreciating the ways in which Egypt’s young activists were forced to find very subtle and opportunistic, yet highly precarious, ways to assume urban space even for a brief moment. During the 2010 parliamentary elections, when participating in wider NGO-led campaigns, it was the independent observers themselves, such as Mona and her friends in Doqqi, Giza, who put their bodies and social tact into play when hanging around polling stations as “curious local passers-by” while in fact on the look-out for alternative information about what was taking place. Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, Youth for Change entered popular quarters in Greater Cairo where the tactics of “urban guerrilla warfare” – as one activist put it – proved crucial in relocating public street protests beyond the narrow contours of its accustomed arenas in downtown Cairo.²⁴ In this way they not only challenged prevailing conventions in the political opposition but also the narrow margins allowed for public dissent by the state power; decentralising public dissent was consciously geared towards expanding the audiences of the wider prodemocracy movement beyond the place and class-specificities of downtown commuters.

The early youth movements were also prone to use the available cultural, material and symbolic materials at hand (de Certeau 1980). Let us return to the initial successes of Youth for Change whereby the protesters appropriated a popular belief that by dusting a shrine’s premises one can demand justice against a wrongdoer. According to Fahmi (2009: 97) the “Kans al-Sayyida” is a popular religious practice among Cairenes:

Sweeping the mosque entrance with straw brooms is considered both a literal act of paying respect to the mosque and a symbolic

²⁴ These are practically housed within the same quarter, roughly one kilometre north of Tahrir Square.

call for aid and blessing from the beloved Zeinab's spirit. Seeking spiritual assistance against all manner of injustice is a Sufi-inflected mode of popular resistance that Egyptians have invoked historically against tyrants and police brutality.

Participants brought along brooms and wished for the sudden departure of the NDP elite, including Prime Minister Habib el-Adly and Sawfat Sherif, the Speaker of the Parliament and the main candidate in the Sayyida Zeinab constituency; even the Ghad Party's presidential candidate Ayman Nour paid a visit and media attention was assured.

In late July 2008, April 6 Youth activists organized a trip to Alexandria with a seminar at the local Ghad Party office and a visit to Tussun, a neighbourhood that faced forced eviction by the police. While enjoying a national holiday on the popular Sidi Bishr beach, they prepared to fly a kite in the colours of the Egyptian flag; on the occasion of the July 1952 Revolution that had effectively brought the 70-year-old colonial presence to its end. In the view of the security officials, who had hitherto followed the youth from a distance, this act exceeded the boundaries of what is acceptable in public places. In what followed, they expelled the youths from the beach, ultimately forcing fifteen of them into police wagons to be taken away. Fourteen others were arrested the following day, and the subsequent charges included blocking the traffic. While the goal of flying a kite was in itself a marginal event, it was also an attempt to reclaim a strip of public beach for collective expression. Importantly, it would have gained its power from its symbolic meaning: the determination to reclaim the Egyptian flag, the prime state symbol toward which all Egyptian pupils bow and swear allegiance every morning at school, and memories of an Egyptian nation that once united against foreign rule and oppressors.

Over the course of the 2000s, these forms of surprise protest became part and parcel of later waves of youth mobilization, as exhibited in the actions of April 6 Youth as well as in the context of the signatures campaign, organized by the National Association for Change, the pro-ElBaradei coalition that was calling for extensive political reforms such as the end to the State of Emergency, judicial oversight of the coming parliamentary elections, and the limitation of presidential office to two terms. Undoubtedly, middle-class and relatively well educated youth would at times face suspicion from local residents. But, according to some, this was often overcome through simply talking and listening; they faced little antagonism with regards their views of the present predicaments in society. In addition, in the early experiments

of Youth for Change, one of the protesters normally lived in the neighbourhood and was known to its residents as a “son of the neighbourhood”, and, importantly, had the practical knowledge of how to negotiate its alleyways and quarters in case the police moved in.

Although the youthful attempts to assume public spaces in 2008 were curtailed, stories about them soon circulated in the social media in the form of personal testimonies and photographs taken at the scene, including, in July, from the police wagon itself. These events were further reported in the private press, and narrated and re-narrated among the youth, as yet additional stories of resistance and injustice evolving beneath the “public transcripts” of how Egyptians had generally learned to behave in the face of the state powers such as the police, and in public life (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Scott 1990). In this sense, although youthful dissent was suppressed in public spaces it gave expression to the subversive attitudes, frustration and popular anger – especially against the police and corrupt officials – that were tangible realities in Mubarak’s Egypt. As such, it revealed “low-profile forms of resistance” (Scott 1990: 19) that can be rife among the populace but rarely expressed or performed in public (e.g. Bayat 2010: 51-55). Rather, Scott argues, these comprise a widespread popular subculture, or “hidden transcript”, that takes many forms and constantly simmers beneath the conspicuously settled surface of public quiescence:

Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in over collective defiance of the powerholder nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites (Scott 1990: 136)

But, as already noted, the new protest movements in Egypt did not emerge in isolation from global events and processes. In other words, youthful resistance was also drawing influences from globally circulating activist cultures. It is, for instance, well known that April 6 Youth drew influences from Otpor (Resistance), a Serbian youth movement that played incremental roles in mobilizing a critical mass against President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 (Gunning and Baron 2013: 84; Alexander 2011: 35). At the outset, the group did not have direct contacts with Otpor but, as one member explained to me, they studied its experiences and tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience from online sources, such as Wikipedia, and watched documentary films about it, such *A Force More Powerful*. Others, such as the more cosmopolitan, upper-class youth, had been connected to global activ-

ist networks since the Palestinian Intifada and the war in Iraq. In this context, the internet provided the prime medium for acquiring knowledge about past experiences of youth activism outside Egypt, of their tactics and successes, as well as of social networking. A few activists later developed links with global youth movements, including Otpor, learning new tactics from them directly, which generated internal tensions within the movement, as I shall discuss further below.

In sum, the young urban activists had come of age in an era of financial globalization and global flows of ideas, technologies and commodities (Appadurai 1996). In comparison with their elders, they were also more intimately connected to the globalized media ecology.²⁵ At the same time, they argued and wrote politics in the Egyptian dialect and articulated new political meanings on the basis of popular religion (e.g. Youth for Change's event at Sayyida Zeinab) and rather conventional forms of patriotism (e.g. April 6 Youth's celebrations of the 1952 Revolution and the Egyptian Day of Love). Some of their tactical practices reflected what Bayat (2010: 134) terms "accommodating innovation", attempts to use available cultural resources in order to redefine and reinvent "prevailing norms and traditional means to accommodate their youthful claims". Indeed, they seemed highly reflexive as to the constraints and opportunities of their actions as they responded to a fragmenting and increasingly complex public sphere. In this sense, they were entangled in a "general process, driven by social, political and economic change, by which social actors, confronted with the erosion, or transformation, of established patterns of belonging, readjust existing notions of rights and membership to new conceptions of identity, solidarity and the institutional foci of redress" (Ellison 1997: 711).

4.1.2. Politics of truth

In this light, an important aspect of being an opposition activist in Mubarak's Egypt was to try to keep track of what was going on in the world; in other words, reconciling official "truths" with their own experiences of it represented yet another dimension of everyday life. Mark Allen Peterson (forthcoming) asserts that social scientific inquiry into the making of truthfulness

²⁵ I refer here to Mark Peterson's definition of media ecology as "the dynamic, complex system in which media technologies interact with each other and with other social and cultural systems within a particular social field, and the ways these interrelationships shape the production, circulation, transformation and consumption of images, texts and information within this system" (Peterson 2011: 11).

in news reporting should go beyond professional claims about the “correspondence between the facts reported and a corresponding objective reality”, adding that:

Truth, in the social practice of news making, is less about facts than it is the correspondence of some arrangement of facts to what some group of people believe about the world. For journalists, truth thus generally involves representing the world in a way that creates agreement among many of those among whom these representations circulates; news consumers, in turn, usually judge the reliability of news on the basis of how well it fits with what they already believe to be true about the world.

In this regard, the ICTs and new media – mobile phones, the Internet and satellite television – became increasingly important sources of information at the turn of the millennium. In the early 2000s, the prodemocracy movements and coalitions, including the Kifaya movement and anti-torture campaigns, were among the first to tap into these opportunities for political communication and public mobilization. In the main, it was the young who designed and maintained websites, wrote on personal weblogs and email-lists, and on the Internet’s new social networking sites. Alongside dissident street actions, social media emerged as their main arena for experiencing politics. They shared the goal of mobilizing Egyptians to take transformative action and sought to promote “political awareness” (*wā’ī siyāsī*) – not only to sensitize Egyptians to “what goes on” in society, but also to their legal rights and entitlements as citizens – which the young activists generally considered lacking in contemporary society, thereby hindering the building of a critical mass against Mubarak’s rule and the NDP elite.

Indeed, the early adoption of social media as political tools, including blogs, YouTube and later Facebook, can be seen as crucial tactical practices making use of the available technical tools for purposes that were originally alien to them. Ethan Zuckerman (2008), who has closely observed the appropriation of the Internet by prodemocracy activists in Egypt and, more generally, under repressive regimes in the global South, coined the “cute cat theory” in order to explain this phenomenon: online publishing tools were initially created for Internet users who wanted to share “harmless” information with friends, such as pictures of their cute cats (Shapiro 2009). People who live in authoritarian countries appropriate these tools in order to expose human rights violations, political corruption and other injustices perpetrated

by public authorities. As an unintended effect, the online publishing tools would become alternative sources of news, online debates and networking.

Although Egypt entered the digital era in earnest at the turn of the millennium, by the electoral year 2005 the number of daily Internet users only amounted to 12.8%; and in 2008 some 18% of the population (World Bank 2015).²⁶ The earlier generations had relied on state-owned print and broadcast media which, since the Nasser era, had played important roles in state building, public mobilization and maintaining the hegemony of professional journalists and the governmental press over news reporting (Sakr 2013). During Mubarak's presidency, Press Law Nr 148 of 1980 required the journalists to safeguard the "interests of the country and its citizens" (*maṣāliḥ al-waṭan wa al-muwāḥiḍīn*) which, coupled with the State of Emergency, instigated practices of self-censorship within the journalistic profession (Kienle 2001: 40). For activists, the national digital gap in Egypt at the time presented a real challenge, coupled with the state's new PR campaigns and media machinery that continued, despite growing social polarization, to argue for the Mubarak-era social contract and Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif's government's commitment to neoliberal reforms.

Consider, for instance, how public authorities responded to the popular uprising in al-Mahalla al-Kubra on 6 April, 2008. Less than a month later, President Mubarak gave a televised speech on Labour Day, 1 May, 2008, that was filled with neoliberal arguments for better addressing the challenges of the global financial crisis (Ministry of Interior 2008). The main concession he made was the promise of a pay-rise for workers, which was, indeed, a mark of victory for the emergent workers' strike movements that been challenging the functioning of the economy during Mubarak's fifth term in office. The ways in which Mubarak addressed the youth, however, were much less concessional. He promised them a decent future but admitted that it was pregnant with challenges, emphasizing that it was the duty of the Egyptian government to tackle them. The central message for Egyptian youth was, however, that it was their responsibility to be educated and to find work, and not to remain "idle" and, especially, not to engage in "old ways" of thinking:

I say to our young people that the world around us is changing and we have to keep pace with it. The labor market now has new requirements as well as increasing needs for qualified manpower.

²⁶ Source: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2/countries/EG?display=graph> <Accessed 15.4.2015>.

I say to those graduated some years ago that we cannot deal with today's challenges with a mentality of the past. Embark dauntlessly and unhesitatingly onto the labor market with its new specialization in demand and go ahead making your own and the nation's future, with determination, confidence and new thinking.

Since the early 2000s, the NDP made repeated efforts to polish and modernize its public image and, in this context, the public notion of “new thinking” (*al-fikr al-jadīd*) had been epitomized by Gamal Mubarak, the alleged heir to the presidency, and his inner circle of “young NDP reformists” who claimed they were bringing the ruling party, and Egypt along with it, “into the 21st century” (e.g. Rabie 2004: 78-81).²⁷ As a new catchword it had direct connection with Gamal's rising public profile as well as the NDP's Policies Secretariat over which he presided. The Policies Secretariat included many of his closest associates and effectively functioned as a think-tank for Egypt's neoliberal reform policies, and in many respects appeared as the next strategic generation of political leaders, ready to take over the reins from the aging political elites. Gamal, a former investment banker in London, also headed a charity that was called the Future Generation Foundation that aimed at empowering the next generations of entrepreneurs and business leaders in the country. In 2005, his associates were involved in designing the PR campaign for Hosni Mubarak's presidential campaign, framing Mubarak as both a leader and a citizen, as “one of us” (Schemm 2005). In a parallel development, the Policies Committee began producing a number of “citizenship documents” (e.g. NDP 2004a, 2004b, 2006), which, in contrast to the lived experiences of wide segments of Egyptians, claimed to promote citizen participation in public affairs as a “national duty”, and to strengthen the trust of the average citizen in the state apparatus.

The timing of Mubarak's speech in terms of its proximity to the events on 6-7 April in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, which amounted to a major public outcry of discontent during Mubarak's presidency, cannot be overlooked. While the youth movement that later bore the name of this date was still taking shape, private newspapers, satellite television channels and social media were filled with subversive imageries of popular resistance and discontent. Images of protesters tearing down and then stumbling over Mubarak's poster on the central square of al-Mahalla al-Kubra were espe-

²⁷ The slogan of “New Thinking” was introduced during the NDP's 2nd Annual Conference in September 2002 (Rabie 2004).

cially powerful, and hitherto unwitnessed, expressions of popular anger and defiance against the president. The Facebook youth were also quick to call for another day of civil disobedience a month later on 4 May.

On Labour Day, Mubarak closed his speech with a direct response to his dissenters, referring to the “old ways” of thinking as follows:

Ours are a conscious people that know that increase in income is generated by exertion, sweat, hard work and struggle rather than by bygone slogans or instigative and provocative attempts that take lightly slogans of our homeland and people, profiteering in people’s suffering and failing to provide choices, alternatives or solutions. The destiny of homelands and peoples cannot be the subject of recriminations or overbidding.

We are more concerned over the rights of workers or other compatriots than those who profiteer from them and those who cover up under their slogans. So wide is the difference between democracy and anarchy, between the expression of opinion and the targeting of the homeland. We will respond, with the power and decisiveness of law, to those who target the homeland security and stability and the march of our compatriots. We will stand against those who propagate the call for skepticism, despair and frustration and will encircle those who manipulate prices and people’s livelihood.

We will forge our way towards a better future, with an economy, where the potential for growth is rising year after year, with workers, whose giving continues for the sake of the homeland, with a private sector that cares for its workers and attends to its social responsibility and with a people that make their present and future.

In addition to the hegemonic position Mubarak took as the defender of Egypt’s national interests, the public critique of its opponents in terms of “no alternatives” was a forceful argument which I noticed was also used by many Egyptians as a way to criticize the political opposition and the “loud protesters” on the streets. Coincidentally, the government under Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif maintained that neoliberal economic reform – with further privatization of state assets, deregulation of the financial sector and the

pursuit of foreign direct investment – was the only alternative and the way forward.

The NDP's PR campaigns and the state's neoliberal rhetoric appeared in the context of contested neoliberal reforms, which impoverished rather than benefited the population as a whole, and were partly intended to impress outside audiences, including the international financial institutions, the European Union and, especially, the policymakers in Washington (Kienle 2001; Springborg 2009). In the late Mubarak era, these state discourses represented an apparent move towards the logic of "hybrid regimes" that consolidated their hegemonic power in public life on the condition that "cognitive dissonance between the realities and trappings of participatory politics" were obscured therein (Sakr 2013a: 21). According to Tripp (2010: 1), the leaders of hybrid regimes,

...adopt the trappings of democracy, yet they pervert democracy – sometimes through patronage and largess, other times through violence and repression – for the sole purpose of remaining in power. This creates a catch-22. Because leaders have sought power through violence and patronage, they cannot leave power; the personal consequences would be too great. Because there is no easy exit, they must continue using violence and patronage to remain in power.

In this light, the blog posts on the sexual harassment of young women published after the protests in May 2005 and during *'ūd* celebrations in 2006 (Klaus 2007), the video clips of humiliation and torture at police stations, and the online reporting on forced evictions of local residents in impoverished neighbourhoods, represented a cumulative set of counter-narratives that undermined official depictions of the social world in the 2000s. They represented important wedges into the "scriptural economy" of the ruling elite, insofar as national and international media, human rights organizations and other pressure groups act on them. The activists' main audiences and targets of mobilization were, however, closer to home. In this sense, the tactical practices of exposing "what goes on" in society, coupled with online campaigns, such as "We are all Khaled Said" group on Facebook, amounted to a sustained campaign of exposing reality – the corruption and brute practices of police violence – to the eyes of average Egyptians. For the latter, however, the video clips, photographs and online testimonies that were diffused in the late Mubarak era did not necessarily make "news"

as such. Rather, they confirmed what had already circulated among close circles of families and friends. Rife in society were stories of the misuse of power by the police and public authorities who were also subject to ridicule well as horror stories, yet this was rarely voiced in the face of the authorities.

In the late 2000s, the expanding use of ICTs and social media challenged the traditional power structures in the making of news and also marked a gradual transformation of who had the right to consume and to produce imageries that represent what many consider to be true on the basis of their everyday experience. For the young activists online, producing and disseminating counterhegemonic imageries were subversive activities in themselves. Their online and offline political engagements were part and parcel of their daily lives, and these realms could not separated, but rather contributed to an everyday experience of “connected presence” in both (Licoppe 2004). To use Herrera’s terms (2014b), they were members of the growing “wired generation” of young Egyptians, who collectively played important roles in the making of the “January 25” events and beyond. In the early stages, however, social media provided unconventional sites for forging new political subjectivities and modalities of political action, whereby the social boundaries of public conformity, carefully managed as they were by Mubarak’s regime, were negotiated in front of PC screens in homes and “on the move” by those who could afford smart phones with Internet connections (e.g. Lynn 2012).

The online dissent became political by the very circumstances of authoritarian rule in which it emerged, and, at least initially, required courage from the Internet users who consumed, and contributed to, dissident information online. In 2008, Amin, an occasional member of the April 6 Youth Movement told me that he had, from the outset, written on his weblog and Facebook account anonymously, but that a recent post on Facebook had disclosed his real identity. He no longer cared, however, and was ready to face potential repercussions for his anti-Mubarak stance. Other activists chose to act as openly as possible in personal defiance of any claims that they were doing something wrong. On the other hand, some Egyptian youth, who were not involved in politics, disclosed that the power of social media lies in numbers, as they did not expect the police to detain the thousands of individuals who join certain Facebook groups and like or share contentious images online (Herrera 2014b: 32).

For Scott, those who voice what is already known disclose the individualized yet simultaneously shared experiences of rectifying the cognitive dissonance in their everyday lives:

...the open declaration of the hidden transcript in the teeth of power is typically experienced, both by the speaker and by those who share his or her condition, as a moment in which truth is finally spoken in the place of equivocation and lies [...] those who take this bold step experience it as a moment of truth and as a personal authentication. (Scott 1990: 208)

While Scott uses the term “truth” with high reservation, Hannah Arendt is less economical: At stake are the constant efforts to expose the “modern political lie” that aims at concealing “things that are no secrets at all but are known to practically everybody” (Arendt 2006: 247). For Arendt, the relationship between truth and political power lies in the processes whereby factual truths are represented and mediated in public life (ibid.: 223-259). In this context, “factual truths” refer to empirical reality, such as historical moments and events, or things someone has said or done, and, as such, differ from opinions and “philosophical truths” that can be the subject of deliberation, acceptance and rejection. Interestingly, a number of experienced blogger-activists told me that, in comparison to a textual format, they highly valued the use of audiovisual material such as photographs and video clips in their political communications. The textual format can always be refuted, while the audiovisual evidence of “what actually happens” can be either verified or concealed. The latter conveyed lived realities more directly and was more accessible to illiterate audiences and, importantly, evaded engagement in ideological debates when exposing the living conditions of average Egyptians, including the continued humiliation and violence, and the way in which human dignity has been stripped from the people by the powerful.

4.1.3 Transformations in Egypt’s media ecology

Soon after the 2010 parliamentary elections, a seminar at the Journalists’ Syndicate contended that today’s “citizen journalists” were the most active news sources at the polling stations, which the NDP had put under a virtual news blockade on polling day (Onodera 2011a). Despite the active roles the youth played in dissident forms of knowledge management, however, it is important to remember that their practices to produce and disseminate alternative information on Egypt’s societal affairs built on the ongoing processes of structural transformation in Egypt’s public sphere. Here, notions of social authority and affiliation had already been challenged by the human

rights advocates' earlier campaigns and the popular consumption of "small" and "new" media, such as cassette-tapes and wall graffiti in urban spaces (Starret 1995; Norton 2003; Hirschkind 2006) or satellite television channels, and the Internet (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Turner 2007).

Since the 1990s, the satellite channels have become more widely available as relatively low-cost dishes have proliferated in the market, and new Arabic-language channels, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, have diversified the news coverage of current affairs at national, regional and global levels. In the 2000s, the new satellite channels such as ONTV and Dream TV, and particularly their political talk shows, played important roles in gauging public opinion and diversifying public debate on a daily or weekly basis, often involving exchanges with in-callers about current affairs (Sakr 2013a: 26-31).²⁸ The administrators of the "We are all Khaled Said" on Facebook also encouraged its members to call in to these programs (Herrera 2014a: 67). Since the mid-2000s, the gradual privatization of the publishing industry has also given rise to a new and vocal press. Privately owned dailies, such as al-Miṣrī al-Yawm, Al-Badīl, al-Dustūr and al-Shurūq, played important roles in covering the burgeoning protest movements across the country and diversified news coverage beyond those close to the ruling elite and political parties: the governmental and oppositional press, or the mouthpieces of existing opposition parties.

In addition, significant changes took place in the 2000s in the realm of popular culture. Social criticism, in particular, expanded as a popular genre in both cinema and literature in tandem with anti-Mubarak mobilization, narrating highly affective stories of ordinary people suffering from police violence, local corruption and urban poverty. Several authors, like Alaa al-Aswany and Ahmed Khaled al-Tawfiq, along with the publications of the Dar Merit publishing house and others, fed in different ways into the popular imagination, and direct experience, of social injustice. Omar Afifi, a former police officer, created a minor scandal in 2008 by publishing a book whose title, in colloquial Egyptian, is best translated as, "So that you don't get slapped on the back of your neck", informing average Egyptians of their legal and constitutional rights when dealing with police officers on the street (Afifi 2008). In Egypt, a slap on the back of another person's neck is a highly offensive gesture of public humiliation, a direct insult to one's honour and, incidentally, a frequent scene in the video clips that were leaked

28 These shows included *Ākhir Kalām* ("Last Word") on ONTV, Ibrahim Eissa's *ʿAlā al-Qahwa* ("At the café") on Dream TV, Al-*ʿĀshira Masāʿan* ("10 PM") and Al-Qāhira al-Yawm ("Cairo Today") on Dream 2 (Sakr 2013).

from police stations to be seen openly by Egyptian publics at the time. As a consequence, the book was soon banned and Afifi took refuge in the United States, but copies were circulated among opposition activists in both printed and online versions.

At the same time, the Internet and social media became a daily source of information for growing numbers of Egyptians towards the end of the decade. If Internet users only amounted to 18 percent of Egyptians in 2008, by 2010 their numbers had grown to 31.4 and to 39.8 in 2011 (World Bank 2015). Meanwhile, Egyptian Facebook members numbered 822,560 in March 2008, and in February 2011, when Mubarak resigned, some 5.6 million, with the influx of two million additional members by April 2011; three out of four members were between 15 and 29 years of age (Herrera 2014b: 31). According to Herrera, the growing wired generation of young Egyptians relied increasingly on the Internet and social media as their source of information, networking and deliberation, providing users with alternative and preferred sites for learning outside the formal educational system, and shaping users' "cognitive make-up, which changes their relationship to political and social systems and their notion of themselves as citizens" (ibid.: 20). Importantly, the new opportunities provided by the Internet cut across social differences such as gender, geography and religion, although during my fieldwork in 2008, being connected to the global information flows as an aspect of democratic citizenship was still a question of access to resources, needed know-how and, for instance, foreign language skills.

The advent of neoliberal reforms and, especially, the privatization of the news and publishing industry were curiously working against the consolidation of power by Mubarak's hybrid regime. Egypt's entry into the information age and the exponential growth in the number of mobile phone and Internet users, added to the small but vocal private press, made state attempts to monopolize Egypt's public arena increasingly difficult. This is not to say that the Egyptian government gave up its attempts to control media output. The State of Emergency authorized security services under the Ministry of Interior to monitor and censor different forms of communication. From the mid-2000s onwards, public prosecutors arrested several journalists, including Ibrahim Eissa, one of Mubarak's most vocal critics, and young bloggers on the basis of their writings. At the same time, private newspapers, such as *Al-Badīl* and *al-Dustūr*, were forced to reduce their publishing activities for economic reasons, amidst public speculation about behind-the-scenes political manipulation (al-Aswany 2011: 189-192). During the 2000s, the Internet in Egypt was relatively free in comparison with other countries

of the Middle East, such as Tunisia or Syria, although, in 2008, the NDP planned to create the National Agency for Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcast to control any audiovisual material in print, and broadcast and digital media that damaged “social peace”, “national unity”, “public order” and “public values”.²⁹ The state organized occasional filtering and certain webpages were blocked during major events, such as on April 6, 2008, and during the parliamentary elections in 2010. The closing-down of the Internet during the “January 25” uprising in 2011 made it clear that the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Egypt operated under state tutelage, namely, the National Telecommunication Regulation Authority (NTRA) in cooperation with the State Security services (Onodera 2011a).

Shortly after Mubarak’s resignation in 2011, various opposing groups, including pro-Mubarak sympathizers, the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, which took on the role of overseeing the transitional process, were eager to use new ICTs to cauge public opinion and establish their influence. In the post-Mubarak era, the SCAF’s “amateur military journalists” (Iskandar 2012) and the Muslim Brotherhood’s “e-militias” (Herrera 2014a) adopted ICTs and the practices of citizen journalism, seeking hegemonic positions in cyberspace, thus confirming the early warnings of pioneering bloggers that the power of social media lies in their content and not in the mere adoption of technological tools (Hasan and Abdelfattah 2008). Indeed, although the young activist promoted the wider goals of the political opposition, such as the principles of freedom, justice, democracy, human rights and the civil state, the subversive effects of social media practices carried the potential of transcending this normative surface. Activists’ appropriation of ICTs concerned premeditated struggles to know, and to make known, the deplorable context in which Egyptians lived their everyday lives. However, the tactic of exposing “factual truths” did not necessarily promote predefined visions of an ideal social order, but rather the ordinary people’s “right to have rights”, or their right to make ends meet and to live with dignity. These notions can hardly be described as universal and, consequently, it is not a given that the appropriation of social media as political tools necessarily leads to democratization.

In this light, although de Certeau’s stand on “tactics” can be used to analyse specific forms of youthful dissent, it can be also criticized, as Jon Mitchell (2007: 101-103) suggests, for promoting a certain theology, if not

²⁹ The draft law was leaked to al-Miṣrī al-Yawm on July 9, 2008 and consequently covered in Al-Jazeera International. Source: <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/08/20088791952617974.html>.

a teleology, of human action, in that it suggests that the unleashing of some kind of innate powers in the human being leads to prosperity and emancipation. Be that as it may, the appropriation of new media as political tools – spearheaded as it was by Egyptian bloggers – took place at a strategic historical period of the mid-2000s when the wider anti-Mubarak mobilization was taking shape in public life (Radsch 2008; Hirschkind 2011). If Mubarak’s security state had yielded a panoptic position over public life and urban space, the gradual reversal of the gaze or, indeed, any synoptic intrusions onto the practices of state authorities, enabled them to be viewed by the general public (Mathiesen 1997).³⁰ In Egypt, the tactical use of ICTs enabled audiences to view the very spaces of state power, whether they were voting places, local police stations or patrol wagons, and enabled people to mediate their up-to-date experiences to expanding audiences. Although these tactical practices were at the outset pioneered by the small circles of “cyber-dissidents” (Fahmi 2009), the gradual expansion of online dissent would lead to increasing numbers of those who produced, distributed and consumed counter-hegemonic ideas and imageries as members of the emerging wired generation.

4.2. FIELDS OF POSSIBILITY

I have thus far suggested that, in the 2000s, youthful resistance took many forms along a variety of different avenues. Towards the end of the decade, some were more oriented toward youth movements, others more into party politics or civil society organizations, while newcomers could also be mobilized online; yet all were part of the wider prodemocracy mobilization (Albrecht 2013). While dissident practices of knowledge management did not only concern young people, their new roles and visibilities built on pre-existing transformations in neoliberal Egypt, including the expansion of privately owned media, the earlier campaigns of Egyptian human rights advocates, and the anti-Mubarak mobilization in the 2000s. In this context, their political engagements evolved and operated at the precarious intersection of knowledge, mobilization and power (Leach and Scoones 2007) through practices that are at times termed as “tactical media” (Garcia and

³⁰ I draw here on Mathiesen (1997) who introduced the notion “Synopticon” as a way to explain the reverse situation of panoptic processes whereby citizens have become increasingly able to oversee public personalities and public personalities with the help of the mass media, television in particular. For an extended discussion of synopticism, see Elmer (2012).

Lovink 1997; Dieter 2011) or “citizen journalism” (Khiabany and Sreberny 2009; Onodera 2011a) which were, alongside dissident street actions, the main arena of engagement in which young activists established their presence and made their influence felt.

To give some sociological coherence to their diverse forms of individual and collective actions, it can be useful to view youth activism as a specific field of political practices in which young activists sought autonomy on the basis of their generational consciousness and tactical practices aimed at resisting the given socialization and acculturation processes within the political opposition (Edmunds and Turner 2002a: 13-16). As such, youth activism also built on uneven processes of habituation or acquiring certain skills, practical norms and social standing as public political actors. In other words, the activist habitus that some acquired was not so easily appropriated by others, and youthful resistance encompassed various entry points, personal life trajectories, and differentiated means and chances to participate in public political life. In this sense, youth activism should not be regarded merely as a monolithic field with rigid boundaries but as one characterized by internal heterogeneity, social hierarchies and struggles for resources, legitimacy and influence between different social actors.

4.2.1. Multiple trajectories

Indeed, some young Cairenes appeared “more activist” than others in the late 2000s. Not everyone was equally knowledgeable in new media technologies, or versatile in political theory or public mobilization tactics, nor did all have similar resources for the acquisition of camera phones, digital cameras, laptops and other state-of-the-art technical tools in order to enact their new agentic capacities. Some did not have a camera or the Internet on their mobile phones and could not participate in quick-witted debates on the latest news. Some wore ill-fitting jeans and baggy T-shirts, and others, in the hope of upward social mobility, would be more attracted by the financial incentives and opportunities offered by opposition politics. Unless born and bred into oppositional culture, or connected with the needed support networks, the possibilities of embracing the political life of the opposition activist were more limited. I have already suggested in Chapter 3 that the family background and gender of young Cairenes shaped and conditioned their opportunities to engage in public political dissent. Here I wish to continue this discussion by examining other distinctions such as social class,

education and cosmopolitan connectedness, and the ways these intersected and shaped experiences of possible action.

Let us consider Umar (23) who lived with his parents in an agricultural village on the outskirts of Greater Cairo, and had only limited access to his favourite pastime: sitting in the evenings with friends in downtown cafés. Umar was a staunch Arab Socialist and valorised Gamal Abdel Nasser's visions of state-led development, a large public sector, and greater unity between Arab countries in which Egypt should take a leading role. Similar to many Nasserist and Leftist youth, Umar was highly sceptic about the recent emergence of April 6 Youth movement, claiming that the latter's claim to "non-ideology" offered no future vision (*ru'yā*) or practical solutions to Egypt's social, economic and political problems. In 2008, he was a student at Cairo University and resisted party affiliations although he had participated occasionally in student demonstrations, especially on the Palestinian issue, and a few meetings of the Nasserist Thought Club, affiliated with the Karama Party. He soon resigned from the latter and, later developed the habit of attending a small study circle with other young people who shared his interest in Nasserist and Arab Nationalist ideology; about a dozen, both men and women, met once a week to debate matters related to, for instance, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, global capitalism and Egypt's role in regional politics.

On weekdays, Umar usually travelled to attend classes at Cairo University but, often without telling his parents, he also went to meet his friends downtown. In order to travel to the city centre, he had to take three separate minibuses, taking him some 1.5 hours and costing him around 5 L.E. each way. There were periods when he stayed in the village with family and local friends who were not involved in political groups. Sometimes he helped his father tend the land, a small plot on which his family partially depended for subsistence. At other times he was pressured into studying for university exams and, in the summer, for repeat exams due to failing some in the first round.³¹ When I first befriended Umar, his family did not own a computer and, consequently, he was detached from Internet-based debates and online news that were, for most of his downtown friends, the content of everyday conversations. To get to grips with topics of public debate, he occasionally

31 In Egypt, university students enter different faculties on the basis of their results in the final exams in high school. Umar studied at the Faculty of Commerce which is one of the largest faculties at Cairo university but, at the same time, one of the socially less 'glorious' due to its entrants having had relatively poor results. In general, the academic year reached its most active peak in April and May, when the "end of the year" exams took place, while those who failed were given the opportunity of repeating exams during the summer.

bought Al-‘Arabī, (costing then 3 L.E.), the weekly mouth-piece of the Nasserist Party. “I don’t like reading that much,” he said about his reluctance to spend money on newspapers, adding: “All I need to know I will hear from my friends.” Umar’s life aspirations and social standing, and those of many others, stood in stark contrast to those young activists who were educated in private universities, were fluent in one or more foreign languages, and led cosmopolitan life-styles with a relative abundance of money, social networks and “cosmopolitan capital” (de Koning 2009).

Or consider Asmaa (28), a young liberal NGO professional whom I interviewed in a café called Cilantro in October 2008. Unlike Umar, she belonged to Cairo’s “upper-middle classes”, spoke fluent English and held a degree from the American University of Cairo, one of the most exclusive private universities in Egypt. She lived alone, far from her family, which ran counter to the prevailing norms and expectations of a young unmarried woman, and spent much of her leisure time in the popular (*sha‘bī*) *ahāwī* and Western-style cafés such as Cilantro near her old university next to Tahrir Square. Asmaa personally considered street demonstrations to be mostly futile and unproductive ventures, although she had participated in periodic protests after the sexual harassment of women on “Black Wednesday”, May 25, 2005. She considered herself an activist but foremost a feminist, preferring to work within the contours of professionalized civil society and, in particular, as part of Egypt’s women’s rights movement. The latter addressed, in her view, the most crucial predicament afflicting Egyptian society, namely, the patriarchal power relations and conservative public moralities that helped to reproduce social injustices at all levels, from family life to high-level politics.

After graduation, she and her friends established a feminist advocacy group, with headquarters in an affluent part of Cairo, with the aim of empowering local women and of sensitizing them to deal with patriarchal and conservative practices – such as domestic violence – within the family. Her active public role as an advocate of women’s rights in Egypt yielded occasional invitations to lecture overseas, and helped her to secure funding from international development agencies, such as USAID. Being versed in political science and feminist scholarship, Asmaa was highly reflective about her uses of “gender equality” and “women’s empowerment” as both value statements and current “catch words” in development. She acknowledged that the normative terrain on which she and her associates position themselves relates, first, to the Egyptian women’s movement and, second, the global “human rights regime” including its international conventions

and rights-based rhetoric (e.g. al-Ali 2000). She was particularly proud of the Egyptian women's movement for pushing traditional "taboos" such as the long-standing practices of female genital mutilation into public debate which, eventually, had produced changes in the legislation.

Class and gender

Egypt is a highly class-conscious society in which levels of education, family background, wealth, and also acquired knowledge of political, cultural and global affairs position young people in different social spheres and consequently shape their political opportunities as well as their social interactions (de Koning 2009). Only a handful of young urbanites could actually launch their own NGOs, secure funding, and take as active a part in "civil society debates" as Asmaa did, and the personal trajectories of Umar and Asmaa illustrate the highly differentiated experiences which young Cairenes had of their role in socio-political change in the 2000s. The majority of young activists I got to know through my fieldwork were socially positioned somewhere between these two personal trajectories. In other words, they were educated in public universities in the Greater Cairo area, such as the Universities of Cairo, Helwan and Ain Shams, or, alternatively, had moved to Cairo from the governorates, including Alexandria, Tanta and Mansoura. By and large, they considered themselves members of the middle class (*ṭabaqa mutawassiṭa*) or the "content class" (*ṭabaqa mastūra*), who lived relatively privileged lives but whose future prospects were being narrowed down.

In other words, inasmuch as youth activism attracted members mainly from the urban and educated middle classes, not everyone had similar opportunities, resources and chances to participate in protracted political dissent. At least at the beginning of their activist careers, most youth had few of the required connections (or *wāṣṭa*) that could provide them with satisfying avenues into the labour market. Many aspired to work in journalism, civil society organizations and other forms of employment that would resolve the deeply felt contradictions between the exigencies of earning a living and continuing political dissent. Moreover, the majority spoke little English, or any other foreign language, beyond the customary salutations. Language skills represented a persisting division among youth activists, especially between the "content class" and those more affluent, part of the reason why the latter were so predominantly interviewed in foreign press. Moreover, foreign language skills are increasingly important for gaining

access to employment and also to civil society professions. Finally, in addition to providing entry to global information flows, they represent a marker of cosmopolitanism and a bearer of social status among peers.

Such social distinctions among young dissenters help us to recognize how their fields of possible action were differentiated. As the cases of Umar and Asmaa suggest, these were often influenced by socioeconomic standing more than gender, despite the fact that Egypt's public political life was and is in general dominated by patriarchal norms. The appropriation of ICTs as political tools was also most readily adopted by relatively affluent, educated and cosmopolitan youth. Some belonged to Cairo's "rooted cosmopolitans" – or, as Abdelrahman puts it, domestic activists who "help mediate new ideas about power structures, political strategies and modes of political activism within their local context" – who played important roles in linking Egypt's activist networks to those abroad (Abdelrahman 2011: 408).³² In part due to the contacts and social networks forged during the prodemocracy campaigns, some had managed to find work in NGOs, newspapers and the private sector, including publishing and IT consultancy. Others, especially those whose parents were already cultural or public figures, had found ways into political parties and civil society groups which, if not always as lucrative, at least provided them with livelihoods and a chance to engage in public political life as part of their job description. Some of them frequented the same spaces as Umar and Ahmed, namely the downtown *ahāwī*, while also having the means to blend in with the clientele of the more up-market Western style cafés that catered to the well-to-do young professionals (de Koning 2009).

Cosmopolitan youth, both men and women, could also accommodate themselves to the ways of being and doing that prevailed in the transnational activist cultures – including its tastes, political practices and patterns of consumption. In these social circuits, globally circulating genres and sensibilities – such as the political satire linked to South Park – provided a source of subversive jokes and humour, but also social distinction. Many global commodities, such as online movies and articles, require some knowledge of foreign languages, especially English, which served as yet another point of differentiation. Furthermore, the rooted cosmopolitans

32 These include global networks such as the Egyptian Anti-Globalization Movement and Global Justice Movement (Abdelrahman 2011). One important instance of forging these linkages was the Cairo Anti-War Conference that has been organized in Cairo annually since the outbreak of the Iraq war. I attended the event in 2007 and 2008, which also coincided with the Cairo Social Forum in the same premises.

could afford imported luxuries like trendy imported jeans and T-shirts. Some young men, and especially those who affiliated themselves with parties and NGOs, would occasionally wear the “official look” of suits and collared shirts which, in turn, would be ridiculed as an act of “giving in” to the conventions of formal politics by those who could afford (in the symbolic and economic senses) this form of irony.

Cosmopolitan and more affluent youth were generally better placed to claim autonomy from the formal hierarchies of civil society formations and political parties. They had the means to travel around and set up meetings in the Greater Cairo area, and to maintain dissent actions through their social networks, while using costly ICT tools “on the move” as part and parcel of their daily political practices. For those who were less equipped to do so, cultivating personal ties with, for instance, the staff and volunteers of political parties and NGOs were in this respect more beneficial. They provided vital access to office spaces in, for example, party headquarters, NGOs and private newspapers, which saved them the money they might otherwise have spent in cafeterias, for instance. These premises could at times be used for organizing meetings, using computers and printing facilities and more mundane acts such as having a rest or going to the toilet. However, benefiting from these facilities potentially involves entanglement in the overlapping relations of power and patronage within these formal organizations and, as such, socialization into their conventions and oppositional practices.

Despite the multiple differences among young activists with regard to, for instance, their class, political ideology, public piety and even religion, young men were seemingly pressured to conform to the popular notions of manhood (*rugūla*) and, especially, to the ideal traits of *gad‘ān*, including toughness, courage, and righteousness. Similar qualities were also expected of young female activists but at times of crisis and upheaval, such as when protesting or dealing with the police or political rivals, young men were under more pressure to prove their manhood through the display of powerful ideals of personal commitment, integrity and self-sacrifice. As I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, these idealized forms of personhood were part and parcel of the normative landscape of opposition politics in which the young activists were embedded.

In this sense, young women activists had at their disposal a more varied repertoire of outward appearances and self-comportment than their male peers. Operating in Cairo’s masculine urban spaces, young women faced more personal risks from political activism, as I have already mentioned (see Chapter 3). Huda, who was briefly detained on April 6, 2008, pointed out that deten-

tion is always a graver experience for a young woman than it is for a man. Although, based on my observation, both young men and women seemed to gain respect and credibility within activist circles from being detained, Huda suggested that for young women detention usually implied – at least in the public eye – possible exposure to sexual or other forms of harassment. Even brief detention in prison was directly connected with a woman’s honour and family reputation and could endanger the long-term marriage arrangements that constitute important economic endeavours for most Egyptian families (Singerman 1997a: 109-131). In the 2000s, some women activists were facing yet another challenge, as police officers had threatened that they would involve the “vice police” – the state guardians of public morality; any association with this branch of the police would be highly damaging to one’s reputation, even if there were no grounds for accusations.

Moreover, some young women faced additional challenges to be taken “seriously” in public political life. Some, especially those from affluent families, were conscious of the gendered attitudes they had to overcome in order to legitimize their social status and credibility as activists even among their peers. Fadwa, due to her wealthy family background, had faced suspicions that she and her female friends – with “all” the options in life – engaged in oppositional activities for the sake of excitement, if not escapism. Others told me that they were compelled to deal with unwelcome attention from males; one said that she had resigned from an opposition party partly because one of the elderly leaders told her he loved her, making her situation uncomfortable. Moreover, a disengaged Youth for Change activist once complained to me about the ways some “upper class” women dressed – in tight jeans and shirts, without the veil – during street protests. In his view, they should have presented themselves in a more appropriate and “respectful” (*muhtarama*) manner in the course of protesters’ attempts to gain support from average Egyptians on the street. At times, however, some women could actually negotiate their way around – and even play with – these kinds of prevailing masculine expectations and attitudes, as they were “freer” to do things that most likely would have got their male peers in trouble. For instance, I heard a story about how a young female Youth for Change activist had directed a fierce verbal critique against a policeman during a street protest, only to learn later that he was one of the highest-ranking police officers in the Cairo municipality. On another occasion, she had been allowed to take food and groceries to a friend in jail on the basis of a “cute smile” to the prison guard: a tactical move that benefited from the masculine attitudes of the officer.

4.2.2. Gaining practical knowledge

Elyachar (2011) notes that Cairenes learn from an early age a certain political economy of gestures, movements and behaviour in public spaces. In these everyday situations, one's ways of talking, walking and self-comportment carry the traits of one's social standing, socioeconomic background, level of education and public piety and are thus far from neutral acts but subject to contested debate. In this sense, the politics of habitus and bodily *hexis* – or outward appearances and self-comportment – becomes a site of contested ideologies, such as women's donning the veil, or the ways in which Muslims transgress social norms in specific circumstances like religious feasts (Elyachar 2011). While Elyachar's focus rests on how urban residents negotiate their way around Cairo's fragmented urban spaces, these insights are useful for framing our discussion on the practical and everyday dimensions of being a young political activist in the late Mubarak era.

Although the young activists' opportunities and dispositions with regard to public political dissent were differentiated, they were not necessarily predestined to stasis in their given social backgrounds and life trajectories. Oppositional activism in itself involved continual social interactions with others, such as colleagues, fellow activists, and elder politicians, thereby establishing social networks that provided prime social sites for learning and internalising practical knowledge and skills that proved necessary when taking a public stance against the incumbent authorities. Thus, even if an individual was not born and bred into a politicized family, he or she could still tap into the "hidden transcripts" and certain processes of enskilment and acculturation within the political opposition, which were not always available through virtual spaces.

In this sense, getting to know the little alleyways and learning to spot government agents from afar provided highly valuable tacit knowledge that was needed at times needed. Learning to talk on the phone in a certain manner with friends, or in public seminars with unknown persons, also developed similar skills with which to circumvent state surveillance, skills which were, undoubtedly, diffused differentially within the political opposition. Compared to the majority, rooted cosmopolitans were highly equipped to counter the state grip over digital communication. Some were committed to Egyptian and global Open-Source movements that resisted, in particular, the monopoly of Microsoft in the operating system and software markets. One thus globally linked young NGO professional told me that as soon as

the government finds its way into their computers or profiles, the online Open-Source community will provide them with new digital security tools. In the 2000s, the technologically “savvy” activists provided their services to campaign networks and human rights organizations, at times instructing their younger peers in workshops or through instructional online posts, thus transmitting their technical know-how and political experiences to new activist generations. At the street level, those who bore the markers of being “upper class” – through clothing, lingua and gestures – often enjoyed relative safety from the excesses of police violence.³³ This observation naturally may be compared with the position of “average” Egyptians who could did not benefit from either the social status or capital of being connected to journalists, public personalities, lawyers or human rights advocates in Egypt and possibly abroad.

For those like Ahmed, who in 2008 did not fit the appearance of an “upper-class youth” and did not have the needed connections, dealing with the police sometimes ended in humiliating experiences. Through political activism itself, he had acquired certain practical knowledge and “practical norms” (de Sardan 2008) that proved beneficial when negotiating his differentiated rights on Cairo’s streets.³⁴ Firstly, he had studied his legal rights, including the banned book by Omar Afifi, and knew that as a citizen he had the right to ascertain that a plain-clothes officer on the street really belonged to the police forces. But the mere knowledge of one’s rights would fall on deaf ears without knowing how to deploy them. For instance, he had once walked a female friend to her home. As they were approaching her neighbourhood, a man introduced himself as a State Security officer and asked to

33 For example, in 2006, a student at the American University in Cairo wrote in the student paper of his experience of differentiated rights on Cairo’s streets: “Last Sunday, one of my friends was approached by policemen who asked for his national ID and then decided to search him. My friend objected on the basis that the police officer doesn’t have the right to search him and an argument took place. The policemen started swearing at us using profanity and multiple hand gestures. One then summoned an officer who threatened that he would frame all of us for drug charges no matter who we are, saying that he wasn’t scared of anyone and that he has the right to do what he wants. He told us that under the emergency law, he can take all of us in and do whatever he pleases with us. He promised to destroy our future. Finally, one of my friends managed to cool the officer down by telling him who exactly he was and what university we attended and what our parents did for a living. The officer started to change his tone and let us go.” (Caravan, May 14, 2006: 4)

34 For de Sardan, the notion of practical norms is based on the acknowledgement of normative pluralism in society and refers to the “refined, invisible, implicit, and subterranean regulations” in society that are scarcely articulated in public (de Sardan 2008: 13). Although closely associated to Bourdieu’s (1977) habitus, de Sardan criticizes the latter as too “dominocentric”, extending similar criticism of “resistocentrism” against both Scott (1990) and de Certeau (1984) (de Sardan 2008: 14).

see their ID cards.³⁵ The activists improvised they were cousins but, before showing their ID cards, Ahmed requested that the man first display his own. This he initially declined to do but, after a tit-for-tat argument on the issue, he reluctantly produced it. The card indeed belonged to a State Security officer, but the man concealed the name of its holder with his index finger. Ahmed requested that the man show his name, but the latter refused. An argument took place, after which the man let the two go. In retrospect, Ahmed said that, from the outset, he had recognized the man as a State Security officer, but speculated that the latter would not want to disclose his name in the local neighbourhood, perhaps for fear of later being recognized later as someone working with the notorious state institution.

A single incident among many, Ahmed's experience amounts to what Holston calls an "act of public standing" (Holston 2009) or a way of arguing one's position on the basis of legal authority in a situation when citizens' formal rights, as inscribed in law and the constitution, are not substantiated in real practice. This is not incidental, since an important part of activist practical knowledge was to know one's rights, and act accordingly, which was an important aspect of the "political awareness" they saw as lacking among average Egyptians. When I met Ahmed two years later in 2010, he seemed an experienced activist in the eyes of many of his peers. During the previous two years, he had studied in an open-university program and worked part-time in a private newspaper with the aim of saving for the future. He had also met a girl he cared for, and cultivated the prospect of marriage. Their relationship did not blossom, however, and he used the savings to buy a laptop and a digital camera. These were not only important commodities and markers of symbolic and economic capital within activist circles, but he also needed them for building a career in journalism. Passing time in the same *ahāwī*, his social status – an early member of April 6 Youth, with the activist tools he had not possessed in 2008 – he had tangibly changed in two years. His new friends, who were mobilized as volunteers in the ElBaradei-campaign in 2010, were keen to hear his stories and experiences of events he had personally witnessed. By then, he had withdrawn from April 6 Youth but he would meet or bump into his former associates regularly in downtown Cairo and at opposition events.

For some, the experiences in youth movements themselves encompassed a learning curve on coalition politics. One told me in 2008 that the main

35 Egyptians, by law, were obliged to carry their national IDs, and such policing practice was a frequent occurrence on Cairo's streets.

lesson from his involvement in Youth for Change was that that cooperation with diverse youth groups, especially partisan groups, simply does not work. During the 2010 parliamentary elections, which resulted in the NDP's landslide victory and marked the high water mark of frustration and perceived lack of prospects within the political opposition, a former April 6 Youth member complained to me:

We [the young activists] have not learned anything from the past, and make the same mistakes over and over again. Everyone is out there for the fame; to be in positions of power. We should have a bigger picture of what's going on.

At times youth coalitions did not move forward beyond the initial idea. Islam, the young liberal who earlier memorized Salah Jahin's poetry to express his generational consciousness – “silent, but with much to say” – had tried to form a coalition with young members of different opposition parties in 2008. He managed to get them together to a couple of meetings but found it an impossible venture: “We started with coming up with a name for what we should be called, but couldn't even agree on that!” His experiences are telling of the fact that youth movements, such as Youth for Change or April 6 Youth, were by no means self-evident developments.

4.3. HOW TO ACT TOGETHER?

As we have seen, youthful dissent took many forms via several avenues in Egypt's public political life in the late Mubarak era. Some would appropriate autonomous political roles by combining direct street action with the tactics of “cyber-dissidence” (Fahmi 2009) thereby gaining new niches and visibilities in the wider prodemocracy movement. I have also suggested the value of closer examination of the internal differences and dynamics among the youth themselves, and their differential experiences of engaging in public political life over time. The field of youth activism was in many ways characterized by social hierarchies but also struggles for resources, legitimacy and influence. For instance, the various organized groups – Liberals, Leftists, Arab nationalists and so on – were periodically at loggerheads over political demands, appropriate lines of action and power hierarchies, despite the initial aim of leaving differences of opinion aside so as to be united in their public demand for the end of Mubarak's presidency.

Finally, let us turn to the issues of horizontal organizational forms that characterize political youth activism and public mobilization in the global era (Nikolayenko 2007; Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009; Abdelrahman 2011). While the young activists' collective rejection of formal organizational affiliations in many ways provided them with a degree of autonomy, a closer look reveals the dynamic and overlapping processes of group formation.

4.3.1. Limits to coalition politics

In the late 2000s, it was evident that those, such as bloggers and individual Facebook users, who could resist being socialized into formal organizations, were most able to continue their individuated actions over time. The wider phenomenon of Internet-based dissent involved synoptic intrusions and also what Linda Herrera (2014a: 115-118) terms “vemes”, or virtual memes, which transmitted anti-regime ideas, imageries and attitudes in the making of the oppositional consciousness in the run-up to 2011. In this sense, the expanding online communities could also be seen as digital era nonmovements – or “digital encroachment” – whereby individual Internet users participated in the wider phenomenon of shared contestations over the truthful representations of the world in public life (Bayat 1998, 2010). At the “offline” street level, however, whenever young people devised a group initiative of their own, gained a degree of autonomy, a membership base and public prominence, they were faced with the perennial practical question: how to act together?

Let us return to the two youth movements with which we are already familiar, namely, Youth for Change and the April 6 Youth Movement. As soon as Youth for Change emerged in the summer of 2005, and its members started galvanizing horizontal, face-to-face ties between themselves, they had to find modes of organizing their collective actions in an effective and meaningful way. The early debates revolved around questions of whether they should divide themselves into “working groups” or “committees”, and how many members, chosen on what basis, the latter should include. These debates, which involved partisan youth and those who claimed to be organizationally “independent”, created a deterrent for those who did not want to engage in such wrangling. Ultimately, the youth movement gradually adopted an organizational form that resembled many other prodemocracy coalitions of the period, including the Kifaya movement, electing a general coordinator (*munassiq 'ām*) and a coordination committee (*lagna*

tansīqiyya), as the main decision-making body, for three months at a time. The members of the coordination committee headed respective subcommittees that took charge of different operational areas such as media, communications, culture, art and outreach (e.g. Fahmi 2009: 96). The strife between partisan and organizationally independent youth persisted, however, and internal elections gradually became rather contentious spectacles. Former members, who were critical of internal politicking, complained to me that the same partisan interests that marred Egypt's opposition – that is, the competition over scarce resources, membership base and public notoriety – had found their way into the youth movement. According to some, the recruitment of young activists to existing political groups had effectively removed the ideological commitment of members to their shared interests, and internal strife, coupled with renewed state pressure on street activities, led to the group's disintegration in late 2006.

April 6 Youth arguably emerged as the most enduring youth movement in the late Mubarak era. But, as with Youth for Change, its members' collective actions were by no means easy to achieve. The group opted for a similar organizational form at the outset, namely, a general coordinator, a coordination committee, and a given number of subcommittees. It was, however, more particular about selecting new members on an individual basis rather than as representatives of political parties or groups, and used Facebook as its main medium for political mobilization, social networking and debate. Another difference was more distinctive: its general coordinator, Ahmed Maher, a former Youth for Change activist, acted as the general coordinator from the outset and his position was not subject to internal elections. In late 2010, Maher explained that he had learned the lesson from Youth for Change that it was necessary to defend the movement from disintegration. Further, he was adamant that the youth movement should be managed through top-down structures.

Some others would further explain that there had been dire instances of internal strife within April 6 Youth that had brought the group to the brink of collapse in 2009. At stake had been the group's internal governance as well as disagreements about the movement's activities on its "anniversary" of April 6 and its response to President Obama's official visit to Cairo on June 4. Over the summer, debates on the movement's relationship with foreign organizations also became heated after a few members accepted invitations to attend meetings abroad, including a seminar by Freedom House in Washington, and an activist workshop organized by CANVAS, established by former Otpor members, in Belgrade, Serbia. By July 2009, a grave divi-

sion had emerged between, on the one hand, Maher and his supporters who were in the clear majority and, on the other, a group of partisan youth affiliated with the Amal Party which included spokesperson Dia al-Sawi (Sa'ud 2009). Both groups publicly claimed to be the genuine April 6 Youth Movement. Maher argued in the press that dealing with Western organizations was acceptable as long as these do not interfere in the movement's affairs (Sumayka and Adiiib 2009). The second group, with a stronger Arab Nationalist orientation, made accusations against the Liberals in particular for cooperating with the "West" and Washington-based organizations, echoing the contentious arguments against "foreign funding" in Egypt (Pratt 2006). The situation was resolved when Maher's group managed to keep the upper hand and, in consequence, the so-called founders' committee (*lagnat al-mu'assisīn*) began to operate as an unelected body within the movement in parallel with its general committee.

In light of these developments it is apparent that while the youth movements that emerged in Egypt's public life in the 2000s did promote horizontal organizational forms, this image is only partial. The committee-based structure and the emphasis on individual membership were not specific to youth movements but had been part and parcel of Egypt's new protest movements and prodemocracy coalition initiatives since the turn of the millennium. Shehata (2011) argues that the Egyptian People's Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI) was an important predecessor in promoting the principle that members join as individuals, and not as representatives of political groups or parties:

Movements such as EPSCPI and Kefaya have contributed to the general increase of societal mobilization and youth mobilization by introducing new forms of political organization that bypass the legal constraints that the state has imposed on all formal channels of political participation. By organizing informally and horizontally and without seeking official license or recognition and by relying on direct forms of collective action such as street protests, these actors were able to create news spaces and forms of organization that youth were able to emulate. (Shehata 2011)

That youth movements adopted and gradually developed these organizational forms should be viewed, however, in a context where the more formal organizational structures were governed by top-down and person-centred hierarchies. Ultimately, the question was as much about "how to act

together” as it was about how to manage interpersonal relations, to pursue shared goals, and to keep relations of trust, loyalty and solidarity – precious as they were in the contested sphere of politics – as intact as possible.

4.3.2. Heterogenous responses

While some former members of Youth for Change found their way into April 6 Youth in 2008, and some into existing political parties and groups, others moved into network initiatives. For instance, Muhammad, a Leftist blogger, told me in 2008 that the main lesson he had learned from Youth for Change was that political coalitions involving different ideological groups simply “do not work” – thus echoing the experiences of both Hamdi and Said described above. Following the disbanding of Youth for Change, he volunteered with several issue-based campaigns and network initiatives on an individual basis. At times he cooperated with other Leftist networks, including Solidarity (*Taḍāmun*) that took shape along parallel lines with April 6 Youth in 2008.

Solidarity was established in February 2008 and attracted former Youth for Change activists, especially those with Trotskyist and Marxist orientations. In contrast to April 6 Youth, they did not promote a particular youth-based identity but, instead, emphasized that demands for democracy and human rights cannot be divorced from socioeconomic conditions and the grievances of the working classes. Consequently, their most meaningful tactic – namely, the Trotskyist goal of the “united front” – was to facilitate building concrete social relations between the existing protest movements that would otherwise be confined to the local level (e.g. Mansour 2005; Abderahman 2009). At the outset, Solidarity activists focused on the daily struggles of fishermen to maintain their livelihoods, but later extended their activities to different localized protest movements across the country.

In comparison with April 6 Youth, Solidarity activists sought closer cooperation with the workers’ strike movements. During and after the strike day on April 6, 2008, for instance, they held frequent meetings at the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre in Cairo and, together with members of other network initiatives, such as the Committee for the Defence of Workers’ Rights, turned its premises into a press and contact centre for al-Mahalla al-Kubra activists.³⁶ Solidarity members were prepared to provide media support

³⁶ As noted in Chapter 3, these kinds of support campaigns were important predecessors for the

and legal aid to strike movement activists, detainees and their families. On another occasion, in Ramadan (September) 2008, they hosted an *iftār* dinner bringing together various protest and labour activists such as real estate tax collectors and teachers from Greater Cairo, fishermen from Port Said and labour leaders from al-Mahalla al-Kubra. The *iftār*, breaking the daily fast during Ramadan, represents an important social institution in Muslim-majority society that provided good opportunities for opposition groups to socialize and recreate relations across ideological and partisan boundaries.

During 2010, when the ElBaradei campaign mobilized new members into the prodemocracy movement, the issues of internal strife and governance did not diminish within April 6 Youth. By mid-2009, the Amal Party-affiliated youth had established an initiative called *Lan Tamurru* (Don't Pass By) and, in 2010, two further youth movements emerged from its ranks. One of them was called Youth for Justice and Freedom (*shabāb min ajl al-'adāla wa-l-ḥurriya*) that conjoined a range of Leftists, including Trotskyist students, who were formerly affiliated with the student group My Right (*Haqqi*) at Helwan university, as well as independent Arab Nationalists. Its members, albeit small in numbers, would take visible roles in, for instance, sloganeering during public opposition protests. Another offshoot initiative, the Free Front for Peaceful Change (*al-jabha al-ḥurra li-l-taghyīr al-silmī*), conjoined a more liberal-oriented gathering. Its members experimented with different street performances, including one in which they brought along pots, pans and plates as a way to protest against the continuing rise in the prices of daily foodstuffs.

Towards the end of the decade of the new millennium, youth activism was expanding and had dispersed in several directions. Some either returned to or joined existing political parties; others volunteered in the ranks of ElBaradei's signatures campaign in parallel with partisan youth groups, such as the Democratic Front Party and the young members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2010, the Revolutionary Socialists had also divided into two organizations. Some Left-oriented youth also joined the recently formed Popular Democratic Movement for Change (*Al-ḥaraka al-sha'biyya al-dīmūqrāṭiyya min ajl al-taghyīr*), while Facebook-based dissent was involving growing numbers of young members in contesting the ruling elites. In the run-up to 2011, the diverse off-shoot movements – as organized groups, social networks and politicized individuals – collectively diversified the avenues for public political dissent. Although social

emergence of the Front for Defend Egypt's Protesters.

divisions and internal strife persisted within the political opposition, by the time of the NDP's landslide victory in parliamentary elections in December 2010, the processes of internal division (*inqisām*) had at least contributed to a certain heterogeneity of resistance which, through online and offline avenues, were increasingly difficult to govern.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have examined in some detail the actual political activities of young Cairenes who aimed to diversify and to challenge the conventional forms and avenues of opposition politics in the late Mubarak era. In doing so, they preferred to organize unlicensed street protests in the popular, lower-class residential areas and to tap into the subversive potential of the ICTs and social media, thereby compensating for their lack of political opportunities elsewhere. I have noted that what have been termed tactical transgressions – the activists' attempts to reach out to wider publics via both offline and online methods – were more easily adopted by those who either had the necessary social networks in place, including family support, or the available time and the economic means to do so. In this context, a privileged socioeconomic background, such as being educated in private universities or coming from relatively affluent families, was generally a more decisive factor than gender in enabling political engagements over time. Those who were less privileged and less equipped for public dissent, however, could nonetheless acquire new combinations of practical skills, knowledge and social connections that enabled them to harness innovative ways of enacting their critical, anti-regime stances through everyday speech and action. In this sense, the young activists were embedded in the evolving oppositional counterculture wherein they mobilized not only new members but also youthful forms of political action and imagination. In comparison with the burgeoning workers' movement across the country that was gaining concessions from public authorities, and the campaigns by human rights advocates, the young activists' street actions and online dissent perhaps seemed in many ways inconsequential to social change. For the young protagonists, however, these were important ways to enact their sense of meaningful political action, and be part of mobilizing a critical mass that held the promise of a better future in a post-Mubarak Egypt.

For the young, being and becoming an opposition activist in the late 2000s was also about learning how to keep track of what was happening in society, and how to engage in public dissent with others. In the late 2000s,

the social media provided increasing opportunities for political communication, social networking and deliberation among the wired generation of young Egyptians (Herrera 2014b), which helped further to reproduce a critical generational consciousness among the young, as they could consume and contribute to counter-hegemonic imageries of the social world. In this context, the blogger-activists had played pioneering roles since the mid-2000s. At street level, the activists' attempts to assume urban spaces were often prevented by the security apparatus, resulting in events that would further contribute to the growing reserve of stories of youthful resistance and consequent injustice, as these were reported and debated online, and at times made headlines in the national and global news outlets. At the same time, the efforts they were exerting towards building and maintaining coalitions were faced with a number of challenges. The practical requirements of collective decision-making and gaining publicity, for instance, were issues that required attention, yet also encompassed the seeds of potential disarray. Towards the end of the decade, the processes connected with internal factionalism among the young tended either to generate new offshoot groups or, alternatively, encourage newly politicized youth to join existing campaign networks, political groups and parties. These divisions hindered coalition politics, but they had the result of diversifying available sites and avenues for political socialization, which would eventually converge with other contentious movements early in 2011.

In the run-up period, under the volatile circumstances of authoritarian rule, being an opposition activist required active maintenance of trust, loyalty and everyday solidarity, an issue I shall examine more closely in the next chapter.

5 ON FRIENDSHIP AND EVERYDAY SOCIALITY

In April 2007, I joined Muhammad (26), whom I had met by chance only a few days earlier, and Said (28) in a small, dimly-lit restaurant in downtown Cairo. A leftist blogger and former Youth for Change activist, Muhammad was a sharp-witted character who proclaimed himself an anarcho-communist. Although his online writing stirred up the occasional controversy, he was respected in activist circles for his political blogging and for his persistent and courageous actions at the front lines of democratic struggle, including fighting riot police and *baltagiyya* which had resulted his being detained several times over the past few years. His friend Said, a young Esmatist – a follower of Egyptian Arab Nationalist intellectual Esmat Seif al-Dawla (1923-1996) – was currently unemployed but active in independent groups. We entered into diversified and rather heated debates on current politics in the noisy, crammed and smoky atmosphere. The restaurant, which was also one of the few downtown places that served beer to its clientele, provided a realm of experience that provided a stark contrast to the convivial chattering on religious issues at the Journalists' Syndicate which I just left. It had been the occasion of the 5th Cairo Anti-War Conference held since the outbreak of Iraq war in 2003, and I had departed a happy man after meeting a number of young members of the Muslim Brotherhood, both men and women, whom I wished to interview at this nascent stage of research.

Muhammad and Said, like many other Leftists, boycotted the Cairo Conference in 2007. The main reason for their disengagement was the active and public role the Muslim Brotherhood took in both the conference's

organizing committee and during the conference itself.³⁷ The two abstainers could not fathom why Trotskyist Revolutionary Socialists, themselves hard-line secularists and co-organizers of the event, should want to ally with the Brotherhood, even on the pretext that revolution in Egypt could not materialize without collaborating with the Islamists.³⁸ On the other hand, Muhammad admitted that he and Said were not entirely natural companions either: he usually hates Nasserists and Arab nationalists, such as Said, for idolizing Gamal Abdel Nasser. Although Muhammad appreciated the vast socioeconomic reforms that had taken place under Nasser, the regime had hit hard at Egypt's communist movement at the turn of 1950s and 1960s, incarcerating many of Nasser's political rivals and dissenters for a number of years, including Ahmed Nabil al-Hilali, a pioneering human rights lawyer-activist and one of Muhammad's long-time idols.³⁹ Muhammad further deplored what he saw as nepotistic practices in current Nasserist groups, a line of criticism that soon encompassed most opposition parties and also some NGOs. Said, having had dire experiences of party politics himself, could only agree.

* * *

Among the characteristics of Egyptian youth activism of the 2000s was that young people from across the ideological spectrum would try to act together and forge alliances regardless of the accustomed ideological strife and "personal politics" that prevailed in the political opposition. I have previously explained that their collective actions were connected to the processes of expressing a generational consciousness in order to position their political activities in more autonomous spaces. On the other hand, when public prestige and social hierarchies came into play, especially in terms of coalition building, these collective pursuits were subject to internal factionalism.

37 One manifestation of their role was that the MB Supreme Guide, Mahdi Akef, gave a speech at the opening plenary session, during which the younger MB members distributed the print-outs of it in both Arabic and English on coloured leaflets, with the appropriate contact details and the MB website printed on them. Other organizers at the 2007 conference included representatives from the Karama and Amal Parties, and Revolutionary Socialists.

38 The Trotskyist activists I encountered during the conference referenced the work of Chris Harman, from the London-based Socialist Workers Party, to make this point (Abdelrahman 2009), or Sameh Najib's *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn: Ru'yā ishtirākiyya* (Najib 2006).

39 Al-Hilali (1928-2006) was the son of Ahmed Naguib, the last Prime Minister of Egypt before the 1952 July Revolution (Goldschmidt 2000: 77-78). As a communist, he was imprisoned in the 1960s, and respected for the fact that he had dedicated his working life to the defence of ordinary Egyptians (Stork 1987).

Nonetheless, being an activist in the late Mubarak era was not only about the “high” moments of democratic struggle; it also involved hanging out with friends in places and moments in which protest narratives were circulated, shared experiences told and retold, and political subjectivities mutually constructed.

In this chapter, I look more closely at the dynamics of trust, belonging and everyday solidarities – often regarded as the virtues of friendship – that shed some light on the ebbs and flows of collective action among young activists. The issue of friendship emerged at a rather late stage of this research, and much of the analysis connected with it is based on retrospective reworking of field notes made in 2008. As the divisive processes within April 6 Youth described earlier indicate, the pertinence of friendship became all the more salient in interviews in 2010. Friendship is, however, so important an issue that describing and trying to understand young Egyptians’ experiences of public political life in the late Mubarak era would fall short without it. In this vein, I start the first section by contextualizing the notion of friendship: in other words, the activists’ experiences of having good friends and being a good friend to others. I also probe more closely the bases of commonality, such as lifestyle choices and shared anomalies in the public eye, which provided young activists specific opportunities for creating and maintaining friendship relations over time.

The first section, therefore, highlights aspects of social confluence; the second section, however, discusses some of the vulnerabilities inherent to their friendship relations. Finally, in the third section, I discuss the notion of *shilla* as a local type of group formation that sheds some light on the dynamics of coalition politics among young activists.

5.1. FRIENDSHIP AS BELONGING TO THE WORLD

Friendship is an important aspect of the human condition that is based on the fact that we experience and inhabit the world together. My interest in friendship is based on the observation that most young people in Egypt – as elsewhere – cherish the company of good friends. This observation, in all its banality, assists the recognition that, in the lifeworlds of young people who have learned to live in relative autonomy from their natal families, friendship ties forged at school, university and through leisure activities provide immediate experiences of trust, reciprocity and shared everyday existence.

In other words, friends serve the young as an additional social layer to kin and formal organizations and, due to their particular life stage, provide them with important, yet precarious, avenues to collective life. This was certainly the case in the late Mubarak era, when authoritarian stances on public political dissent, coupled with internal strife in the opposition, created particular values, exigencies and opportunities in terms of friendship relations. In what follows, I shall address these issues, beginning, however, from a less politicized context.

5.1.1. Ali's *shilla*: "Friends come first"

In 2008, Ali and his friends, Midhat and Karim, were university students in their early twenties. They had known one another since childhood and formed the core of their localized *shilla* (group of friends) in the midst of high-rise buildings near Haram Street in Giza.⁴⁰ They seldom travelled downtown but, rather, met daily at their local hang-out, an *ahwa* in their home neighbourhood, where they had grown up and where everyone knew each other. They would meet in the evenings after classes and spend hours on end with their friends, talking about life events, girls, music and university studies. Despite matching the profile and oppositional attitudes of the young activists, they had no experience of direct personal involvement in public political life. After I pressed them on the issue of political inclinations, they declared themselves Nasserists "at heart" (*guwwa*), despite their deeply suspicious attitudes toward opposition parties – which they regarded as fundamentally corrupt and defunct – and anti-Mubarak protesters who, as they saw it, did not achieve anything by shouting in the streets.

The three friends lived with their families, but they agreed with Midhat that they and their parents lived somewhat separate lives. According to Midhat, parents did not have the slightest idea of what their offspring, especially their adolescent sons, were thinking about, or of what really went on in their lives. Even at the level of language, his parents did not understand some of the slang words and expressions commonly used among the young, which Midhat at times exploited at home when discussing "delicate matters", including girls, with his friends. Good friends, Midhat contended, were far more important than family:

⁴⁰ *Shilla* can also be translated as a "clique" which is a point I discuss in more detail in Section 5.3.

Good friends come first (*al-aṣḥāb ahamm ḥāga*). If you're depressed, they come and cheer you up. If you fail in your exams, or if you're heartbroken because your relative has died, they share your sorrow (*humma za'lānīn zayak*).

The Youth Aspirations Survey, which also probed into friendship ties in the lives of Egyptians aged between 10 and 29 in the late 2000s, produces conclusions similar to those in Midhat's account (Population Council 2011: 133-138). Three emerging trends from the survey are particularly interesting: first, regardless of region and educational level, young men had more friends than young women; second, the more urban and educated the young were, the more probable they would have friends of the opposite sex; and third, young people discussed their personal life – especially romance, puberty, growing up and friendship relations themselves – predominantly with friends. While friends also rated highly in discussing issues like school performance, bullying at school and one's personal future, these subjects were raised more often with parents although, in general, were more likely to be discussed with the mother than with father. Young people were also introduced to the Internet predominantly through friends, and the Internet was mostly used – with the exception of “seeking general knowledge” – for social purposes, such as chatting with friends and writing and reading emails.

Although more age specific and regionally delimited data, such as that confined to Greater Cairo, could have been useful for our purposes, this survey data closely correlates with the three friends' account of a generational gap between Egyptian youth, especially young men, and their parents. In my observation, too, friends provide young Cairenes with intimate social circles in which they share and mutually contemplate their concerns, joy, epiphanies and everyday experiences.

5.1.2. Friendship as a subject of study

Despite the salient importance of friends in the everyday lives of young Egyptian activists, there is little research on the issue. The important role of friendship as a micro-level site for political mobilization is, nonetheless, hardly a new discovery (Passy and Giugni 2000; Della Porta and Diani 2006: 15, 128). Friendship provides everyday experiences of trust and solidarity that, it has been argued, are the most effective channels through

which political actors commit to social movements.⁴¹ My aim here, however, is to look at how friendships are experienced, ruptured and recreated in a more general sense, not only with reference to a specific social or political movement. In anthropology, as Killick and Desai (2013b: 4-8) observe, the relative lack of ethnographic research on friendship partly stems from the discipline's long-lasting preoccupation with kinship. In comparison to the ascribed dimension of being a member of one's family, friendship relations seem, as Bell and Coleman argue:

defined solely on the basis of the social contract which really exists and is continually worked upon: participation depends on the relationship created over time between the particular people involved, while what brings people together in friendship may not be what keeps them together (Bell and Coleman 1999b: 6).

At the minimum, they suggest, the analytic of friendship can serve the aim of examining “social relations that may include but are not reducible to kinship; that are sustained beyond single or short-term encounters; that involve the search for some form of sentiment or at least empathy and common ground between persons” (1999b: 16). In general, however, it is contended that Western experiences of friendship provide little analytical value when it comes to examining friendship relations in other parts of the world: there is, in particular, a risk of reproducing powerful assumptions about freedom, choice and individualism that are often valorized in studies based on Western middle-class experience (Paine 1999; Bell and Coleman 1999a; Desai and Killick 2013a). Thus, when studying friendship relations the aspect of choice should be balanced with that of constraint, as both are embedded in and shaped by wider social, political and economic processes (Allan 1989: 30-48).

Although friends do matter to people of all ages, including the elderly (Allan 1989: 85-103), the life stage of being young attaches rather specific values to friendship relations. In childhood and adolescence, social relations and identities are traditionally forged around the family and locality, according to residential neighbourhood or, when younger, nearby streets

41 Here I borrow Scholz's notion of “political solidarity” as a “moral relation that marks a social movement wherein individuals have committed to positive duties in response to a perceived injustice” (2008: 6) As such, it is differentiated – but not exclusive from – other forms of solidarity, such as civic and social solidarity, in emphasizing “individual conscience, commitment, group responsibility, and collective action” (Scholz 2008: 33).

or alleyways (El-Messiri 1978). Those who finish high school with competitive results may enter a university where the campuses expand student lifeworlds, suggesting alternative, yet still confined, urban spaces for congregating and learning new modes of socializing. Although family expectations and pressure with regards activities are highly gendered, relative autonomy from both on campus also provide students with new opportunities to make friends with the opposite sex. Modern schooling prolongs adolescence and transforms not only students (*talaba*) but also youth in general (*shabāb*) into meaningful social categories, and it continues to offer one of the major social environments for the experience of being young (Farak 2007). In Ali's experience, and those of Umar, too, when skipping classes to go to the city centre, for example, friends can provide important support networks, such as taking down lecture notes in the absence of others. Beyond campus life, the young urbanites coalesce around leisure activities, including shared tastes in films, music and fashion, and socialize on a regular basis online or, alternatively, in their home neighbourhood and in different parts of Greater Cairo. For the young, both having friends, and being a good friend, can be immensely important in arranging the structure of everyday life, involving emotional, social and often economic investments over a prolonged period of time. It also implies a willingness to meet others regularly, outside work, studies and political activities. Indeed, friends spend time or "hang out" together even when there is not much to do. Sharing and co-enduring the idle moments of boredom can be in itself very meaningful (Schielke 2008).

5.1.3. Shared experiences

In public political life, it is hard to overestimate the importance of friendship relations in the young activists' lives. In the late 2000s, acting as they were in the contentious sphere of politics where the perpetual state oversight of, and security infiltration into, their daily lives was a real concern, friendship relations provided them with vital experiences of trust, loyalty and belonging. At pivotal moments, such as in clashes with the police or in detention, good friends were those who could be trusted and whose solidarities could be counted upon. Undoubtedly, there was a tacit deal among young activists to go and protest in the case of anyone – especially a fellow party member – getting arrested, but at these junctures, individuals were wont to rely on the fact that, at the minimum, good friends would try and drag them from

the arms of the Central Security Forces, if possible; at the least they would chase the police wagon so as to locate the exact police station they were being taken to. In cases of detention, close friends were actively involved in contacting family members and journalists, designing online banners and circulating messages over the Internet so as to make the case as public as possible. Friends would also be active in helping to organize solidarity protests calling for release and, later, a welcome home party.

Muhammad and Said befriended one another while being confined in the same cell after having been detained during the “Judges affair” in May 2006. Said’s large family, encompassing a number of siblings, brought in various kinds of food almost daily which he then shared with fellow inmates, amounting to a “feast” in Muhammad’s opinion. Despite the odds of ideological strife and political rivalry, and their different friendship circles, they gradually developed a sense of acceptance of one another. During my time in Egypt, I heard several stories about activists forging new friendship relations due to being confined in the same cell, co-enduring the formative experiences of incarceration. Although the fundamental basis of such contact was a shared struggle against the Mubarak regime, and the sense of resolute purpose in this aim, it could also be about very mundane acts, such as sharing food or lending a smuggled mobile phone. Sharing moments of dissent, of facing injustice, and of everyday solidarities served to forge concrete friendship relations that could endure over time.

Even the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kifaya) was built on pre-existing friendship relations. The idea for establishing an anti-Mubarak coalition was first conceived in November (Ramadan) 2003 when a group of opposition politicians congregated at the home of Abu Ela Madi, the Wasat Party leader, to break the daily fast over an *iftār* dinner (Browsers 2007). They belonged to the 1970s’ generation of former student activists and, although affiliated to different and even competing political trends, they had known one another since they were young. As Ahmed Baha Eddin Shaban, a Marxist intellectual and one of those present, told me:

We were, well, a generation that was raised in the student movement, and we had developed relations of mutual trust (*thiqa mutabādila*). So there is a certain extent of friendship (*qadr min al-ṣadāqa*): We went to prison together, we got out from prison together. And we know each other for a long time, whether we are Leftist – Marxist – or whether we are Nasserist, Islamist, or

Liberal. We share a common experience (*tagruba mushtaraka*) and trust and respect one another.

As we have previously seen, the global era drastically altered the ways in which Egyptian youth learned and gained alternative information about the social world. The changing patterns of online communication and networking – through the Internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, mostly used by the young – have also brought tangible changes to how young and “wired” Egyptians negotiate their friendship relations. While the issue of online friendships goes beyond the scope of this discussion, it is mentioned here to remind us that the making of generational consciousness in the late 2000s was less based on direct experiences than on those mediated through the new ICTs (Edmunds and Turner 2005). Andrews (2002) also emphasizes the role of dialogue and stories in producing critical awareness in the formation of active generations that builds on “a consciousness of generations which have come before and which will follow” (2002: 81). Drawing on Paolo Freire’s notion of *conscientization*, Andrews suggests that the stories that people tell about themselves and their lives, and those of others, “are not only the way in which individuals process their own lived experiences, but they are also inherited and remade anew” (ibid.: 84; Edmunds and Turner 2002b: 9).

One of the charges explaining the political apathy of young Egyptians I encountered was that they do not have exemplary role models, yet I have already suggested that the previous experiences of the 1970s’ generation, the human rights advocates and the biographies of politicized families fed in different ways into the democratic struggle in the late Mubarak era. In the 2000s, the shared respect for, and commemoration of, certain opposition figures and public personalities, either living or dead, also helped to generate common grounds for friendship relations as well as intergenerational solidarities. In 2006, both Muhammad and Said went to the funeral of al-Hilali, the pioneering human rights lawyer, at Tahrir Square, an event that amounted to a rally attended by a number of opposition members across ideological divides, which, according to an observer, “brought together men of different generations, young people as well as old” (Issa 2006). Al-Hilali was known for defending protesters after the Bread Intifada in January 1977 and, more generally, political detainees irrespective of their political orientations and, in this role, was also involved in the making of the 1970s’ generation. To provide another example of affective role models: as a youngster, Umar, the young Nasserist student, enjoyed watching

action movies and cherished the stories of Salah El-Din, who fought against the Crusaders (Western aggressors), as well as those about Umar ibn al-Khattab, the fourth Caliph, as he went disguised among ‘his people’ to look at how they lived, wearing a *galābiyya*. These stories of heroic virtue and justice were connected with Umar’s current, yet periodic, commitment to public political life.

At the same time, as already noted, some activists also found commonalities from realms outside politics (e.g. Bayat 2010: 128-136). The more affluent and cosmopolitan youth, for example, who lived rather different lives from Umar, could find resonance in globally circulating tastes and commodities such as rock music or online movies, adopting lifestyle choices distinguishing them from those who did not have access to such luxuries. On the other hand, in contrast to rather pricy restaurants, most young Cairene activists preferred to socialize with friends in downtown cafés. Participating in leisure activities was in general more constrained for young women whose families expected them to remain within the safe contours of studies, work or domestic life, especially in the evenings, although the Internet would alleviate these differential opportunities based on gender. One added aspect of the digital era was that, as the potential of ICTs was recognized by Egyptian human rights organizations, workshops and seminars have been organized around the use of the Internet as a political tool since the mid-2000s. The Arabic Network of Human Rights Information (ANHRI) was influential in this respect, thereby enabling blogger-activists from Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries to share their experiences and get to know one another (e.g. ANHRI 2008, 2009). The function of forging transnational activist networks between diverse groups has been an important feature of ICTs during the 2000s, not only in Egypt, but also at transnational conferences attended by bloggers from Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, creating transnational communication networks through which they could exchange information, opinions, political tactics, and in cases of detention, solidarity operations across the region and globally.

Closer to street level, young opposition activists were in many ways “deviant” characters in society, which in itself confined them to rather narrow social urban spaces. Some young Egyptians, who did not participate in any political activities, told me that they shared many of the activists’ dissenting views and secretly admired their courage and readiness to sacrifice for a good cause. Nonetheless, implicit in their admiration was the understanding that befriending them would be somewhat risky. Huda – the young female April 6 Youth activist whose incarceration on April 6, 2008,

mentioned in Chapter 4 – told me that once she became active in the April 6 Youth in the summer of 2008, her friends at the university abandoned her socially, to the point where her potential boyfriend called her a “crazy girl” (*magnūna*) and other fellow students with whom she normally “hung out” at the campus began to avoid her. On the other hand, being labelled in the public eye a “crazy person” (*magnūn*) or one of those “eccentric downtown people”, could also provide some opposition activists with a sense of relative freedom and an additional impetus to transgress social norms (Sa’id 2010). However, because oppositional activism was regarded in society in such a detrimental light, others concealed their political engagements at the university campus, or within their families and the home neighbourhood. Although this issue was more pertinent to young women, it was not so easy for young men either. In 2008, for example, I witnessed the happy reunion of Basem and Mahmoud in downtown Cairo when they both turned up in an *ahwa* that was then frequented by April 6 Youth activists. Familiar with each other from their home city in the Nile Delta, they had met at the campus almost daily, but neither had ever openly disclosed his political dissent or personal sympathies for April 6 Youth. Released from this constraint by the location, they laughed aloud, hugged each other and, chatting enthusiastically, renewed their friendship in an atmosphere that no longer required the concealment of an important dimension of their private selves; the personal disclosure seemed to strengthen their mutual bond beyond the everyday relationships they were used to at the home campus.

This kind of sensitivity to one’s self-comportment in public spaces in Egypt is related to the very circumstances in which they lived. For the previous generations in the 1980s and 1990s, passing time in coffee shops was an important pastime for men in local neighbourhoods in order to exchange news and favours, but also to hear of job openings directly from friends (Singerman 1997a). Although the young Egyptians attained much wider opportunities to communicate and network with each other online, the need for “face-to-face” interaction among young activists had not withered away in the late 2000s. On the one hand, it was common knowledge that the Internet was volatile means of communication due to digital surveillance and hacking. Some would even use their mobile phones to leave missed calls with pre-arranged meanings - usually a mundane “lets meet where we usually do” – as a tactic to circumvent potential surveillance, although the parallel, and more mundane reason was to save on the phone bill. On the other hand, however, the relations of trust, solidarity and group belonging required sustained face-to-face interactions so as to be verified and recre-

ated, a phenomenon that particularly concerns the political sphere in which alliances and informal networks could be volatile and fast-changing.

5.2. POLITICS OF THE TABLE

As important as it is to recognize the vital role played by democratic struggle in the lives of the young activists, it is also essential to bear in mind that periodic street protesting, online campaigns, awareness raising stunts, public seminars and other engagements with political dissent occupied only one aspect of everyday existence. During in-between moments, which actually amounted to most of the time, many would meet friends in places of their preference, giving rise to the daily question: Where to sit down, and with whom? The young Cairenes, who lived in various parts of the capital city, and whose everyday trajectories involved criss-crossing the metropolis, normally congregated in different parts of the centre where several political parties, NGOs and trade unions have their headquarters, and where the main sites for public protest and social congregation are located. In this context, the repeated acts of “sitting together” (*na‘ud ma‘ ba‘d*) were important moments for recreating and managing friendship relations. They would involve negotiating social proximities between one’s self and others, and also offered prime opportunities to hear the latest news, recap past events, devise future engagements and joke around while there was little else to do. Although I started this chapter in a smoky restaurant, the majority of young activists met in the context of oppositional events; nonetheless, during leisure moments, they preferred places such as cafeterias, public parks, the workplace or the street corner.

5.2.1. Al-Bursa

If I had to name one area in downtown Cairo that played a decisive role in everyday social interactions among activists in 2008, I would nominate Al-Bursa. It refers to a specific quarter delineated by the commercial streets of Qasr al-Nil, Sherif Basha, and Mohammed Sabri Abu ‘Alam, lying to the east of Talat Harb Square. Since the late 1990s it has been renovated in the fashion of the 1920s’ “belle époque” era and today encompasses a number of financial institutions, including the Central Bank and, as echoed in the area’s popular name, the Egyptian Stock Exchange (El Kadi and ElKerdany

2006: 364-366). As part of the same project, the quarter was converted into a pedestrian area – itself a rarity in overcrowded Cairo – that houses a string of relatively inexpensive street-level *ahāwī* that expand their trade, in legions of chairs and tables, onto the pavements. In the evenings, from roughly 6 pm onwards, and during weekends, Al-Bursa unfolded into a completely different scene. Its pedestrian streets were filled with a constant buzz of life, the “to-and-fro” of clientele, friends, colleagues and associates from various backgrounds: from young professionals and students to foreign expatriates, local artists, musicians and other breeds of “cultured people”. Journalists from private newspapers would come after office hours with the latest gossip and news, before it made the headlines the following day. Young men and women could socialize with relative ease, unlike in the more localized and male-dominated *ahāwī* in popular quarters of Cairo where cross-gender socialization and, for instance, the sight of young women smoking cigarettes or a *shīsha* (waterpipe) with unrelated young men could potentially create a minor stir.

During the heyday of the anti-Mubarak mobilization in the mid-2000s, the pedestrian area of Al-Bursa became a central hub for the everyday trajectories of young opposition activists. Members of different political groups such as Liberals, Communists, and Nasserists, passed numerous evenings there with their fellow activists, including both “friends” and “foes”. For the young from outside Cairo, like Basem and Mahmoud, visiting Al-Bursa was a must experience so as to have a sense of the capital city’s “activist scene” and the buzz of its political life. Contentious conversations would occasionally flare up within and between different congregations, and seating arrangements were modified accordingly. Young activists would leave their tables to join political events such as protests and seminars, only to return afterwards to recount their views and fresh experiences, and to plan future actions.

In comparison with the more exclusive menus in the Western-style coffee shops, the *ahāwī* of Al-Bursa served its clientele in 2008 in terms of popular (*sha‘bī*) sensibilities – plastic chairs, coffee, tea and soft drinks for 1.5 L.E. – while nearby restaurants offered traditional sandwiches filled with *fūl* (fava bean paste) and *ta‘miyya* (chickpea rolls) (for 1.25-1.50 L.E. each) – which often amounted to their customers’ first meal of the day. Al-Bursa’s milieu in the heart of the country’s financial life, and its architecture and relative cleanliness of city-scape, sets it apart from the localized *ahāwī* in the popular neighbourhoods. The old colonial-era buildings, the streets named after national heroes and the statues erected in their memory, cater to

a sense of a glorious history: that of liberation and national pride. It can be seen as “hybrid” urban space (Nederveen Pieterse 2009; Sanchez, forth.) in that it conjoins nostalgia for a glorious past, for freedom and the country’s intellectual life, with popular sensibilities and sociability – and relatively low prices.

5.2.2. Lopsided friendships

Thus, beyond the growing connectedness generated by social media, urban places like Al-Bursa provided important sites for recreating friendship relations in the late Mubarak era, but the rather romanticized notion outlined above of one of the social hubs of Cairene activists’ daily trajectories was only part of the picture. In 2010, when I visited the area after a two year absence, it had undergone at least two changes. First, personal laptops had only had a marginal presence in the cafeterias in 2008 but their numbers had visibly multiplied in the course of time, and certain cafeterias had started to offer free WLAN access to their customers. In 2008, only a handful of young activists brought their laptops, some accessing the unsecured WLAN connections from nearby buildings: knowing the exact spots amounted to useful practical knowledge in this respect. The WLAN services offered in some cafeterias partly explained the change, along with the diversification of the groups during previous youth mobilizations, including the ElBaradei campaign and Facebook activism in 2010. Moreover, the number of Internet users had grown rapidly by 2010, giving these cafeterias a “niche” market in this respect, too.

Another visible change was that the activist youth had dispersed to a greater number of cafés and the April 6 Youth members no longer congregated or held meetings as an identifiable group as they did in the movement’s early phase in 2008. Some explained that this was due to the fact that Al-Bursa was full of security (*shurṭa*) since it was, after all, the run-up period to the 2010 parliamentary elections; the dire experiences of internal divisions within the youth movement also provided a background to the development. I had already, however, encountered similar changes in attitude towards Al-Bursa in 2008. Some appeared to have poignant feelings about no longer voluntarily going to the area, while not choosing to explain why; others, however, were much more explicit. “Al-Bursa is like sewage,” said Mahdi, citing a characterization common among his friends with which he agreed, adding: “It is a place for things, of course, to be decided, for

some plans to be made, but not always for the best of the country.” In his grim view, it was the prime arena where careerist youth waged plots against others, where the “rumour mill” went into higher gear, and where it was impossible to remain neutral in terms of one’s allegiance and loyalty:

If you go there you get involved – even if not directly, it will be an indirect process, and if not fast, it will take a longer time. But, still at the end, what will happen to you is that you will get an infection. It is a very bad infection; it’s a terrible disease.

In other words, his view was that spending time in these spaces would sooner or later result in an entanglement in contradictory webs of social relations in which it was seldom easy to navigate without taking up positions against one or the other:

We were all stupid to think it should be the place where we sit. Of course you don’t learn easy, you learn the hard way. Also it was the place where things changed from being groups based on ideologies to groups based on interests [...] to get the best possible gain out of the movement, and of persons like myself, who were foolish enough to trust them.

Because friendship relations were important sites of trust, belonging and solidarity in contentious politics, and involved daily flows of social, economic and emotional investments, the moments and processes whereby friendship – or what had been perceived as such by at least one of the participants – broke up had long-term repercussions in individuals’ lives. Ismail remembers the painful experiences of prolonged detention during the Judges affair in 2006, when people he considered friends chose to disown him on ideological and personal grounds. Some even went as far as declaring him a disbeliever (*humma kaffarūnt!*). He was subjected to psychological and physical torture during detention which, coupled with the sense of betrayal, left him temporarily traumatized after release, and unable to return to “normal” life. While Mahdi’s characterization of Al-Bursa was the most extreme I encountered, it resonates with other views of the “symptomatic” qualities of Egyptian politics in general. One would bemoan that “political life in Egypt is ill” (*al-ḥayā al-siyāsiyya fī maṣr marīḍa*) and, another, “there is no love in politics” (*mafīsh ḥubb fī al-siyāsa*). While the more pessimistic accounts encompassed the undertakings of the ruling elite, these

charges also targeted the political opposition and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the field of youth activism was not immune to partisan interests, personal differences and ideological strife. A popular Egyptian proverb – “Your friend swallows stones for you[r sake], and your enemy wishes for your mistakes” (*Ḥabībak yibla‘ lak al-zalaṭ, wa ‘aduwwak yitmannā lak al-ghalaṭ*) – is indicative of the degree of intensity placed on friendship solidarities, which were, as suggested above, of heightened importance when engaging in public political dissent. The competition between opposition groups over resources, membership base and public prominence also involved constant definitions of friendships in relation to those who were considered rivals.

This reverberates with views that the distinction between friends and foes is constitutive of political life in general. In his breath-taking essay “The Politics of Friendship”, Jacques Derrida (1993) argues that the Aristotelian ideals of “genuine friendship” - that inform many Western ideals of friendship and are based on the mutual encouragement of virtue in one another – do not hold in political life. On the one hand, coalition building among young activists involved rivalries, for instance, between certain Liberal-oriented and Arab Nationalist-oriented youth, while on the other, in the context of everyday interactions, friendship relations were constantly negotiated through the intricate details of everyday practices, and it was often the seemingly mundane things that mattered the most, as Laleh Khalili (2013) also observes among political activists in Lebanon. In Cairo’s cafés, as in Beirut’s bars, actions such as paying for the rounds of drinks, offering to buy *ful* sandwiches “to go” or lending a mobile phone contributed to the daily exchanges that helped to maintain friendship relations. Over the Internet, befriending or defriending someone on Facebook, liking and commenting on another’s postings or sharing Twitter messages, contributed to similar processes of exchange in the virtual spaces. In both realms, if these social and economic exchanges were not reciprocated when the occasion arose to do so, it would be seen in a detrimental light and possibly generate rifts between friends.

5.2.3. On social proximity

As noted earlier, political activism involved a learning curve for young Cairenes, and many became conscious about the boundaries of their private and public selves which they enacted on a daily basis when being and

doing things with others. We are thus concerned with culturally specific veils of privacy and intimacy – or emotional “proximity zones” (Castrén and Lonkila 2004) – between the self and the other which were an aspect of the learning processes involved in political activism in the late Mubarak era (see Section 4.2.). Some friends can be closer than others, but adopting universal scales for measuring the experiences of closeness in friendship relations would be misplaced in ethnographic inquiry (Bell and Coleman 1999a; Desai and Killick 2013a). However, in the volatile circumstances in which young activists lived, acted and experienced politics, coupled with the constant threat of security infiltration and surveillance, one of the most meaningful activities was to recreate the bonds between trusted friends on a regular basis. In other words, it was important to keep the circles of trust and solidarity intact, and out of harm’s way, which involved regular social interactions and different forms of investment – emotional, social and economic – in order to keep the group going. The management of social proximities ran parallel with other notions of social relations such as *zamāl* (“colleague” or “fellow” in a group or movement), *raftāq* (“comrade” in Leftist circles), *akhī* (“my brother”) or *ukhtī* (“my sister”), and these could be used interchangeably at times. Nonetheless, they draw attention to the differential relationships, including affective and corporate relations, that young activists maintained on a daily basis, while also harnessing different senses of sociability.⁴²

“Friends and acquaintances”

Undoubtedly, different activists cultivate their own views of, and categories for friendship which may transgress social cleavages and attributes such as age, gender and class, and I do not claim to understand them all. But, with a view to the contested field of youth activism, let me recall what Ahmed had to say about friendship over the summer of 2008 when he explicated what he saw as a clear distinction between two forms of friendships that prevailed among young activists, namely, acquaintanceship (*‘ilāqa*, lit. a “relation”) and friendship (*ṣadāqa*). He explained that young activists usually have a large number of acquaintances with whom they meet regularly and engage in oppositional activities. They may appear to be close friends but their alliances are mostly forged in order to defend specific political

42 I follow here Allan’s conceptualization of sociability, as “the way in which informal relationships are routinely organised and patterned and the boundaries that are constructed around these relationships, defining what is included and excluded” (Allan 1989: 148).

positions or opinions and, especially, to pursue their personal interests (*maṣāliḥ shakhṣiyya*). Thus, acquaintances stand in contrast to what Ahmed sees as true friendship, which is characterized by mutual loyalty, affection or love (*ḥubb*) and genuine interest in the other's wellbeing. In comparison, Ahmed's view of acquaintances is that they are more instrumental and often constituted in opposition to others. Such relations, he contended, usually last as long as the grounds for these tactical alliances are in place, but, in the politicked and fast-paced sphere of youth activism, acquaintances often prove interstitial, giving way to new alliances.

Ahmed's practical knowledge about the division between the two modes of friendship – that could be termed instrumental and affective – resonates with my own observations of daily interactions among the young opposition activists. Because genuine trust and loyalties were so scarce in the politicked environment, some – especially the more experienced with “activist credibility” – were resolved on the subject of whom they consider their close friends. “We are not friends, but we know each other” (*iḥnā mish aṣḥāb baṣ 'arīfīn ba'ḍ*); or “I know him/her” (*anā 'arīfuh/hā*); or “he is close to me” (*huwwa 'urayyib minnī*) were common claims in terms of relationships with others, with the effect that these kind of attributes also contributed to shared understandings of the composition of informal networks at the micro-level. To draw on Ahmed's practical knowledge: young activists could have numerous acquaintances but they did not necessarily disclose their inner feelings, personal matters or their real interests in everyone's company. For example, as a researcher or at best as a “partial insider”, I sometimes heard things, even mundane details, about persons with which some of their daily associates were not cognizant. From afar, a group of young activists could seem close friends at times but the boundaries between them were usually mutually known. It was seldom that those who did not know one another well asked about each other's private lives, including where they lived and what their parents did for living, without crossing the line into what was considered personal and therefore inappropriate for conversation between acquaintances.

At the time, Ahmed did not personally know Muhammad, the blogger-activist, though he had followed him online and talked to him a couple of times. While respecting the latter's courage and self-sacrifice in the anti-Mubarak movement, he had reservations in case talking with him made him doubt religion. Ahmed and Umar, on the other hand, knew one another through mutual friends and they would all frequent Al-Bursa during my fieldwork in summer 2008. While not being precisely “close” friends, they

would at times sit around the same table. Although Ahmed was at the time critical of April 6 Youth, he still considered himself a member and, while taking time to see the direction in which the initiative was developing, he still defended the nascent group against outside criticism. One evening, Umar, disparaging April 6 Youth's claim to "non-ideology", joked repeatedly with Ahmed, trying to win over his allegiance in a bidding war. He started from 20 L.E. (2.5 EUR) though during the evening his bid rose to 500 L.E, insinuating that an April 6 Youth activist would be for sale. At Umar's last bid, Ahmed quickly bantered back to the Nasserist: "For five hundred, I can sell my soul – but not my intelligence!"

In August 2008, I found myself sitting in a downtown café with a group of young partisan activists that comprised an unusual gathering of young Communists, Nasserists, and more Islamist-oriented youth around the same table. I had interviewed some of them, while others I knew more as friends. Amr, a leftist journalist, joked: "Look, Henri has gathered his own *shilla* here!" We found this observation funny and laughed, and I even felt a bit proud of this social achievement. Soon afterwards, however, Umar noted that only the day before Amr had refused to sit with them at the same table. A few moments later, Amr told his child in sarcastic tones to move away from someone else who was present so as not to absorb "bad influences" from him. It was not the cheeriest of gatherings and I am almost certain that, without my presence, they would not have voluntarily spent that half evening together. Amr's remark about "Henri's *shilla*" was informative, however, highlighting the term as a specific form of sociability and group membership that sheds some light on the dynamics of coalition politics among young activists in Egypt.

5.3. NEGOTIATING SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

One central characteristic of friendship relations in the "late advanced societies" of the West is, Allan suggests, that it is rarely institutionalized in any meaningful manner (Allan 1989: 4), thereby drawing attention to situations where becoming a friend does not involve "rituals" and where friendship relations are constantly changing. At the same time, he notes: "There may be no clear-cut rules governing friendship, but there are cultural scripts about the ways in which friend relationships should be structured" (Allan 1989: 99; Bell and Coleman 1999b: 11). In other words, friendship relations may

not involve rituals *per se* in many parts of the world, but still some forms of friendship are more institutionalized than others. In addition, as Jo Freeman (1973) suggests, the ideals of equality and “structureless” self-organization abound in emancipatory social and political movements. In her case these refer to the 1960s’ feminist movement in the United States, though these were challenged by different notions of tasks, power, prestige, social standing, talents as well as pre-existing friendship groups.

5.3.1. Shilla as an informal network

In Egypt, *shilla* (pl. *shilal*) refers to a relatively persistent form of group formation that is best translated as “group of friends” or “clique”.⁴³ As a social institution it enables the sanctioning of friendship relations within a small group of individuals, and against other *shilla* formations. In a general sense, *shilla* in Egypt refers to a close-knit group of friends who got to know each other at university, in the army and so on, and who continue to meet regularly over time, in some cases throughout their lives, providing mutual loyalties, assistance and exchange in the form of job offers, flat arrangements and other services (*muqāyda*). A closer look, for instance, into connections among political elites after independence reveals that the leading members of the Free Officers, including Nasser, Sadat and Field-Marshal Amer, belonged to the same graduation group (*duf‘a*) at the Military Academy in the late 1930s, laying the basis for the strategic generation that ruled Egypt in the post-independence era (Springborg 1975; Migdal 2001). In the 2000s, opposition activists occasionally characterized the Mubarak-era political elite as *shilla fāsida*, or the “corrupt *shilla*”, while “Gamal’s *shilla*” referred to the group of Gamal’s associates, including those in the NDP’s Policies Committee. These reflect the long history of elite recruitment and political appointments in Egypt and the role of *shilla* and *duf‘a*-based loyalties as the strategy used by ruling elites to recreate personal authoritarian rule in Egypt (Springborg 1975; Kassem 2004a; Migdal 2001).

In existing literature, *shilal* are often mentioned together with *duf‘a* as two informal forms of sociability and networking in Egypt that cut across

43 As I write this, the etymology of *shilla* has been difficult to ascertain. Some sources indicate that Arabs “invaders” used it in a denigratory way in late 19th century to denote Berber tribes as “outcasts” in North Africa (Cunninghame Graham 1997 [1898]: 111). On the other hand, Hinds and Badawi (1986: 476) suggest that its Egyptian usage derives from the same root as *shalla*, or “hank” or “skein”, which would in a way emphasize the “inward entanglement” of interpersonal relations which *shilla* formations often involve.

organizational and bureaucratic structures and connect their members through mutual support, loyalty and obligation. However, *shilal* are often mentioned in passing, predominantly in the context of public political life, as a way of explaining the persistent clientelism or corrupt practices behind the public façade of formal organizations (e.g. Reid 1980; Johnston 1986; Rubinstein 1998). These accounts border, unwittingly or not, on a normative venture to locate the corrupt practices and persisting primordial ties in society that somehow hinder the functioning of democratic institutions or even undermine modernity at large. In this context, the salience of an instrumental mode of friendship is presented as the main dimension of *shilla* formations. Others, who take a more balanced view and acknowledge the complex processes of state formation and overlapping modalities of collective action in postcolonial societies, argue for the centrality of these informal networks in Egypt's public political life (Springborg 1975; Migdal 2001). For instance, Ayubi emphasizes the role of *shilla* as "the most significant informal bond in contemporary Egyptian society" (Ayubi 1980: 467-468, op. cit. in Dawoud 2011: 156), while Joel Migdal confirms the role of *shilla*-based loyalties in high-level state appointments, noting, in a more general sense, that Egyptians tend to consider it as a kind of "family" whose membership is clearly defined: "There is no question of who is part of the group and who is not" (Migdal 2001: 76). Springborg (1975, 1978), who has written relatively extensively on *shilla* formations in Egyptian politics in the post-independence era, describes them in the context of Egyptian trade unions as:

... small groups of friends united by bonds of personal, economic, and/or political interest is *shilla*. It is *shillas*, rather than large formal organizations - - - that perform crucial functions in the Egyptian political system. (Springborg 1978: 275-276)

Sakr (2002: 842), in turn, emphasizes the gendered character of *shilla* formations in the professional field of journalism, where recruitment takes place largely through informal channels. In this context, they appear as male-dominated "cliques", that could be best translated as "old boy networks" whose members exchange information, news tips and job opportunities within closed social circles and thus reproduce the patriarchal privileges and hierarchies common to Egyptian journalism.⁴⁴ Indeed, most

44 In her study on localized social identities in Cairo's popular quarters, El-Messiri also translates

writers emphasize the aspect of instrumental relations underlying *shilla* formations, in similar ways to how *quanxi* relationships in China are generally treated (Smart 1999). As a characterization it is partly true: in the absence of direct access to formal bureaucracies, people continue to rely on informal networks, their friends, and *duf*“a- and *shilla*-based solidarities as vehicles for pursuing their interests or the services they need.

5.3.2. Aspects of everyday sociality

Against this background, de Koning (2009) offers a refreshing account of *shilal* in her ethnography of upper-middle-class youth in contemporary Cairo. To begin with, de Koning does not place *shilla* on a normative continuum between democratic and undemocratic practices but, rather, equates it with a “group of good friends” in the lives of young, affluent and in many ways privileged urban professionals. They meet almost on a daily basis, exchange news, opinions and gossip in the modern, Western-style cafés and other cosmopolitan milieus in the global city of Cairo. Their *shilal* provide members with their principal social circles in which to enjoy and experience life and their rather exclusive tastes and senses of cosmopolitan belonging. Although de Koning does not elaborate the social institution of *shilla* beyond “group of friends”, her detailed account of the everyday loyalties and friendship relations between young professionals affirms understandings of Ali’s localized *shilla* near Haram street (see above): *shilla* formations can be as much about everyday conviviality as about politics.

In other words, *shilal* also play a role in the more recreational spheres in the lives of young Egyptians when they revolve around certain purposes such as sport, football, music and other leisure activities. It was commonplace, for example, to see groups of young men and women, normally not exceeding ten in number, in the public and semi-public spaces of Cairo. However, while they may have arrived together at a park, a café, a shopping mall or along the Nile Corniche, sooner or later they disbanded into couples who sat and chatted in pairs at a distance, at times holding hands. The recreational *shilal*, common among university students, highlight socially sanctioned forms of mixed-gender gathering which channel friendship as well as courtship practices.

shilla as a “clique” in the more recreational sense (El-Messiri 1978: 109). She shows that, at the turn of 19th and 20th century, local male residents in the butchers’ quarter of al-Husainiya would join a “clique” whose members shared their taste for wine and hashish parties every night (ibid.: 66).

In this sense, they can involve substantial peer pressure and demands for conformity. Zuhur (1992) argues in the context of the Islamic revival that friendship groups based on *shilla* and *duf'a* solidarities were crucial in the spread of veiling practices among young women in Egypt in the 1980s. Zuhur's observation provides a complementary view of the practices of ethical self-formation that the women members of a Salafist piety movement in Cairo adopted, as a way to better embody religious mores and to conform to public piety (Mahmood 2005). According to Zuhur, *shilla* and *duf'a* forms of reciprocity, which are "extremely common and popular in Egypt", do not involve only peer pressure or mutual interests but, importantly, "social connections, fallbacks, introductions to mates, and favour exchanges. Young women and men feel an essential need to 'belong' inside or outside the family circle" (Zuhur 1992: 105-106).

For our discussion, it is interesting to note that, after Youth for Change had dissolved, Egyptian researcher Abdelrahman (2007: 189) observed that the main pattern for the emergence of "Kifaya youth" was in the form of sporadic and scattered *shilal*, which involved forging new friendship relations outside the party structures. Indeed, he suggests viewing *shilla* socialities in parallel with more corporatist relations and party affiliations:

This intimate period of *shilla* formations (*al-ḥāla al-shilaliyya al-ḥamīma*) was remembered by the majority with a deep sense of nostalgia for the past that, in comparison, seems far distant from the present state of recession (*ḥālat al-rukūd al-ḥāliyya*) which is dominated by partisan activities.⁴⁵

5.3.3. An insight into coalition politics

We have seen already that collective actions within youth movements, especially in terms of coalition building, were prone to internal factionalism when issues of public prestige and social hierarchies came into play. Some, like Islam, tried to form youth coalitions in vain, claimed that sectarianism (*tā'ifiyya*) persisted between certain political groups. In general, we have seen that the more leverage and membership youth movements gained in public life, the more prone they were to breaking up, observations that correspond with the analytic division Springborg (1975) makes between

⁴⁵ Translation from Arabic is mine.

organic and political *shilal*. In general, he suggests that organic *shilal* are important forms of collectivity and collective action in forging horizontal relations between people but, as soon as they get entangled in vertical relations of power and patronage in public life, *shilla*-based solidarities come under strain. These *shilla* types correspond, but do not correlate with both Ahmed's division between acquaintances and friendships, as well as differing modes of sociability, namely, instrumental and affective relations. It seems, indeed, that creating and maintaining social boundaries in political life involves acts of power and an exclusion/inclusion dynamic.

At the same time, being exclusive could at times serve to maintain relations of trust and solidarity – prime values of friendship in political life – within small social circles. Some of the “newcomer” activists in the late 2000s in particular characterized the groups of experienced activists as exclusive. “They like to have their own space,” one told me, indicating that he considered their social circles distant and exclusive. During my time in Egypt, rival groups would sometimes characterize each other as *shilal*, harnessing rather negative connotations with the term. In these contexts, they appear as exclusive social circuits in which everyday socialities and solidarities are maintained, distributed and experienced in the course of specific purposes, political goals or personal interests. It is however problematic to describe political *shilal* in great detail. On the one hand, I concur with Springborg that “it is difficult for an observer, or indeed, even for a participant in Egyptian elite politics, to successfully monitor changes in personal alliance networks, for *shilal* periodically fragment, giving rise to new combinations of alliances, and individual commitments are never total” (Springborg 1978: 275-276). Political *shilal*, thus characterized, were indeed exclusive, and often formed around shared interests and against other alliance networks, but their degree of internal cohesion was, and still is, often based on outsiders' speculations or moral statements. Partly for this reason, it would run counter to research ethics to describe in detail which activists or groups were seen as “*shilla* politicians” by others.

On the face of it, *shilal* appear as informal networks which mediate personal and collective experiences of reciprocity, solidarity and obligation and which can be operationalized as “the framework for effective political, social, and economic action” (Eickelman 2002: 319).⁴⁶ In other words,

46 As such, *shilla* formations echo other forms of informal structures that connect private lives with public political life in other parts of the world, such as *equipos* (teams) in Mexico, *panelinhas* (little saucepans) in Brazil, *diwanias* (salon debates) in Kuwait and *dawrahs* (circle) in Iran (Springborg 1978: 275; Eickelman 2002: 318-320).

sometimes their members meet for recreation and leisure and, at other times, for more predetermined collective action in pursuit of their particularistic goals. Belonging to a *shilla* potentially secures its members, through informal channels, resource-full, yet exclusive, everyday connectedness – or *wāṣṭa* – to associational life and formal political institutions. At a minimum, the *shilla*-based friendships help to unravel some of the dynamics in coalition politics in Egypt’s political life, and also among the young. Before concluding, however, it needs to be emphasized that I am cautious about advancing exotic accounts of *shilla* formation or presenting them as cultural features of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. Practices, such as the political appointment and recruitment of trusted friends, or helping old “school mates” in their pursuit of a job, a partner or an apartment, also happen elsewhere. In this sense, *shilal* defy single definitions and are structured by larger processes of social change in the neoliberal era, such as the rapid expansions in the use of the Internet and social media, the prolonged period of being young, differential access to urban spaces and the globally circulating youth cultures. *Shilal*, just as with friendship networks more generally, cut across different arenas of collective life including family, workplace, studies and politics. Given that experiences of belonging to one, or several, may differ from person to person, and from group to group, it is less fruitful to view *shilla* formations as having a fixed logic of micro-level congregation and collective action that resists time or place, than as a form of belonging and doing things together.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have acknowledged that engaging in public political life in the late 2000s provided much more varied experiences for young Cairenes than merely the acts of dissent which represented rather periodic events. Importantly, it also involved participating in a dissident lifestyle that incorporated sharing moments of being and doing things with others on a daily basis. In the absence of representative political institutions, the experiences of having friends and being a friend to others offered intimate avenues to public political life that stretched beyond kin ties and formal organizations. Although the field of youth activism was in many ways divided along lines of class, gender and political affiliation, the young could forge mutual grounds for friendship relations on the basis of their shared tastes, lifestyle choices and mutual respect for exemplary public figures. The shared experiences, especially those of youthful resistance and injustice, such as prison

cell stories, could connect young activists despite the group divisions and ideological strife that was prevalent in the political opposition. Oftentimes fallout from potential differences of opinion could also be avoided through treating one another with respect and reciprocity. Furthermore, despite the decisive role of the ICTs and social media in mediating friendship relations in the late 2000s, the daily need for “face-to-face” social interactions remained important due to the politicized and policed circumstances in which they lived. In this context, safeguarding the bonds of trust, belonging and everyday solidarity – the ideal values of friendship – were highly meaningful daily activities. The processes of internal strife bestowed somewhat particular exigencies, opportunities and challenges to the social interactions among young activists, and, therefore, an important aspect of being young activist was also to learn how to negotiate one’s public self in political life.

In this context, *shilla* formations provided the young with informal networks that coincided with partisan and organizational affiliations in Egypt’s public political life. On the other hand, they also provided intimately felt sites for friendship and everyday belonging in the lives of young Cairenes, the creation of which was conditioned by political and economic constraints, and their members’ differentiated opportunities and tastes for certain lifestyles and leisure activities. Nonetheless, when *shilal* were formed in the politicized context of youth activism, they became the recipients of increasingly ambivalent and negative connotations as vehicles for pursuing personal interests and shared goals while being subject to shifting alliances. While oscillating between the informal and formal areas of public political life, *shilal* mediated both affective and instrumental connections as the basis of friendship relations within close social circles. The concomitant notions of personal interests, however, point to the ethical dimension of youth activism in the late Mubarak era, an issue which will be the subject of the next chapter.

6 LIFE AS FREEDOM

In February 2011, at the height of Egypt's popular uprising on Tahrir Square, I witnessed several moments when protesters, usually groups of young men, spontaneously burst into singing a famous line from a poem of Ahmed Fouad el-Negm (1929-2013). The original version, written in 1969, begins as follows:

al-gada' gada' wa-l-gabān gabān
The brave man is brave, and the *coward a coward*.

bīna yā gada', haninzil al-mīdān
Let's go you brave ones, down to the battle front.

al-midān ba'īd, min gawf al-madīna
The front is far away, beyond the inner [depths of] the city.

Yā tār ish-shahīd, Dīr Yasīn wa Sīnā
*Oh (you are) the martyr's revenge, Deir Yassin and Sinai.*⁴⁷

El-Negm wrote this particular poem at the height of the student protest movements while in jail. At the time, it expressed the popular disillusionment and widespread sense of national loss after Egypt's defeat by

⁴⁷ The direct reference to Dir Yasin, a Palestinian village stormed by Zionist militias in 1948, draws parallels between Sinai and the occupation of Palestine in 1948. Deir Yassin and Sinai are highly symbolic sites of Arab defeat under the Zionist project of the Israeli state. The Palestinian village of Deir Yasin was occupied by Israeli forces in 1948, and Sinai was lost in the 1967 war to Israel, where Egypt was defeated. The translation into English is mine, with a view to conserving as much of the literal translation of the words as possible.

Israel in the 1967 war (Abdalla 2000). It called upon Egyptians to fulfil their national duty and to do their share in regaining the occupied land. El-Negm became notorious for his sharp social critique and political commentary, often mocking the political elites and better-off members of society, using the Egyptian dialect and vernacular expressions rather than Classical Arabic. His verses were performed by the singer and composer Sheikh Imam, and the concerts and recordings of this “revolutionary couple” had become an integral part of the collective experience and moral landscape of the Left-oriented opposition since the turbulent 1970s. But, it was not only their political messages that gained them popularity and moral approval. They also chose to live modestly in the popular quarters of Cairo “like any other” despite having had the opportunity to become rich and famous on the condition that they soften their language (Hindi 1979; Beinín 1994; Booth 2009). Both had been imprisoned several times since the 1960s for inciting the masses, and Imam’s recordings were banned from state media for over four decades under the rule of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Their songs continued to circulate among political dissenters, however, via word of mouth, cassette tapes and, later, CDs and the Internet.

In 2011, the protesters on Tahrir Square appropriated these lines, yet added something of their own, for instance:

al-gada‘ gada‘ wa-l-gabān gabān
The brave man is brave, and the coward a coward.

bīna yā gada‘, hanu‘’ud fi-l-mīdān
Let’s go you brave ones, let’s stay on the square.

In the Egyptian dialect, the term *al-mīdān* – as in Midan el-Tahrir (Liberation Square) – has a dual meaning which has at times escaped journalistic accounts of the revolutionary moment (e.g. Young 2013). In the original version, it refers mainly to the “battle front” where Egyptians should fight to regain the losses suffered by the military during the Six-Day War and, most notably, the loss of the Sinai Peninsula to Israeli occupation, but in 2011 Egyptian protesters exhibited their flexibility towards poetry as a subversive cultural resource.⁴⁸ In the middle of a revolution, they emphasized the

48 Protesters in other countries, like Tunisia, also resorted to subversive poetry at the important junctures of popular revolutions in 2011 (e.g. Colla 2012). These practices of using pre-existing symbolic resources have also been analyzed in the context of other popular uprisings in 2011, prompting,

second meaning of *al-mīdān* (as in “public square”) and urged fellow protesters to stay put on Tahrir Square, which had become the symbolic hub of the popular revolution. That the two registers of meaning – battle front and public square – would collude so seamlessly in 2011 was not arbitrary: they were a perfect fit with the revolutionary ethos of the time.⁴⁹ On January 28, the protesters had succeeded in reoccupying Tahrir Square and defending their position against Central Security forces and, on February 2, they had gained a victory in the “battle of the camel” against Mubarak’s supporters. Since then, “staying put” had been their primary political act. Public squares, circumscribed as they were under the Mubarak regime, now represented the principal physical spaces for heroic virtues and bravery, popular resistance and shared attempts to regain dignity for the Egyptian people.

* * *

In this final chapter, I inquire into the ethical dimensions of public dissent among young activists and explore more closely the makings of the “critical consciousness” (Andrews 2002) prevalent among them in the late 2000s. While there is no doubt that they collectively wished for greater justice, rights, democratic pluralism and the end of Mubarak’s presidency, their everyday lives were filled with a number of ethical considerations concerning what they should do, how to act with others, and why they had engaged in opposition politics in the first place: dilemmas which were not only about right and wrong, but also addressed the circumstances of living under an authoritarian form of rule in which personal involvement in public political dissent entailed the potential for immediate risks, and repercussions in their future lives. In this vein of exploration, I begin with a general overview of the broad public claims which framed the anti-regime attitudes of young activists as members of the wider anti-Mubarak mobilization in the late 2000s.

for instance, Bouzoita to use Umberto Eco’s notion of “semiotic guerrillas” to characterize Tunisian artists who reappropriated and reinterpreted the national anthem in the run-up period to the Tunisian revolution (Bouzoita 2013: 290-291).

49 It can be argued that Negm’s original poem also played with the two registers of meaning at the turn of the 1970s and the 1960s. The call for *al-mīdān* that lies far from *al-madīna* can also be interpreted to insinuate that the students should move from the campuses – or the student dormitories (*madīnat al-talaba*) – and occupy central squares in downtown Cairo. At the time, this represented a concrete debate among student activists. For instance, when Sadat ordered the CSF to arrest Leftist students at campuses in January 1972, thousands of students marched on downtown areas, including Tahrir Square, and the CSF were unable to curb their protests (Abdalla 2008: 183-184). According to Abdalla, it was “the first occasion on which President Sadat had had to face street riots, and it set a precedent which he never forgave or forgot” (ibid.: 183).

In the second section, I look more closely at the social and moral worlds in which they were embedded and the prevailing notions of courage, self-sacrifice and optimism that were considered prerequisites for continuing their oppositional engagements. In the third section, I discuss the different practical decisions and judgements that the young faced making when engaging in public political life in the late Mubarak era.

6.1. DEFENDING THE NATION

In the run-up to the 2011 uprisings, young activists would, by and large, claim to be true patriots. It was a position that was often expressed through depictions of the potential Egypt has in terms of natural resources, cultural innovation and its important role in the history of humanity as the “cradle of human civilization”; in everyday parlance it was often expressed through a deep love of Egypt. At the same time, their claims for social justice (*‘adāla ijtimā‘iyya*), freedom (*ḥurriyya*) and dignified life (*ḥayā karīma*) also run deep in popular imageries of Egyptians as a people who have lived for centuries, if not millennia, under the rule of centralized powers that have for the most part been, if not foreign to, then at the least exploitative of its social fabric.

According to Amr (23), the young student from Giza, Egyptians are “by nature” very resilient people who have lived and survived from Pharaonic rule to the Ottoman Empire, and from European colonialism to the era of Mubarak, and continue to live, even if beaten to the ground, by eating its soil. Strong patriotic sentiments did not only prevail among the Left-oriented youth, in Marxist, Nasserist and Arab Nationalist circles, but also among Liberals and Islamists. Emad (23), a blogger who had once been affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, explained his patriotism to me in 2008 with a famous quote by Mustafa Kamel (1874-1908), one of the heroes of Egyptian nationalism in the early 20th century: “If I wasn’t an Egyptian, I would wish to be an Egyptian.”

In July 2008, I talked to Arif, who had recently joined the April 6 Youth Movement. For him, as with other members I encountered, the main task for the nascent group was to raise Egyptians’ political awareness, since they deserve much better than the “gang” (*‘aṣāba*) that governs them through “corruption and tyranny”:

We do it because it’s the right of our generation to try to take its role (*yakhuṭ dawruh*), and regardless of whether we succeed or

not, we will leave this experience for the generation that comes after us (*hansīb tagruba li-l-gīl illī ba'dinā*) who can continue until we can make Egypt into a much better place (*makān 'afḍal kitīr*).

The sense of frustration I encountered among opposition activists can be regarded as deep, shared sentiments of injured patriotism: the Egyptian people were being plundered before their very eyes, and their resources and land were being “stolen” for the benefit of political and business elites and their associates abroad.⁵⁰ During the global financial crisis in 2008, public outrage over the “bread crisis” and the coinciding labour protests – which overshadowed the early stages of my main fieldwork and led to the emergence of the April 6 Youth Movement – represented for young activists yet further confirmation of a complex set of predicaments that inflicted contemporary society. Various events and localized disasters (*kawāriṭh*), such as the sinking of the Al-Salama Boccaccio 98 in the Red Sea in February 2006 – a ferry carrying some 1,400 passengers, mainly Egyptian migrant workers, to Saudi Arabia; the landslide in al-Duweiqā in September 2008; and localized farmers’ protests against the privatization of land, coupled with widespread problems in healthcare, traffic, pollution and public education, all fed into a collective sense of protracted and escalating crisis (*azma*). In the aftermath of the al-Mahalla al-Kubra uprising, as the media had conveyed stories of impoverished Egyptians being killed during scuffles in front of bakeries, one activist noted that the government had made a “fatal mistake” (*ghalṭa mumīta*) because it had encroached on the loaf of bread – the symbolic and de facto staple food of most impoverished Egyptians.

Sentiments of this kind were hardly the prerogative of members of the political opposition. During my fieldwork in Egypt, encounters with Egyptians in buses, public parks and on the street produced similar conclusions: their society and livelihoods were deteriorating by the day and the authorities were either incapable or unwilling to act in the best interests of the country. The sense of impending crisis was linked to one of injustice due to the impunity of those who were seen as responsible for it. In 2007, Emad Siyam – a Leftist intellectual affiliated with the Kifaya movement – characterized the grumblingly contested legitimacy of Mubarak’s regime and the political “dead-end” as follows:

50 Arriving at this analysis is supported by reading a number of articles written by opposition politicians (e.g. Qandil 2005; Sha‘ban 2006; Kifaya 2005).

The survival of the regime of tyranny and corruption now relies, alongside its oppressive security services and arsenal of freedom-restricting laws, on a political culture none other than that of despotism and scaremongering that prevailed over many decades. This culture has succeeded in doing away with all resistance on the part of opposition groups and movements, and in destroying the institutions through which they would have been able to express themselves and voice their political and social demands, independently or collectively. The citizen became a mere individual in the face of the full might of the state and its instruments of tyranny, forcing everyone to buckle under, accept the *fait accompli* and learn to live with it. (Cited in Sha‘ban 2007)

In the 2000s, voicing dissenting views, especially in public space, was constrained by the state to the point that opposition groups sometimes framed Mubarak’s position at the apex of political power in terms of a present-day “pharaoh”, thereby connoting not only his centralized political clout but also his old, if not “ancient”, age. These claims also implied a refusal to see Mubarak through the imagery of a “just tyrant”; that is, one who rules by force but defends the wellbeing of his subjects by, at the very least, providing order in society – a role that had, according to some, harnessed a degree of popular acceptance of authoritarian rule in the Middle East (e.g. Korany 1994).⁵¹

The background to discontent thus exhibited the fragile legitimacy of the Mubarak regime and the argument that it did not represent Egyptians and, indeed, barely acknowledged its responsibilities towards them (Albrecht 2013: 24-36). In some ways, the rhetoric of the prodemocracy movements comprised a statement by the urban middle-classes that they needed to defend the Egyptian nation from further peril at the hands of an oppressive and unjust regime. The imagery of the Egyptian people (*al-sha‘b al-maṣrī*)

51 Egyptian political scientist Bahgat Korany observed in the 1990s that the stagnant political life of Middle Eastern countries was connected with their aging leadership (Korany 1994). At the time, he argued that the popular legitimacy of public authorities – especially in “rentier states” – was partly based on religious notions of a “just autocrat” which helped the public authorities to claim hegemony over public political life: “The influence of this hegemony could even go deeper to influence the collective mind and reinforce people’s dependence on the state. For the state becomes the sole provider of collective and individual goods as well as of political order. Did not Ibn Taymiya [1263-1328] inform the people that 60 years under the authority of a just tyrant is better than one night without government? No wonder, then, that segments of Arab political discourse are littered with descriptions of the enlightened dictator, the heroic leader, the exceptional Za‘im and revered head of the family.” (ibid.: 511)

– and the average “Egyptian citizen” (*muwāṭin maṣrī* or *‘ādī*), at the core of which lay the male individual – served as an imagined community (Anderson 1991) that was increasingly disenchanting and impoverished under Mubarak’s rule, and paying the price, in terms of livelihoods, dignity and future chances, for a societal trajectory which only benefited the few. The notion of “the people” is central to nationalist sensibilities of emancipation and resonates powerfully in everyday discourse with the popular or working classes, impoverished as they were during Mubarak’s presidency, while also providing a reminder of their revolutionary potential. Lockman (1994: 182) suggests that the notion of “people” was adopted by early-20th-century Egyptian nationalists, such as Mustafa Kamel, to mobilize the masses into the liberation movement with the aim of evoking a “desirable frisson of populism, of heroic virtue, of activism, of a democratic, egalitarian, and possibly even revolutionary inclination.”

In the 2000s, the claims of the anti-Mubarak movements would also tap into social histories of popular resistance (*muqāwama sha‘biyya*) to outside oppressors, including British colonial rule in the pre-independence era; Britain, France or Israel during the Suez Crisis in 1956; the Israeli occupation of Sinai – as well as Gaza, the Golan Heights and the West Bank – in 1967.⁵² Hence, just as the 2000s’ anti-Mubarak mobilization encompassed the formation of critical awareness among Egyptians, it encompassed these junctures in the national past and also informed the moral exigencies of “losing fear” and “taking our right” (*nakhud ḥaqqinā*) that prevailed among the activists who talked to me prior to 2011. Being interrelated, these normative claims encouraged a subversive analysis of the present in which the incumbent authorities would not voluntarily give citizens the formal rights or entitlements which they are due on the basis of law and the constitution, accompanied by a shared conviction that they must be fought for.

These sensibilities of injured patriotism, fused with the moralities of reclaiming dignity, are the lens through which I interpret the Egyptian protesters’ two central messages at the crucial junctures of the popular uprisings in early 2011 (Onodera 2011a). Among the protesters, the resolved sense of togetherness and purpose was at moments almost tangible, with the slogan “the people want the regime down!” (*al-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*) comprising the initial and central tenet. It articulated the diverse demands, wishes and aspirations of large segments of the population and, simulta-

52 At the World Social Forum 2013 in Tunis a young Cairene explained to me that, due to their geographic location at the juncture of wars and national liberation, the Canal cities of Port Said, Ismailiya and Suez occupy an important role in this imagery of popular resistance in Egypt.

neously, constructed anew “the people” – elusive as that notion may be (Salvatore 2011) – as the source of public legitimacy and the quintessential locus of social change. On the day of Mubarak’s resignation on February 11, 2011, I witnessed the spontaneous vocal outburst of “Raise your head high, you’re an Egyptian!” (*irfa‘ ra’sak faw’*, *inta maṣrī*) among the protesters. Again, it echoed the past, specifically one of Nasser’s central slogans in the post-independence era – “Raise your head high, the age of imperialism is over” – implying that similar processes of national liberation were being enacted before us (Hatem 2000: 45). It was a moving moment on Tahrir Square, bearing witness to the sudden and collective experience of regained dignity on the part of Egyptians, and thereby expressing a two-way symbolic movement that was instantly ingrained into the revolutionary narrative: the downward fall of an unjust regime and all who represented it, and the proudly “erect posture” of an Egyptian.

6.2. “LOCAL” MORAL WORLDS OF YOUTH ACTIVISM

To return to a period when these events were still in the future, the general framing of injured patriotism that I described above functioned as a main unifying element across the social divisions and cleavages among young activists. Importantly, these ideational references were part and parcel of oppositional culture – its events, public rhetoric, social networks and shared social memories – in which young activists lived their daily lives. In this sense, they were simultaneously both socialized by, and contributing to, certain “moral worlds” which, as Kleinman proposes, also encompass “micromoral settings [that] are particular, intersubjective, and constitutive of the lived flow of experience” (Kleinman 1995: 123):

They are not simply reflections of macro-level socioeconomic and political forces, through they are strongly influenced by such forces. The micro-level politics of social relationships, in the setting of limited resources and life chances, underwrite processes of contesting and negotiating actions. Yet micro-contents are not for the most part so greatly fragmented or disorganized as to be lacking distinctive forms or coherence. (Ibid.)

In the 1990s, Kleinman provided an insight in the field of medical anthropology that harnessed special attention to the experiences of human suffering and illness. At the time, it implied that ethical considerations and moral experience were embedded in everyday life and belonging in communities, neighbourhoods and social networks at specific localities (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996).⁵³ As noted earlier, the new ICTs undermined the importance of physical locale for daily communication and interaction, and the young activists were increasingly exposed – with some contributing – to counter-hegemonic imageries of daily injustice and stories of popular resistance not only across Egypt, but globally. For some, especially the rooted cosmopolitans, global cultural flows and transnational activist cultures – including the Global Justice Movement and anti-war movements of the early 2000s – provided additional references and concrete social networks through which to articulate claims for justice, democracy and human rights. At the same time, the moral worlds in which they operated also encompassed prevailing notions of bravery, commitment and personal integrity which had been articulated to oppositional culture since long before the events of 2011.

To return to Negm’s poem quoted above: I had come across it – and its central trope, the notion of *gada’* – on a number of occasions before 2011. During the 2010 parliamentary elections, for instance, Muhammad – who in April 2008 had chastised me for smoking a cigarette while walking – commented that the only candidate who merited his moral approval was Gamila Ismail, a former TV presenter and the wife of Ayman Nour, ex-leader of the liberal Ghad Party who was in jail at the time: “I don’t agree with her politically, but I respect her, she’s a *gada’a*”. Ismail was known for her courageous stand against the state authorities and had led a vocal campaign against the NDP’s Hisham Mustafa Khalil, son of the former prime minister, in the Qasr Al-Nil constituency in downtown Cairo, gathering support from young prodemocracy activists.

I have already mentioned that the Leftist Solidarity Group organized an *iftār* party – marking the end of daily fasting – during Ramadan 2008 (see Section 4.3.2.). As the event was coming to an end, and most guests had already left, an *ūd* player’s performance of Negm’s poem above reinvigo-

53 Arthur Kleinman (1998: 359) would later modify his conception of local worlds so as to encompass the specificities of the global era, noting that “even in a vast sea of globalization, in which we are more acutely aware that local worlds have permeable boundaries, undergo frequent change, and that their members may belong to several different networks at the same time – even with these qualifications the local perdures as the grounds of social life.”

rated the atmosphere through collective song, with everyone but me knowing its lyrics by heart.⁵⁴ On this occasion, and many others, Negm's poetry served as a celebration of political dissent and the virtues of personal commitment, courage and self-sacrifice. In my observation, what was highly valued across a broad spectrum of young activists was a personal sense of justice: respect for the integrity of speech and action was an issue that transcended social and ideological boundaries. Rather than being mere abstract notions, the virtues of courage, justice and integrity were not only enacted in moments of public resistance but also shaped the activists' social interactions in daily life. In this sense, they represented circulating "normative registers" (Schielke 2009) which mediated certain moral qualities in both speech and action and, far from settled, shaped the moral terrain on which activists positioned both themselves and others.

6.2.1. Ideal traits of bravery and righteousness: Being a *gada'*

In the Egyptian dialect, the notion of *gada'* usually refers to a man who has one or several of the following characteristics: "nobility of character and integrity, intelligence and application, and manly toughness and courage" or "fellow, young man" (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 151; e.g. Elyachar 2005: 137). In Cairo, it traditionally has had forceful impact on the sociabilities of working class men and, more generally, on the local moral worlds of the popular (*sha'bi*) neighbourhoods. In her ethnography of the craftsmen's workshops in Madinat al-Hirafiyeen on the outskirts of Greater Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2005) situates the personal traits of *gada'* in the local social and economic exchange systems, observing that the personal qualities to which the term refers relate to someone who is generous in giving both material resources and time to benefit others, and who devotes himself to solving the problems of friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbours (Elyachar 2005: 137-139, 158-161). In a similar vein, Salwa Ismail (2006) emphasizes that the notion of *gada'* carries the ideal traits of braveness and toughness that prevail among lower-class residents in an informal district of Cairo and connects it to "the classical *ibn al-balad* [son of the country] masculine construct of the popular-class male who embodies the spirit of the country" (Ismail 2006: 100), referring to Sawsan El-Messiri's influential ethnography

54 The *'ūd* is a traditional Middle Eastern string instrument that resembles the European lute. It was also played by the singer and composer Sheikh Imam.

Ibn al-Balad: A concept of Egyptian identity (El-Messiri 1978). El-Messiri suggests that the term *gad‘ān* (plural of *gada‘*) was used to denote the localized gangs in Cairo’s popular neighbourhoods after the 1919 popular revolution against the British (ibid.: 50, 66-68)⁵⁵ who were not petty criminals (or *balṭagiyya*) but, rather, the sons of local families and neighbourhoods who settled disputes by engaging personally and at times confrontationally with adversaries, wrong-doers and outsiders. They were traditionally notorious for:

...their excellence in beating and fighting and [...] specialized in protecting those who sought their help. The police used to fear them, and prison to them was an honour that they could boast of. It is often said to someone who gets imprisoned, “Prison is for the *gad‘an*”, meaning that it is only the strong and the honorable who are imprisoned. (Ibid.: 82)

While Negm’s poem promotes *gada‘* as the opposite of *gabān* (coward) – thereby shedding light on the moral worlds of injured patriotism and even the revolutionary ethos of early 2011 (Ghannam 2013) – the traits of manhood implied by the term should be viewed in relation to others such as *kāsib* (family breadwinner) and *fahlawī* (“clever”, and talented at convincing others) (El-Messiri 1978: 50, 55; Ismail 2006: 100; Ghannam 2013: 54-57).⁵⁶ Traditionally the ideal traits of *gada‘* combine bravery, a sense of justice and caring for others and, as El-Messiri elaborates, apply to “someone who knows his duty and is eager to fulfil it” (1978: 50); someone who

...would not tolerate improper behaviour; he would interfere to correct it or at least oppose it. This attitude is well expressed in the saying, “he takes his rights by his own arms”. He does not accept injustice or tyranny and usually stands for the weak against the strong. He does not stab his friend in the back or fool

55 El-Messiri relies here on Ahmed Amin’s book *Al-Sa‘laka wa al-Futuwwa fi al-Islam* (1952, Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif) which, at the time of writing, I have not been able to find.

56 Egyptian anthropologist Farha Ghannam (2013: 55) observes that “[W]hile labels like “real man” and “gada” are desired and aspired to, [...] there are other ways of being a man that are socially stigmatized and negatively viewed. People use words such as *khawwal* (submissive), *hafa‘* (insignificant), *kheekha* (weak or sissified), or *‘ayyil* (childish) to describe a man who does not effectively materialize social norms that equate a real man with domination, assertiveness, and decisiveness. Other words may include *hayyif* (trivial, a man who overlooks the important things and makes a big issue of trivial ones), *hafiyya* (nobody, or insignificant), *khafeef* (not serious, talks too much).”

him, nor would he strike a person in his own neighbourhood, for this would be an improper act of a protector to his guest. (El-Messiri 1978: 82-83)

During my research, I heard the term *gada'* being used – and at times used it myself – as a complimentary term when describing persons. I never heard it being used as an auto designation except in collective recitals of Negm's poem which materialized the symbolic weight of the term as a marker of ideal "activist virtues". Those who were simultaneously tough (with the police) but just and helpful (towards fellow activists and citizens), who abided by their moral principles and were prepared to sacrifice their well-being to safeguard others, were often respected across organizational lines, ideological strife and friendship circles. In this sense, the ideal qualities of *gada'* also border on the ideal qualities of a good friend. Among Leftists one could hear someone characterise a young Muslim Brother by saying, "He's a Muslim Brother, but still a *gada'*" (*huwwa ikhwān bas gada'*) as a way to downplay mutual differences and rivalries and show respect. These value statements, however, predominately targeted the younger generation of the Muslim Brotherhood, and bloggers especially, for having voiced public criticism against Mubarak's regime and, importantly, for waging internal disputes with the conservative leadership of their own organization.

As I have already suggested, the notion of *gada'* does not refer only to the working classes or solely to men. Women activists were also complimented in these terms, as in, "She is a girl but a *gada'a*" (*hiyya bint bas gada'a*); or even, "She's a girl but also a man" (*hiya bint bas rāgil* or *rugūla*). These comments highlighted the notion of self-sacrifice and personal stakes in engaging in righteous deeds. For instance, when the landslide victims of al-Duweiqā protested in central Cairo, I met Nermin (25), a young student, who had spent days in the landslide area helping the victims: fetching food, moving rocks and searching for survivors. A few days later, she was one of the last to remain at the scene, as others had lost heart due to lack of food and sleep. A friend of mine told me about what Nermin had experienced, explaining that she had her university exams the following day but that, due to the circumstances, she had not prepared for them. He commented to me, out of her hearing: "She's a *gada'a*, really."

To talk about *gada'* as a fixed social category or a stagnant reference to an "ideal activist" would, however, be misleading. Nor was it used within opposition circles alone. As Negm's poem illustrates, it has a persistent presence in the national history of popular resistance and patriotism, and,

as a symbolic resource from popular culture that is fused with contemporary activist subcultures, it exhibits various uses and situated meanings. Indeed, the youth activism of the 2000s did not emerge in Cairo's working-class quarters but, rather, through daily interactions in both cyberspace and the physical sites of sociability in central Cairo. Young activists, who in the main came from the relatively privileged backgrounds of the "content classes" with the available means and time to frequent the city centre, transposed the localized conceptions and popular (*sha'bi*) ideals of personhood into the non-localized hybrid spaces of central Cairo, fusing them with today's "activist virtues".

6.2.2. "Doing something is better than doing nothing": Against *salbiyya*

At the same time, one thing activist youth saw as their main challenge in society was overcoming the prevailing attitudes of *salbiyya* (lit. "negativism") that was framed in both interviews and everyday talk as a kind of political apathy and carried forceful implications of acquiescence, a sense of defeat, pessimism and, even, selfishness. It was claimed that Egyptians, and youth in particular, should overcome their fear, voice their grievances to the incumbent authorities, and play a role in the making of the future Egypt. Some young activists were deeply disappointed by fellow citizens who shied away from politics and concentrated on making a living, although they conceded that the prevailing sense of defeat and pessimism in society was a product of the Mubarak regime's longstanding strategies to stay in power through the exercise of fear and patronage. Others, however, especially the rooted cosmopolitans, were reflexive about their privileged positions: they had means, connections and precious time at their disposal, unlike most Egyptians whose lives and energies were consumed by daily struggles to make ends meet. Hence, for some, the sense of class privilege was linked to a sense of duty to do something. It was apparent that the possibility of public political dissent was unevenly distributed among young activists: for the less privileged, such activity subsumed more ambivalent trajectories and ethical considerations, as they risked greater personal stakes should outcomes be negative.

What Ahmed told me in 2008 illuminated the deep frustration he felt about the few options he sensed he had in his life. Current social conditions were already so bad that, regardless of whether he decided to engage in opposition politics or not, he would die (*kida hamūt, wa kida hamūt*), and he

felt it was better to do so content in the knowledge that he had at least tried to do something rather than staying at home and do nothing. For Ahmed, the notion of staying at home implied remaining “idle” in his parents’ house and its neighbourhood. For Ahmed’s friend Hisham (28), an April 6 Youth activist, however, the option of staying at home carried somewhat different meanings that included obligations and responsibilities. Firstly, in comparison to many others, he was lucky to have a secure job and an employer who tolerated his political activities. On the other hand, he was married and the father of a young child, and his family life had suffered from his activism, which often took place late in the evenings, because his wife and parents lived in constant fear that one day something might happen to him. He had been detained several times and also undergone physical torture during interrogation. But these experiences seemed to have made him even more committed. I pressed him on the subject by asking why, given the various options he had in life – including a job, a family and a child – he pursued the risky line of opposition activism. After a few moments of reflection, his short and simple response was: “I am hopeful” (*‘andī ’amal*). A seemingly mundane statement, its subversive content was shaped by the circumstances in which he uttered it.

The options of doing something or staying at home, alluded to by both Ahmed and Hisham, was a recurring allegory among young activists that expressed the alternative paths of reaching out to the world with the aim of changing it, or leaving as it was while trying to make the best of it. In addition to the problematic of good/wrong, and the constitution of bravery and gallantry, there was an added dimension to their political experience, namely, the active maintenance of optimism – or *tjābiyya* (lit. “positive” and “affirmative” attitude), the opposite of *salbiyya* – as a way to resist acquiescence and passivity. Arif, for his part, had been arrested several times since the anti-war protests in 2003 and he had lost his job at a small shop due to being detained in 2008. When I asked about his readiness to face the personal risks that were involved in opposition politics, he admitted that, personally, he certainly wished to get married, have children and spend his old age by the sea somewhere outside Cairo. At the same time, he wanted his offspring to have the chance to live in “a society that is much better than the one in which we live”, adding:

When a human being wants to believe in what he does, he doesn’t feel other problems as time passes. Maybe at first you’re worried about getting arrested, but after the first time you get arrested,

tortured, beaten up, and oppressed, you see things differently. For me, our most important mission is [...] to invite people from their negativism towards optimism. And this is so important, much more important than personal problems – that I’m afraid, I secure only my own safety (*a’ ammin nafsi*) – because this country is much more important than myself, Egypt is much more important than individual persons (*maṣr ahamm kitr min afrād*).

Thus, for some, an important aspect of political experience was to invest hope – as precarious as it was under the current conditions – in the Egyptian people (*al-sha‘b al-maṣrī*) as the source of public legitimacy and the quintessential locus of social change that, eventually, would have to arise from silence, take matters into its own hands, and steer the course of history towards a world without Mubarak. Furthermore, although most of the youth to whom I talked did not emphasize their religiosity, those who were more outspoken about their religious beliefs emphasized that their ethical considerations and future trajectories involved life not only after Mubarak but, importantly, also after death. Emad, for example, wondered aloud in the summer of 2008 about the readiness of certain Leftists to sacrifice themselves for politics without citing the element of religion, adding:

I don’t want to be passive (*mish ‘āyiz akūn salbī*). I want to play a role in what happens in my country. At the same time, being a Muslim, when I die Allah will ask me: “What did you do in your country? Did you live only for yourself, for your own ambitions, for your family, earning money and enjoying life? Or did you have the aim in your life to change society and your country for the better (*taṣallah al-muḡtama‘ wa taṣallah baladak*)?” But this doesn’t mean that I demand that everyone work in politics, certainly not! There are people who don’t like politics, but still they take a role in what happens in our country. For example, if you are a rich businessman, you can donate to poor people, or you can participate in politics, or do charity, things like that.

I met Emad a few times over the summer of 2008 when he had only recently resigned from the Muslim Brotherhood. He had joined the movement at university but, after the draft of its party platform was leaked in 2007, he increasingly questioned his affiliations to an organization that did not seem to represent his opinions and wanted to exclude women and non-

Muslims from high state positions (e.g. Brown and Hamzawy 2008). Interestingly, he resigned from the movement, just as he had joined it, by letting his friends know about his decision. By December 2010, when I next met Emad and his friend Sherif, also a former member, his criticism had become entrenched. They both were passionate about movies, and complained that some Muslim Brothers – including those who entered the People’s Assembly in 2005 – wanted to ban public concerts and even the cinema because many blockbusters, despite being censored, showed “immoral” sexual content and, furthermore, that film-going allowed the mixing of unrelated men and women in the confined spaces of dim-lit movie theatres. At the period, as Emad saw it, there were many more pressing issues, such as the redistribution of public resources, freedom of the press and higher educational reform, and the preoccupation of aging moralists with public piety was clearly not among them. He further added that he had gradually been embracing a more secular outlook on life – or secularism (*‘almāniyya*), an almost blasphemous term for the conservatives – which by no means meant compromising his personal beliefs. Rather than framing it as a lifestyle choice, Emad and Sherif contended that their disdain for the Muslim Brotherhood was more a matter of how to interpret religion (*khilāfāt al-fiqh*), and a shared refusal of top-down dictates on how to be a good Muslim.

In general, the young activists who emphasized their religiosity to me evoked notions of the afterlife and the idea that engaging in opposition politics implied a sense of fulfilling a religious duty or even of being “closer to God”. In this context, they situated intention as a basis of morality, recalling, like Emad, that God will judge Muslims on the Day of Resurrection on the basis of their good intentions as well as *thawāb* – the reward gathered through good and pious deeds in life – and not solely on the basis of what they have done.

Most of the young activists in this study did not share the Islamists’ emphasis on Islamic jurisprudence nor the Islamic “frame of reference” (*marja’iyya islāmiyya*) as the constitutive framework for their political actions. In other words, they did not exclusively emphasize religion as the basis for morality but, rather, pointed to Egypt’s present and future trajectories during their own lifetimes or, at least, that of their offspring. While the requirements and opportunities of parenting did not surface with the majority of male activists as much as their prospects of marriage, some young women were decisive that they did not want to raise children in the present conditions. In light of the prevailing sense of injured patriotism, their commitment to social and political change seemed as much tied to the pursuit

of being a good Egyptian as of being a good Muslim. Moral stances that draw on patriotism and religion are not naturally mutually exclusive, however, and both men and women could articulate them, for instance, through enacting the *gada'* ideals of personhood in everyday situations.

6.2.3. On whose behalf?

Meanwhile, discussions of whether “this” or “that” person was really acting for the common good, or merely pursuing particularistic goals, were rife. Some were accused of engaging in *shilla* politics as a way to safeguard personal or partisan interests and to overhaul their rivals. Others were said to cultivate instrumental friendship relations in their careerist pursuit for employment opportunities in either political parties or civil society organizations. Although these accusations at times echoed the differences between the so-called reformists and those who called for more radical change, it was commonly held that seeking positions in formal hierarchies was the first step on the way to becoming corrupt, or at least of putting oneself at risk of being seduced by the prospects of material wealth and social standing. Often the question was also one of who may legitimately represent Egypt’s young activists in public life and who may not.

Indeed, activists were blamed for benefitting from public limelight in many ways, including media presence, invitations to seminars abroad (*barra*) or future funding opportunities, the latter particularly concerning those who had acquired the needed foreign language skills and educational levels. In these kinds of situations, suspicions were framed in terms of means to suspect ends, namely, that activism was not only about public claims of rights and democracy, but also about instrumental values in terms of accruing social status, prestige and better life chances and livelihoods in the future. The issue of foreign funding (*tamwīl*), as we have seen, was a highly contested and divisive issue in this context, though charges of “foreign interventionism” are not exclusive to Egypt as such. They also generate running conspiracies along with considerable social pressures for public political actors to legitimize themselves in the postcolonial aid-recipient countries of the Global South where “accusations abound in heated public debates over national sovereignty, patriotism and, even, cultural authenticity” (Kontinen and Onodera 2015: 3).

In Egypt, accusations against foreign funding not only served the state in undermining the legitimacy of Egyptian human rights advocates but they

also prevailed among civil society professionals and the political opposition. In this context, Nicola Pratt (2006) observes two main arguments that are often deployed simultaneously: the first is based on “the paradigm of dependency that rejects foreign funding because the West is economically stronger and, therefore, can employ funding to exploit Egyptian NGOs for its own purposes”; and the second rests on “a paradigm that rejects foreign funding on the basis of essential moral characteristics of the West, that is, the West is not Egyptian and, therefore, must necessarily be morally dangerous to Egyptian national interests” (ibid.: 115-116; e.g. Sayed 2006: 90-103).

Common good and personal interests

In this context, Emad’s remark, noted above, about trying to “make society better” is illustrative of the wider framing of ethical reflections among young political activists in the late Mubarak era, particularly in their claims to act for the common good (*maṣlaḥa ‘amma*) in contrast to safeguarding their personal interests or wellbeing (*maṣāliḥ shakṣiyya*) (cf. Elyachar 2005: 147-149). In the rhetoric of anti-Mubarak movements in the 2000s, as well as in the everyday talk of activists themselves, the common good or “public interest” (*maṣlaḥa*, pl. *maṣāliḥ*) featured not only in claims for social justice but also as a highly bifurcated normative register that shaped social relations. The notion of *maṣlaḥa* originates in long-lasting debates on the primary goals of Islamic jurisprudence (Abdelkader 2003: 47-57; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004), but, in the claims of the prodemocracy movements it should be seen against the popular sentiments that viewed the Egyptian government as a corporate actor that was not defending the common good, despite its public claims to act in the best interests of the people and to defend the national interest (*maṣlaḥat al-waṭan*) – which, in practice, often translated into neoliberal economic reforms coupled with heightened security measures constraining political rights and freedoms (Pratt 2005).

I have already mentioned how some activists, particularly those who had experienced deep disappointments during the course of political activism, cultivated highly cynical views of Egypt’s “political life” (*al-ḥayā al-siyāsiyya*) as a kind of contagious space which excluded “love” or affective relations, and was fundamentally “ill” (*marīḍ*) (see Section 5.2.2.); some even characterized it in terms of paralysis and “rickets” (*kusāḥ*). Generally, their analyses of “politics-as-disease” targeted the upper echelons of state power and the practices of ruling elites aimed at consolidating political power and economic wealth in the hands of closed circles at the expense of the majority of Egyptians. While these charges tended to target “high

level” governmental politics, they were also directed at much of the political opposition. The parties got the largest share in that it was suggested that their main aim was to maintain their collective benefits while manoeuvring among themselves, and making alliances against their rivals, then switching sides, and, in brief, demonstrating inconsistency. Young activists complained that political parties, including those in opposition, were pursuing their own personal benefit instead of concrete actions aimed at improving conditions for all. As one put it:

There is no party in Egypt that does not have personal benefits in mind (*mafīsh hizb fī maṣr malhūsh maṣāliḥ shakhṣiyya*). They just talk (*kalām bas*) but in reality do not love their country (*waṭan*) and do nothing on the street.

On the one hand, these kinds of views indicate the very limited resources and space for manoeuvre the political opposition was allowed in the Mubarak era (Albrecht 2013). Mohammed Sayed al-Said, a co-founder of the Kifaya movement, traces these widely shared negative attitudes – including fear and disdain – towards “politics” to the post-independence era when Nasser abolished the multiparty system and introduced a series of freedom-restricting laws (Sa‘id 2005). By monopolizing the political sphere the new political elite also encroached on “public civil space” that had been relatively active prior to independence (ibid.: 64-68). Said suggests that the troubled relations between the political and the civil spheres in society continued into the 2000s in the sense that the popular antipathy towards public political life

...involves an outright condemnation of politics per se, which it blames for all the decadence that Egypt is facing, even within the civil field. This type [of widespread attitude] emerged in reaction to political manoeuvres, which revealed “politics” to be devoid of any coherent behaviour and lacking integrity and loyalty. Politics is also perceived as being an abusive practice, seeking individual interests and clientele relationships rather than public interest. (ibid.: 65)

Political activists and NGO professionals, therefore, faced not only state rejection but also suspicion and social pressure from their peers and former associates. Young opposition activists could, to a certain extent, legitimize

their claims to justice, democracy and human rights through embodied practices of concrete street actions that bordered on the domain of sacrifice rather than political rhetoric or mere “talk” (*kalām bas*). They were not, however, immune to the bifurcated debate on what constitutes the common good and who could legitimately claim to defend it which permeated political life in Egypt, from political rhetoric to activists’ social relationships. What I suggest is that the degree of social proximity to each other experienced by young Egyptian activists can also be viewed in light of the bifurcated normative terrain between the “public good” and “personal benefits”; in other words, the further the social distance, the greater the ambivalence about the nature and modality of personal relationships while, between good friends, this ambivalence was seemingly resolved. It does not however preclude the possibility that some, even if they pursued their shared interests through *shilla* politics, could also consider themselves to be good friends, though in a form that is somewhat distinct from Aristotelian “genuine” friendships in which the central values are virtue and the mutual encouragement of one and other towards enacting some generalized notions of good (Ward 2011).

The everyday engagements of young activists took place on the ambivalent moral terrain of public political life and constantly involved reflection on how to be and act with others, as well as ethical reflections on their own dissent practices that exhibited both deontological and consequentialist considerations: those emphasizing duties and moral values and those that involved the ethics of means and ends. Morality, as Lambek notes, “cannot be simply an act of commission or an acceptance of obligation but includes the reasoning behind choosing to do so and the reasoning that determines how to balance one’s multiple and possibly conflicting commitments” (Lambek 2000: 315; Schielke 2009: 162-164). I suggest that these considerations were not mutually exclusive but, rather, claimed and enacted according to time, place and social situation. One way to discuss this matter is to inquire how they positioned themselves against these kinds of ambivalences and legitimized their oppositional activities in the context of their everyday lives.

6.3. ON FUTURE TRANSITIONS

In 2008, Mustafa, a former Youth for Change activist, told me that he had to legitimize his involvement in the prodemocracy movement on several

fronts. He worked as an engineer in a state-owned company and his colleagues, despite their not being wholehearted fans of Mubarak, were estranged by his political activities. In the workplace he had to defend his position as a reformist, and not a revolutionary, although he confessed to me that he was convinced that a revolution in Egypt would happen sooner or later. Closer to home, his parents considered him crazy for undertaking such risky ventures. It had taken him a long time to convince them that, at the end of the day, he aimed to make a career out of politics, and wanted to become a respected opposition politician – a public figure (*shakḥṣiyya ‘amma*) – in his own right. In contrast to most others, Mustafa was engaged, though his fiancée’s parents also considered him crazy. He had, however, managed to change his image in their eyes from a “political activist” (*nāshīṭ siyāsī*) to a “social reformist” (*muṣṭalīḥ iḡtimā‘ī*), arguing that his career choice also held the promise of becoming an earner (*kāsib*) who could support his wife and future offspring. Over time, he gained a degree of reserved endorsement from his colleagues, parents and future parents-in-law.

This final section is based on the observation that an important dimension of being a political activist was to publicly argue, and to cultivate in themselves, the sensibility that the future of Egyptian society was intimately connected to their personal and collective life trajectories. While personal trajectories differed according to class, gender, educational level and so on, their present lives also encompassed a number of potential futures specific to the individual. Graduating from university, finding a job, marrying and becoming a parent or, for that matter, wanting to become a political activist or professional politician, all contributed to the multiple life transitions that had to be simultaneously navigated when engaging in public political life (Thiessen and Looker 1999; Herrera 2010; Assaad, Binzel and Gadallah 2010).

From a different angle, Passy and Ciugni (2000) suggest that attention paid to the synergies and tensions between “life spheres” – such as schooling, work, politics and friends – helps in understanding the shifting commitments of public political actors, or their personal entries to, and exits from, specific social and political movements. Their approach is not specifically a critique against the life-course analytic but, rather, a suggestion that the synchronic or coeval dimension of different life spheres make the lived flow of experience an ambivalent enterprise:

...the more the life-spheres are interlocked, or better yet, intertwined with a given political issue and the stronger this connection,

the higher are the chances that such an issue will become a crucial element in the construction of the self, and as a result, the higher the chances that their political commitment will stabilize, leading to sustained participation (Passy and Ciugni 2000).

In this vein, Passy and Ciugni propose the analytic of life sphere as a way to account for the interplay between the structural positions of different actors and their shared understandings of meaningful political action. Moreover, it helps to illuminate the ways in which these understandings shape political experiences and strengthen embeddedness in the social networks of the political opposition (ibid.: 125). On the other hand, the notion of life spheres is in some ways problematic because it raises the question of how, why and by whom, their boundaries are constituted. I mention it here to assist analysis of the ways in which some young Cairenes expressed their concerns and decisions not to continue with political activism. At the same time, attention paid to different exigencies and future aspirations casts light on why some were more disposed to continue their public political dissent than those for whom reconciling different life demands – especially in terms of seeking employment and social justice – proved an overwhelming task (Herrera 2010).

For instance, some disengaged members of Youth for Change I encountered had distanced themselves from public politics altogether, choosing to pursue university studies, careers or prioritizing their new responsibilities as parents. One disengaged former member recalls that his personal involvement in protest actions effectively cost him his small trade and created difficulties in renting an apartment due to records kept by the security services. The majority of occasional participants in the youth movement had, as one activist recalled in 2008, “simply vanished” although, as we have seen, their relations tended to survive the periods of demobilization, providing informal networks – including generational relations – that could potentially be reactivated in the future. Trying to reconcile multiple life trajectories provided the young activists with continued experiences of practical judgement on not only what constitutes good actions but, also, what would provide their best chances in life.

6.3.1. Coeval trajectories: Tensions and synergies

As we have seen, Egypt’s political life in the late Mubarak era did not represent for most people, or even for many activists, a “glorious” sphere of

deliberation or civic coexistence. Rather, the very notion of politics (*siyāsa*) carried derogatory connotations of corruption, discord and self-interest. In this light, the activists' public political claims to support rights, democracy and justice were levelled not only against the similar hegemonic claims of Mubarak's regime – to safeguard the people's best interests – but also against popular suspicions that they operated on morally ambivalent terrain that compelled them to compromise their democratic claims and moral principles. The tensions between political activities and earning a living were for some, like Mustafa, resolved by pursuing a career in politics, and arguing that he was not an activist but, potentially, a person of social standing in the future. In other words, despite anticipating a popular revolution in the future, he felt compelled to legitimize his public political activities in terms of consequentialist ethics on several fronts, not the least in the eyes of his parents, future family and colleagues.

This kind of ambivalence towards one's own oppositional activities highlights an important aspect of being a young activist in the late Mubarak era, namely, that everyday life unfolded in ways that encompassed differing expectations, chances and sociabilities. In other words, their lifeworlds consisted of different areas in which transitions did not necessarily present seamless constellations. Ethical reflection, under these conditions, concerned reconciling political activism with the different choices offered by life, a process involving what Lambek translates as wisdom or temperance (or *phronesis*): a certain quality of “knowing how to find the judicious middle path between opposing extremes” (Lambek 2010: 20). Personal expectations had to be reconciled with those of others with regard to the social passages and transitions demanded by their aspirations, such as graduating from university, entering a job and, one day, getting married and having a family of their own.

For many young Cairenes who wanted to be involved in public political life, the ideal situation would have been one that resolved the tensions between the exigencies of livelihood and political activism. Those who were already employed or who had found a job in public life through civil society organizations, journalism or the publishing industry had better chances of continuing their political engagements over time. While party affiliations sometimes attracted suspicion from peers, being employed provided relative freedom from livelihood considerations and, moreover, reduced the attraction of the support networks and potential for upward social mobility that came with party membership. “We are untouchables,” Hafiz (28) asserted when I discussed this issue with him. He had graduated from a private uni-

versity, and his family belonged to the “cultured classes” (*muthaqqāfīn*). He had taken an active part in the prodemocracy movement since 2005, including Youth for Change, and, since then, he had operationalized his ICT skills – either by volunteering or through temporary contracts – in the service of several NGOs and campaign networks. Occasionally he had also travelled to seminars abroad as a representative “young Egyptian activist” before and after 2011. “We have travelled, we have jobs, and we are not lured by the incentives that political activism involves,” he said as he reflected on the privileges he enjoyed as a member of Egypt’s young activist “elite” in comparison to most of his peers. On the other hand, those who were involved in political parties told me that party affiliation secured them much needed support networks, for instance lawyers, at times they were needed.

Being cosmopolitan, or “upper class”, and competent in foreign languages, also enabled some young women to maintain their political involvement over time. In general, however, the daily activities of those who were involved in political activities received more negative sanction from their families than their male peers. The parents of those belonging to the “withering middle classes” (Amin 2006), in particular, expected their daughters to distance themselves from politics and take on extensive roles at home, doing chores, leading modest lifestyles, studying and working before getting married and becoming mothers themselves. Salwa (24), had been involved in April 6 Youth in the beginning, but had become convinced that change (*taghyīr*) would come through sensitizing people in other ways than by protesting. Her family was also involved in opposition politics and supported her activities, though many of her friends were obliged to conceal their Facebook activism and visits to oppositional web sites in their homes. At the time that I asked her whether she cared about the repercussions public political activism might have on her future life, she had already found a job in a civil society organization and, as for marriage prospects, she joked: “I lost my reputation a long time ago!”

Some young Cairenes, both men and women, found love and romance through activism itself, which made their practical choices between family pressure and public political dissent less troubled. On the other hand, Khaled (27), an AUC graduate, told me in 2008 that he had no time for marriage. He joked that he had tried it once and, in any case, he was too busy with his political activities which, at the time, involved documenting the history of the revolution which he was certain was coming. Mustafa, for his part, wanted to build a career before getting married and settling down. While the aspect of choice in the context of marriage and love seemed to be

taken somewhat for granted by the privileged few such as Khaled and Mustafa, for others the issue of settling down (*istiqrār*) was of grave existential concern. After a long discussion on the predicaments of Egyptian youth, Umar – the Nasserist student who lived in an agricultural village on the outskirts of Greater Cairo – concluded that “all we really want is to get married and settle down”. Continuing political activities presented him with an issue requiring constant reflection: “That’s a question I ask myself a lot” (*al-su’āl da anā bas’al nafsī kitīr*). He did not want to affiliate with opposition parties and, for him, political activities were not only risky but also exhausting, and brought no tangible benefits, while being unmarried was not so much a lifestyle choice as a matter of constraint. His grim prospects of finding a job and an apartment, or getting married, were coupled with his lack of opportunity to migrate abroad for work.

For young men like Umar, whose access to public political life was constrained by class, future prospects and life chances were intimately tied to growing socioeconomic polarization in neoliberal Egypt. If one did not have the needed skills or educational levels, or the right connections, engaging in opposition politics would often “close doors” to the already limited avenues to both public and private labour markets. Since the 1990s, certain openings in the publishing industry and proliferating civil society organizations often required a university degree, language skills or the right connections – or all of them – and, as such, presented both restrictions and opportunities to young Cairenes in terms of class and gender, as well as embeddedness in the social networks that tied them to public political life. As already noted, some were raised in already politicized milieux – perhaps with parents belonging to the 1970s’ generation – and could draw on the fact that their families, despite their concern, would condone or, at least, allow their oppositional activities. For others, particularly young women, family worry and pressure curtailed involvement in oppositional groups and movements, although families generally provided immense support during moments of personal crisis such as detention or imprisonment.

On the other hand, the prolonged period before marriage and reproductive roles took over – or “waithood” (Singerman 2007) – provided further “leeway”, for young men especially, to engage in intense social networking and socialization in opposition politics. Meanwhile, although public dissent of young unmarried women such as street protesting and late night meetings in downtown *ahāwī*, was often prevented by families and prevailing social norms, they found political agency on a more equal level through the Internet and its social networking sites at home. Moreover, as I have already

suggested, friendship relations provided young Cairenes, both men and women, with an additional sphere of everyday life that connected them both to formal organizations and informal networks which could in part accommodate the tensions and contradictions that were involved when engaging in public political life. During situated events when concrete actions of solidarity were crucial, such as in street clashes with the police, the most meaningful acts seemed equally attached to the normative claims of safeguarding the “nation” as they were performed through the ideal virtues of being a *gada‘* or, simply, a good friend.

6.3.2. Engaging with the world

In the late Mubarak era, Egypt’s young activists, therefore, operated not only betwixt and between adolescence and adulthood, but also between the personal and the political and the predicaments of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow. The young Cairenes whom I had the opportunity to meet and talk to, were all experiencing growing uncertainties about future trajectories in Egyptian politics and society at large. “God knows,” (*allāh ‘ālim*) was a common response to my questions about what they thought would happen in the future. They hoped that neither Gamal Mubarak – an apparent heir to the presidency – nor the Muslim Brotherhood would seize political power in Egypt. Nor did they find the competing, and at times parallel, ideologies of neoliberal economics and moralist Islamism particularly attractive alternatives.

For the young there was an added sense of having to endure the legacy left by older generations who had both capitalized on national resources and consolidated positions of power in their own hands, or, alternatively, had been incapable of steering the course of the country towards a better future. Indeed, the lived experiences of young Cairenes who were involved in public political life in the late Mubarak era were shaped by a different outlook on life to that of their elders. The previous political generations, including the 1970ers, had already acquired education, employment, an apartment, and were married with children; most had been settled for decades. Reflecting on what life had – and did not have – to offer was for the young simultaneously more precarious and pertinent: both the present and the future presented greater ambivalence and insecurity in terms of life chances and aspirations.

In this light, my aim is not to fetishize the notion of freedom in the title of this chapter, or to adopt under its rubric the various socioeconomic needs and ambitions young Egyptians in general had in their lives (Amin 2006: 63-74). It refers more to their aspirations to resolve the multiple tensions and contradictions which shaped their political experiences in the late Mubarak

era. What was at stake was less their daily subsistence than future opportunities, so we can conceive of freedom as the lived moments of playing a role in what they perceive as lying before them in their everyday lives. This corresponds to what Johannes Fabian (1998: 21) describes as the fragile, yet powerful resource for imagining the world anew:

If freedom is conceived not just as free will plus the absence of domination and constraint, but as the potential to transform one's thoughts, emotions, and experiences into creations that can be communicated and shared, an if "potential", unless it is just another abstract condition like absence of constraint, is recognized by its realizations, then it follows that there can never be freedom as a state of grace, permanent and continuous. As a quality of the process of human self-realization, freedom cannot be anything but contestatory and discontinuous or precarious. Freedom, in dialectical parlance, comes in moments.

Given their pervasive claims to rights, social justice and democracy, as well as their differing degrees of religiosity, I am not suggesting that they aspired to do and be as they pleased in life. Yet, at the same time, they lived in a society whose state authorities prohibited them from enacting the sense of righteousness, duty and self-sacrifice – the ideal traits of personhood – which young activists considered both the normative self-positioning for democratic struggle and also intimately connected to their shared futures. In this light, the futures to which they aspired implied personal and collective attempts to bestow a certain moral order on events, societal trajectories and public political life itself which they witnessed and of which they were part.

It took me a long while to reach an interpretation of what Ahmed had said, early in September 2008, after he had helped remove the bodies of landslide victims from the rubble in al-Duweiqqa and then supported their relatives' protest on the lawns of Abdeen Square in central Cairo. The residents of al-Duweiqqa had lost everything – their homes and relatives – and my question – "Why aren't they afraid of the police?" – sounded rather meaningless to his ears. For him, the events unfolding before us reminded him of the lyrics of an American rock band he adored – "you don't care about how I feel, I don't feel it anymore" – which he continued to play with when next we met. In retrospect this wordplay could echo an aspect of a deeper experience of politics that, while it took highly symbolic form during the popular uprisings in early 2011, was similar to those I encountered among young Cairenes even when the end of Mubarak's rule was still an inconceivable future scenario: namely, witnessing the brute realities of injustice, violence and inequality in society was connected to cathartic experiences of purging one's feelings of both fear

and aspirations about life's future offerings. "*Kida hamūt, wa kida hamūt,*" Ahmed said; he would die with or without trying. Framed in this way, we can appreciate that not caring for oneself can, at certain moments, especially for those who have more to lose, go hand in hand with a heightened sense of caring for the world.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have explored some of the ethical considerations which young opposition activists faced when engaging in public political life in the late Mubarak era. While taking part in the wider processes of prodemocracy mobilization, they resisted the status quo because it did not seem to offer them the likelihood of satisfactory futures. It should be noted, however, that the prospect of impoverishment did not generally motivate their political engagements as much as their aspirations to acquire greater justice and wider recognition as rightful citizens with a say in the making of their collective future. While they shared a deep sense of injured patriotism with their older peers, the young activists' critical awareness was based on recognition of the social fact that Egypt's future was more intimately tied to their own life trajectories as inheritors of the predicaments of the present world. At the same time, their involvement in public political life coincided with popular suspicion about the impact of their public political dissent or, alternatively, about possible motives for their activism such as the pursuit of social status and even economic gain. Despite the differences that existed among the activist youth in terms of class and gender, they could challenge these types of speculations by enacting the prevailing ideals of personhood in terms of bravery, righteousness and self-sacrifice, as well as those qualities attached to the notion of *gada'*.

The young activists' desire to play a role in the making of a post-Mubarak society was often connected to their class privilege, but by no means always. The moral worlds in which they were embedded, including that provided by the social media, were dominated by normative claims for the common good, justice, rights and dignity, and positioning one's self and others in relation to these coincided with a number of reflections on the meaningfulness of one's own practices of political dissent. For some, ethical reflections connected to the pursuit of balancing between coeval life trajectories and the social expectations of family, friends and colleagues. For others, political engagement involved much greater risks when trying to finish studies, find employment, get married and settle down, and having,

for instance, personal files in the archives of the Interior Ministry could hinder these life transitions. On the other hand, for others, engaging in public political life held the promise of upward social mobility while those who found synergies between different spheres of everyday life – especially in terms of combining oppositional activism and employment – profited from their relatively privileged status, while being aware that this combination subjected them to the possibility of further repercussions in the future.

7 CONCLUSIONS

British historian E.P. Thompson has famously said that the working classes in Britain “made themselves as much as they were made” (Thompson 1966: 194). Resonating with Thompson’s observation, this thesis has discussed the ways in which young Cairenes sought new roles and visibilities in Egypt’s public political life, and emerged as important protagonists in the popular uprisings against Mubarak’s rule in January and February 2011. The critical masses did not, of course, only come from the ranks of young activists examined here, but consisted of Egyptians of all ages, social backgrounds and persuasions, protesting out of deep and long-standing resentment against the authoritarian state and worsening life prospects in a society that principally served the interests of a narrow band of elites. Wage labourers, in particular, intensified their industrial actions during the very last days of Mubarak’s rule, steering their demands for better living and working conditions towards the political goal of the revolution (Beinin 2012). Moreover, a crucial role was played by high-ranking officers in the Egyptian Armed Forces who opposed Mubarak’s “succession scenario” and wanted to safeguard the country and their vested interests in the national economy from looming social disorder. Nonetheless, young activists played an undeniable part in triggering the street protests, not least by helping to raise public awareness of critical issues involving abuses by the state authorities during the last decade of Mubarak’s presidency.

Since 2011, Egypt’s state-society relations have gone through profound political, social and economic transformations. Despite the important roles young Egyptians played in the prodemocracy movement, concurrent societal processes and trajectories – including the Islamic revival, neoliberal economic reforms and military rule – have proven to be much more powerful in steering the course of history in post-Mubarak Egypt. Soon after Mubarak’s ousting, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took

on the role of overseeing the transitional period, which witnessed a number of street clashes between young revolutionaries and state authorities, including the now infamous events on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in central Cairo in November 2011. The Muslim Brotherhood and conservative Salafists won the first parliamentary elections in early 2012, and the Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi was elected president in June 2012, becoming the first civilian president since Egypt's independence. Mursi's electoral legitimacy was, however, outweighed by popular resentment against the Brotherhood's consolidation of political power, culminating in mass protests on June 30, 2013 which, coupled with the strategic part played by the Egyptian Armed Forces, ousted Mursi from power on July 3, 2013. Much of the Mubarak-era political opposition, including the young activists in this study, aligned with this momentum. The consequent suppression of pro-Mursi protests, leading to hundreds of casualties and the entrenchment of the military "deep state" in Egypt's political life has, however, become a highly divisive issue among them: some were supportive of military rule; a few affiliated themselves with the Islamists' claim to legitimacy; while many were left with even narrower political spaces than those experienced during the late Mubarak era. Several prominent youth activists were jailed on the basis of the newly promulgated protest law (Nr. 107 of 2013) and, in April 2014, the April 6 Youth movement was legally banned, while human rights advocates have raised concerns over the possible effects the new NGO legislation, now being drafted, may have on their operational space (Matthies-Boon 2014).

Since the military takeover and the landslide victory of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the presidential elections in June 2014, the newly emerging polity seems to be constructed in a way that compromises citizens' freedom of expression in exchange for state promises of increased security and socio-economic welfare. Al-Sisi's popularity is being further fed by print and broadcast media which portray him in the guise of a great leader of the Egyptian nation, not dissimilar to Nasser, who is safeguarding public order and defending Egyptians from aggressors both inside and outside the country. Since 2013, the attacks by armed Islamist militants in Sinai and elsewhere in the country have led to the Egyptian government's waging its own "war against terrorism" which will, in all likelihood, increasingly promote the legitimacy of the state towards the end of the 2010s. Regardless of eventual outcomes, however, the popular uprisings of 2011 and their aftermath have provided Egyptians with major formative experiences and paved the way for new generations who will one day need to bear the burden of the

historical legacies that are being made today, and reconcile the past with their own futures.

7.1. BEING A YOUNG ACTIVIST IN THE LATE MUBARAK ERA

In this study I have focused on the pre-2011 period, examining what it was like to be a young activist in an era in which the end of Mubarak's presidency was only a shared aspiration. I have focused on the lived experiences of young Cairenes who engaged in public political life during the period: predominantly young unmarried men in their 20s belonging to the relatively well-educated urban middle classes. More specifically, I set out to examine the following research questions:

1. In order to change society, what did the young opposition activists regard as meaningful activities? Why?
2. How did being young shape their experiences of politics?

As we have seen, there was no single way of being or becoming a political activist, nor is there a single answer to this research problematic. Youth activism of the 2000s encompassed diverse life trajectories and experiences. In general, I have argued that their political engagements were not merely about opposing Mubarak's regime and the "succession scenario", or even supporting the main grievances of the political opposition during the late Mubarak era. Indeed, their experiences surpassed the normative rhetorical level of democratic political demands in several ways. While young activists shared the general political demands of the wider anti-Mubarak mobilization – such as justice, freedom, democratic pluralism and civilian rule – the meanings and relevance of their collective pursuits were in an important way geared to realizing the young as legitimate political actors and rightful members of contemporary society, as well as inheritors of the future. In this sense, being a young opposition activist involved an existential journey towards positioning the self not only against an authoritarian state but also in potential dissonance with the very immediate social environment in which they lived.

7.1.1. Multiple public engagements

To better understand the activists' political experiences it has been necessary to bear in mind the levels of popular antipathy towards public political life in the late Mubarak era. Prevailing sentiments framed it as a stagnant, distant and morally ambivalent sphere that was largely immune to influence and pressure from outside. Yet in order to gain new roles and visibilities in public life, one of the central arenas in which to build influence was the political opposition itself, though many young Cairenes saw the latter – and party politics in particular – as not productive of tangible changes to the status quo. Operating on the fringes of wider processes of contentious politics, such as the prodemocracy mobilization and the workers' strike movements, in the 2000s they resorted to finding multiple avenues to public political life and alternatives to the conventional ways of doing opposition politics so as to forge a generational consciousness and to imagine their political opportunities anew.

In this respect, movements such as Youth for Change and April 6 Youth were important instances of collective action by young Egyptians which expressed their collective will to organize themselves and to do things on their own. The youth initiatives provided the young with alternative sites for political socialization as well as establishing precedents for carving out relatively autonomous spaces for political action through the acquisition of a “young activist” habitus, the achievement of which generated subversive understandings of youth (*shabāb*) as a potent and in some ways privileged social location and realm of experiencing politics. It involved a certain sense of being a member of a disenfranchised generation and raised political awareness (*wā'ī siyāsī*) of the lived realities in society, but also promoted the view that doing something is better than not doing anything at all. However, maintaining the autonomy of the new youth movements demanded constant effort on the part of members to legitimize themselves as potent actors and to avoid being socialized into existing hierarchies and formal institutions requiring various clearances from the state authorities in order to act, which would have limited their independence and spontaneity of operations. In this context, they benefited from tactical alliances with, and symbolic, social and material support from, earlier political generations such as the 1970s' generation and human rights advocates in their 40s and 50s – whether parents, colleagues or friends.

In order to gain new roles and visibilities in public political life, young activists experimented with innovative modalities of political action that

combined nonviolent civil disobedience on the streets with dissident knowledge management, making heavy use of the avenues provided by emergent ICTs and social media. This compensated, to some degree, for the lack of opportunities elsewhere, though another important project was the attempt to build bridges between popular grievances and the goals of the wider anti-Mubarak camp in Egypt: a social interface that was carefully controlled by Mubarak's security state. The emergence of the neoliberal media landscape in the 2000s enabled them to consume and to contribute to alternative depictions of the social world; meanwhile, their street actions, which were circumscribed by the police, gained new audiences through the social media, private newspapers and, at times, global news outlets such as Al-Jazeera and The Washington Post, as well as global human rights organizations. In order to harness popular support for their democratic struggle, some activists also appropriated elements and expressions from popular culture. The youth movements and new forms of Internet activism generated fresh dynamism between previously demobilized youth and the various groups in the opposition, such as the ElBaradei campaign, opposition coalitions and civil society organizations. Some found their way into opposition political parties and new offshoot movements, while others gained employment through the networks accessed via political engagements; both routes, coupled with the new generation of young NGO professionals, journalists and lawyers, contributed to intergenerational synergy and social reproduction in public political life and further expanded the scope and diversity of public political dissent towards the end of Mubarak's presidency.

It is apparent, therefore, that young activists in this study by no means represented a homogenous group but, rather, demonstrated a variety of life trajectories, something which is important to acknowledge. I have suggested that social divisions based on class, gender, cosmopolitan connectedness, ideological orientation and group affiliation prevailed among the young and shaped both their social interactions as well as their experiences of opposition politics in the late Mubarak era. Meanwhile, the opportunities for young men and women to engage in public political life were further conditioned by prevalent norms and social expectations through which some could manoeuvre, to a degree, using tactical practices and innovations. Some were socialized into oppositional culture from an early age by virtue of their families' political orientations, and were more disposed to continue with public political dissent later on. Others, who were not brought up in the oppositional culture, faced relatively more obstacles in order to continue with political activism. In addition, although gender roles would shape the

political experiences of all young men and women, these differences were not as pronounced for those who belonged to more affluent and cosmopolitan families. Although being unmarried – or in the prolonged period of waiting for adulthood (Singerman 2007) – was not a life situation to which many aspired, it did provide young urbanites with greater opportunities to engage in intense social networking, to hang around in the city centre and attend oppositional events, and to develop self-organized forms of resistance before the exigencies of reproductive roles and family life took over.

In addition, being a young opposition activist involved learning about politics, society and collective action; mastering the skills to manage one's public self under state surveillance; and learning to transgress the prevailing norms of what was permitted and what was not in the urban spaces of the Greater Cairo area. In order to manage the risks and expectations that were involved in opposition politics, it was crucial to acquire the practical skills necessary to circumvent the panoptic gaze which security services exerted over urban spaces and communication. It was equally important to become acquainted with certain websites, social media platforms and alternative sources of information so as to keep tabs on what was happening in society, in order to pinpoint the manifest contradictions between official state rhetoric and lived realities on the ground. Inasmuch as it involved tapping onto globally circulating mediascapes, being an activist thus also involved a gradual socialization into Egypt's pre-existing oppositional culture, and learning its stories of contention, events and personalities, and then reinterpreting Egypt's national history in light of this newly acquired information. For some, learning about Egypt's oppositional culture coincided with the aim of learning only as much as was necessary to avoid being socialized into it, while, for others, group and party affiliations were beneficial, providing support networks and facilities. More generally, the young activists' own shared experiences contributed to the social memories and narratives of resistance which grew in scope toward the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Rather than fixed and unalterable, these "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) provided a symbolic reserve from which to draw in order to articulate new meanings, reinterpret contemporary society and imagine its alternative futures. It should be noted that these processes of self-realization were rarely experienced in isolation but, rather, in tandem with others through the everyday social interactions which represented an integral dimension of what it meant to be young activist in the late Mubarak era.

7.1.2. Everyday sociality and commitment to change

Undoubtedly, being an opposition activist in the late Mubarak era involved much more varied experiences than merely those acquired through acts of public political dissent. In the moments in between, that is, for much of their time, young Cairenes frequented a range of different downtown venues such as cafeterias, parks, party headquarters, NGO offices and street corners. Thus, becoming embedded in various micro-social worlds in the political opposition would also coincide with learning how to do things and how to interact with others in certain ways. In authoritarian settings, we can conceive of oppositional youth activism as a specific lifestyle and youth subculture that, coupled with the narrow social spaces afforded by the police state and prevailing norms of public quiescence, amounts to intense processes of negotiating social proximity between the self and the other, and of managing the social bonds of trust, solidarity and belonging on a daily basis.

In this context, friendship relations provided highly intimate avenues to public political life. The importance of friendship was heightened at pivotal moments, such as street clashes or during detention, as an additional “safety net” that stretched beyond kin and formal organizations. Having friends and being one to others often amounted to a full-time activity, involving constant flows of social, economic and emotional investment. While the young activists’ social interactions were shaped by social cleavages such as those mentioned above, they could also forge common ground for friendship through seemingly non-political areas of life that included lifestyle choices and shared tastes, as well as a shared generational consciousness that being young posed them specific challenges and roles as inheritors of a post-Mubarak Egypt. But because friendship relations mediated the bonds of trust and mutual expectations of solidarity in the contentious sphere of politics, the processes whereby they fractured would at times result in dire personal experiences and rapid alterations in the patterns of everyday sociality and group formations. Consequently, many learned to be cautious about the boundaries of their private and public selves, which they enacted on a daily basis, and about whom to trust in, rely on, and consider their real friends.

In this light, although Egyptian youth activism in the 2000s corresponded in many ways with the characteristics of concurrently emerging activist subcultures globally, the claim that their collective actions operated only through horizontal and non-hierarchic forms of organization seems partial. Friendship ties that provided young activists with alternative avenues and

sites of mobilization beyond kin and formal organizations were both highly precious and volatile. On the one hand, some were willing to work together, to encourage and to support one another, and to share everyday existence with fellow activists in often very vivid, intense and personal ways. For some, their most meaningful activities related to the constant goal of maintaining their circles of trust and solidarity intact and out of harm's way. In other words, keeping the group "going" became the principal social task as it enabled continued oppositional engagements over time; meanwhile, recreating social bonds under the rubric of friendship could be seen as enacting an ideal social order at a microscopic scale: a micro-polity where the experiences of mutual trust, solidarity and the goals of democratic struggle would converge.

On the other hand, being a young opposition activist also involved learning how to operate within antagonistic personal relationships; for instance, when attempting to outdo rival groups. As we have seen, many youth-based prodemocracy movements in Egypt – including Youth for Change and April 6 Youth – gradually developed organizational structures which were soon subject to contentious processes of disbandment and internal factionalism. In addition to partisan interests and ideological strife, which marred the political opposition in general, an important dimension of these processes relates to "lopsided" friendship relations of trust, loyalty and obligation. Moreover, a closer look at these processes of group formation suggests that oppositional youth movements encompassed fluctuating and overlapping forms of affiliation behind their public façade. In this context, I have suggested that *shilla* formations, as culturally informed modes of group belonging and as informal networks, remain understudied with regards Egypt's young activists in the global era. Although they refer to a longstanding and widespread type of group formation among young Egyptians, comprising closely-knit groups of friends, they invite increasingly negative connotations as shared interest groups or even political cliques as soon as they enter public political life and become entangled in vertical relations of power and patronage. These different sides of *shilla* formations, and the affective and instrumental modalities of friendship implied, however, should be seen as different aspects of the sociality that was involved in the local moral worlds of oppositional youth activism in the late Mubarak era, rather than being regarded as mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, legitimizing one's place in public political life was, by and large, a collective and intersubjective pursuit in which the issues of sociality and public morality intertwine. In this sense it is difficult to dissoci-

ate friendship and everyday sociality from ethical reflection, particularly as the young activists' lives and undertakings were embedded in an ambivalent moral terrain that was bifurcated by the contested notions of the common good (*maṣlaḥa 'amma*) and personal welfare (*maṣlaḥa shakhṣiyya*) in public life. Activist youth was, to say the least, often compelled to position itself against the prevailing social suspicions that held the realm of politics to be a self-interested sphere in which to pursue privilege, social status and material gain or, alternatively, one in which its actions did not lead to any tangible results. Against this background, young activists promoted the view in public life that the two contrasting normative registers were by no means incommensurable: their goals in the present were forcefully linked to the social trajectories which they would inherit when the older generations' time had passed. They could in part accommodate their claims to defend Egypt's interests by privileging concrete actions over mere speech, and by fusing transnationally circulating ideals of democracy, human rights and freedom with local conceptions of bravery, righteousness and personal integrity like those encapsulated in the notion of *gada'*. Although the concept of the common good is historically linked to religious jurisprudence, theirs was framed mainly through different degrees of patriotism and the collective duty to do their share to save Egypt from potential peril. Having these principles and acting accordingly, despite it possibly being against one's own safety and wellbeing, was a normative ideal that they promoted in public life.

7.1.3. Being young and oppositional

A question that has been addressed in the course of this study is how, in the late Mubarak era, the young activists' experiences of politics differed from those of others, including their older peers; and whether being young shaped these experiences. The first elements to be considered here are the specific historical circumstances in which they were born and raised. Unless they were socialized into an oppositional family, Egyptian youth was raised in the awareness that it was detrimental, if not outright futile, to voice dissent or criticize the incumbent authorities in public, unless one was prepared to deal with the responses of the police state, and potential repercussions in the future. At the same time, the globalized world of the 2000s also exerted a number of influences which shaped their ways of experiencing the world, as they appropriated trends, tastes and sensibilities from globally circulating

subcultures. This was compounded by their socialization into an already fragmented public sphere that had been diversifying since the advent of neoliberal Egypt, with the help of new media and satellite television, and was already questioning the conventional notions of public authority. In contrast to conditions affecting the earlier political generation of the 1970s, the university campuses did not provide meaningful spaces for public political dissent (Shehata 2008) which was instead channelled into direct street action and dissident knowledge management through the Internet and social media.

In addition, they were also part of the unprecedented number of young Egyptians, or “youth bulge”, whose educated members cultivated a collective sense of frustration, lack of prospects and the increasing difficulties in attaining the lives they wished for themselves (Herrera 2010). Unless enjoying relative security in terms of livelihood, as some rooted cosmopolitan youth did, the majority were left with aspiring to a number of transitions in several areas of life – such as education, marriage and employment – which did not seem to offer satisfactory trajectories. Some could accommodate political activism with the other requirements of the everyday by affiliating with political parties on the basis of family connection, upward social mobility or ideological conviction. Others were able to find employment in “civil society” formations, such as NGOs and advocacy groups, or through pursuing careers as journalists. For yet others, the tensions rising from the risky practice of activism were too high and they chose to disengage from public oppositional politics altogether. Importantly, all these alternatives were conditioned by wider political, economic and cultural processes taking place in neoliberal Egypt. Paying attention to coeval life trajectories, with their overlapping private and public future aspirations, sheds light on the social expectations with which the young activists had to deal when involving themselves in contentious politics during the late Mubarak era.

On the other hand, the political and economic constraints on livelihood prospects served as an important feature in framing the ways in which at least some young activists justified their personal involvement in opposition politics. At the minimum, the exigencies of entering the labour market, making a living and getting married at some future point had practical relevance for the majority. For those with a university education, and the right connections in the labour market, it was possible to combine the different demands of life, should they want to continue with the risky line of political dissent. For others, it was also necessary to legitimize their oppositional activities in their immediate social environment, including the family,

in terms of the consequentialist argument that engaging in public political life holds the promise of employment, public recognition and social standing. Thus, oppositional activism overlapped with the pursuit of alternative futures for both society and also the self.

These observations serve to demonstrate that being a young activist does not refer in any way to a static predicament but, rather, to an ambivalent state of becoming (Vigh 2006); in other words, it is as much about shaping the world as it is about shaping the self in the process (Foucault 1982; Mahmood 2005). The political subjectivities young Egyptian activists collectively acquired and performed combined today's specialized technical knowledge and globally circulating influences with local conceptions of bravery, righteousness and sacrifice. Enacting these new ways of being political in urban spaces and through online presence further contributed to the ways in which being a political activist was locally conceived in the run-up period to the events of 2011.

In this sense, their political engagements encompassed the collective goal of cultivating courage in the face of fear, certainty out of uncertainty, and the sense of being free to value principles and to take meaningful political stances in public. As much as being an activist encompassed the search for recognition and legitimacy, it was also about resisting outside pressures to lose hope, and to keep going. In these circumstances, hope, perhaps more than anything else, was the most precious thing. Against the odds, they claimed their share in the making of a better future; and that what they did and the ways they chose to spend their lives encompassed the acts of imagining anew what Egypt should be. In practice, the existential need to play a role in shaping the future and seek rights in a world that denied them, was juxtaposed with the aims of finding employment, love and a place in society. Being a young opposition activist involved playing for different stakes than those of older peers in the opposition who had established themselves in life and at least in some ways settled down. Navigating through adolescence in the 2000s presented multiple challenges which affected future life chances and livelihoods: ethical reflections and practical judgements were more immediately linked to the exigencies of negotiating and reconciling a number of coeval trajectories into possible future scenarios that life had to offer.

In this light, political engagements as “transformative acts” can be seen to cut across both different areas of social life and also the porous boundaries between personal and political aspirations. As much as the young activists strove to resist the state, the prevailing norms of public acquies-

cence, and the given trajectories to which they seemed destined, their continued efforts (and ways of being political) stemmed from a shared desire to acquire and enjoy a sense of purpose, certainty and direction. Although they did not envision a limitless array of choices in life to do with as they wished, their aspirations to realize themselves as legitimate members of society and as agents of social change evolved within certain parameters that were shaped by a number of norms pertaining to, for instance, religion, patriotism and local conceptions of courage and self-sacrifice. They aspired not only to feel liberated from the constraints of authoritarian rule, but also to feel free to reflect, to judge and to act for the sake of living a future that had value, both for themselves and others, and to connect their joint destiny to that of the Egyptian nation as a whole. In other words, although there were no single ways of being or becoming a young opposition activist, the young opposition activists' experiences of politics were in an important way tied to a shared awareness and a social fact that, whatever happens, the future would be theirs to bear.

7.2. ON THE RINGSIDE SEAT OF HISTORY

This thesis began as an ethnography of the lived experiences of young prodemocracy activists in contemporary Egypt. Faced with the sudden revolutionary moment in 2011, and the rapid socio-political changes that ensued, it has practically transformed into a micro-level history with a focus on one sector of the protagonists – young opposition activists in Cairo – during the final years of Mubarak's presidency. The popular uprisings and their aftermaths in Egypt, Tunis and other countries of the Middle East and North Africa are and will be written in history textbooks, and studied and analysed time and again by social scientists, historians and other academics.

Although I have described the lives and undertakings of a narrow segment of young Egyptians, I hope this research provides empirical reference for further studies in comparative social science, especially in sociological and anthropological studies of youth mobilization and social movements in authoritarian settings. On the one hand, Egyptian youth activism coincided with the wider processes of transnational mobilizations at a global level, which brought together progressive social movements and NGO coalitions – the so-called Global Justice Movement – to seek alternatives to the neoliberal hegemony and global corporate power structures that have been gaining increasing strength since the turn of the millennium (Hatem 2015).

On the other hand, the new youth movements that emerged in Egypt were in many ways similar to subversive youth movements elsewhere, including those of the “post-Soviet generations” in Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Russia (Nikolayenko 2007; Lyytikainen 2014). In both national democratic struggles, and the global activist networks, young people were at the forefront in adopting the new ICTs and innovative direct action as part of their political activism.

Soon after Mubarak’s resignation, observers were quick to point out the similarities between Egyptian youth movements and those of the “Colour Revolutions”, and also that a few April 6 Youth activists had accepted invitations to workshops abroad where they received “activist training” in the late 2000s (Bensaada 2011; Nixon 2011). These personal ties with global activist networks and movements – including CANVAS, a think-tank on civil resistance run by former Otpor activists in Serbia – created public debate, both inside and outside Egypt, over whether the “January 25” uprisings were orchestrated from abroad and, in particular, from the foreign-policy circles in Washington. However, even if some connections developed between Egyptian activists and their global contemporaries, as well as foreign entities such as US-based “high-tech” companies and funding organizations (Herrera 2014a: 146-149), these links hardly suffice to explain the overall readiness of Egyptians to join the popular uprising in early 2011.

In this study I have aimed to produce a pluralist view of youth activism in the run-up period to the January 25 uprising in 2011, exploring some of the internal dynamics of the processes through which youth emerged as a potent collective actor in Egypt’s public life. As this exploration has been oriented around both informal and formal avenues to political engagement, attention paid to *shilla* formations as informal networks enabled acknowledgement of the ways in which even the informal avenues to public political life can be conditioned by cultural forms of friendship and group belonging. Partly connected to this, we have seen that maintenance of the youth movements and their collective actions over time was far from an assured trajectory. Young opposition activists faced – individually and collectively – grave challenges to their autonomy, whether through being socialized into bureaucratic and gerontocratic institutions, such as established opposition parties, or of being rooted out by the paramount state security services. In addition, internal strife could have led to the disbandment of April 6 Youth Movement over the summer of 2009, just as had happened to Youth for Change and several other youth coalition initiatives. Being attentive to these ruptures at the micro-social level is part of the proposal that we should

be careful when looking retrospectively at the causal processes that led to the popular uprisings in 2011. From the vantage point of everyday life, they seem less like linear and cumulative trajectories than a series of struggles, minor defeats and victories on the part of the wider political opposition and civil society campaigns in which young Egyptians certainly had roles to play.

On a more conceptual level, the notion of political engagement has provided me with relatively open analytical terrain on which to examine the different ways in which people strive to have a meaningful part in changing the social world they inhabit. In comparison with political participation, it has enabled me to follow better the themes that emerged during fieldwork and upon analysing the empirical material. While this kind of conceptual stretching is by no means an original argument, it has allowed me to discuss four areas of analysis – namely, generational consciousness, tactical practice, friendship and ethical reflection – as different, yet interrelated dimensions of activists' experiences of engaging in public political life in the late Mubarak era. The normative meanings of their political engagements correspond to forceful articulations of justice, dignity and freedom, and an array of public activities geared to realizing these goals in society. For the young activists it was relevant to gain a degree of autonomy within the field of opposition politics by cultivating a subversive generational consciousness and by deploying the available technical tools and cultural resources. It was equally pertinent to devise new ways of experiencing politics in a tactical move to avoid the conventional forms and arena of opposition politics in the late Mubarak era. In the context of everyday lives, keeping the friendship groups together – in the face of infiltration, rival groups or other social networks – was highly relevant politically, although it was as much about experiencing life together and jointly anticipating a future. Moreover, practical judgements about the meaningfulness of one's own political action comprised intimate ethical experiences, involving not only attempts to reconcile the diverse expectations and future trajectories in different spheres of life but also aspirations for a meaningful present (cf. Bayat 2010: 248-251).

My analysis has moved, if you will, from a sociologically-themed inquiry into the processes of collective action towards a more anthropological preoccupation with everyday life. This analytic journey has oriented me towards conceiving public political actors more through who they are, than merely through what they do (*ibid.*: 120). This does not belittle the important role that democratic struggle played in the lives of my subjects, but it also acknowledges that they were acting, feeling and reflecting per-

sons for whom being an activist was not a self-evident trajectory. In other words, depending on their life circumstances, it required constant reflection, learning and judgement, as well as the social pressure to justify one's public deviancy not only to state authorities, and friends and family, but also to one's self.

In this sense, the young Cairenes' political engagements encompassed a series of daily efforts to throw one's self, and be thrown with others, into an ambivalent sphere of public political life that involved risks and uncertainties but, at the same time, held the promise of changing its course. Grounded and simplified, this viewpoint acknowledges that their practical concerns revolved around the questions of whether to do things alone or with others, and whether to prioritize personal wellbeing over the common good. Even if we hold that that these terms lend themselves to debate and are construed intersubjectively, we can conceive of a certain moral terrain that would frame the ethical experiences of young activists when engaging in public political dissent. We should also take into account that, being young, their political subjectivities were shaped by a certain sense of future-oriented activities that involved balancing between different areas of life. Thus this grounded suggestion of political engagement can potentially complement studies of how people come to act together and what roles reflective justifications of their own dissent practices may play in the processes whereby their collective actions permute between passive and active social networks (Bayat 2010). To say the least, the young activists in this study aspired to have, enact and perform the sense of playing a meaningful role in the world as it unfolds. By extension, these activities in the present implied the added aspirations to cultivate certain memories for the future when they age and settle down, and when their offspring and future generations come of age, and, even, after they die.

In terms of methodology, this thesis has demonstrated that ethnographic research yields fruitful insights into the processes that take place beyond public political activism. I have suggested that the emergence of youth as a socio-political category in the run-up to 2011 was by no means a seamless process, but, rather, consisted of a widening of the scope of what young Egyptians could consider as possible political action during the previous decade via both offline and online avenues. In addition, being young involved living through a particular and culturally informed life stage that anticipated a number of life transitions through which the members of earlier generations had already passed, thereby highlighting a critical generational consciousness that conditioned their political experiences as forcefully

future-oriented activities. When studying the agencies of people living and acting under authoritarian governance, attention paid to the experimental and experiential aspects of everyday life helps to unravel different dimensions that may be overlooked in research informed by certain normative traits in conventional approaches to political participation. In this sense, the notion of political engagement moves the analytical focus from the modern nation state and public political processes as the main constitutive framework for meaningful activities towards everyday life itself. In retrospect, it concerns an attempt to complement the implicit assumptions that political participation – as activity that aims to influence public political decision-makers and bring changes to public policies – often carries, prioritizing the calculus of instrumental rationality and consequentialist ethics. One way to diversify this kind of inquiry has been to discuss the practical judgements of young protagonists and to suggest a turn towards virtue ethics when examining what drives public political actors to do things whose consequences will, most certainly, have a bearing on their personal safety and wellbeing. These stances are perhaps best characterized in moments of catharsis and in activities that are performed for their own sake and for what they mean at the very moment they unfold. Ethnographic research potentially yields new understanding of these kinds of political engagements as situated practices that involve multiple ethical considerations, not least in terms of coeval life trajectories that are, regardless how limited, also part of the present.

I proposed in Chapter 4 that an attention to the seemingly mundane acts of “sitting down” can potentially provide fruitful insights into the dynamics of group formation and everyday sociality. In the context of this thesis it yielded a closer understanding of the activists’ everyday social interactions as well as downtown Cairo as the main physical site of their daily movements. Indeed, sitting down is an everyday activity, if not a physiological need, shared by all human beings, usually occurring in certain spaces and at certain times. The questions of “where to sit down” and “with whom” can yield – especially with the added “why” – informative observations that also illuminate the researchers’ own practices and social positioning during fieldwork, although I am not suggesting that researchers should document every social situation when they rest during fieldwork: a rather painstaking exercise. At the same time, our need to sit down also draws attention to one of the main tropes of ethnographic research, and an important stage in anthropologists’ professional production: in other words, to the imagery of the “armchair” as the comfortable, yet distant, site for reflecting on (and resolving) what we have done, seen and experienced. Moreover, posing to

oneself the question: “why I am not still there?” – as I have done many times when writing up this study – can yield yet another line of inquiry about our practices of knowledge production.

7.3. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

This thesis has pointed out certain ways to better understand what it was like to be a young activist in the late Mubarak era. At the time of writing these lines, it seems to have raised more questions than it sought to find answers to. The study has in a sense been concerned with the events, processes and lived experiences whereby young Cairenes participated in recreating the “political activist” (*nāshiṭ siyāsī*) as a specific social category in Egypt’s public life. While it is certainly not a new term as such, it is one that seems to have gathered highly derogatory connotations since the “January 25” uprising. Although my empirical materials do not allow for detailed inquiry into this matter, the permutations and processes whereby the category of political activist has subsequently coexisted with others, such as “revolutionary”, “patriot” or even “citizen”, and how it has informed young Egyptians’ experiences of political life, will be of scholarly interest for years to come. Moreover, a more focused attention paid to how young women have acquired new political roles and subjectivities in relation to these, and other, categories is also highly important, not least because of the different social expectations they generally face regarding their role in Egypt’s public political life.

While conceiving of youth activism as a pluralist phenomenon has its merits, especially in acknowledging its internal dynamics and heterogeneity, it seems also pertinent to attend to Egypt’s current changes from the vantage point of particular groups – such as Leftists or, for that matter, the new youth coalitions that have emerged since 2011 – at a time when many protagonists may have, quite simply, better things to do than writing their own histories. In this context, more extensive use of social movement theories would be beneficial. Descriptive analyses could, for instance, inquire into the following questions: In very practical terms, how do the particular groups seek to maintain their autonomy? By extension, what do their members understand by autonomy or independence in an environment that requires constant networking and social interactions with others?

Furthermore, contestations over what constitutes the common good or the “national interest” (*maṣlahat al-waṭan*) in post-Mubarak Egypt are

likely to remain as they are today: an important aspect of state formation in the post-colonial Middle East. The notions of the common good and personal welfare represent a charged moral debate in public life in which, if some prediction is allowed, the state authorities' claims to defend the former will regulate the ways in which public political debates are framed in post-Mubarak Egypt. Tracing the processes which determine who sets the terms of debate over the common good and, by extension, personal interests, from the viewpoint of particular actors, media or institutions would benefit social analysis being carried out at this crucial period in Egypt's modern history. Who claims prominence to speak in its name in public life? On what form of social authority do these claims rest? In what ways do notions of the common good manifest themselves in Egyptians' everyday lives and in relation to what kinds of collective sensibilities? Why?

Finally, the issue of friendship emerged during fieldwork as an important analytical element in accounting for the everyday experiences of young political activists. In the context of this study, friendship relations proved, on the one hand, important in amalgamating the bonds of trust and solidarity beyond kin connections and formal institutional hierarchies. On the other, they came under strain when juxtaposed with different practices of individual and collective action, and self-positioning in terms of the normative register of the common good in public life. Despite their salient importance, friendship relations have attracted little empirical research among young Egyptians before and since 2011, and further research on how they transform at the micro-level – or how friendship relations survive, last and are broken – in the midst of wider societal changes may yield interesting empirical studies on the intersection of contentious politics, everyday sociality and social change. How much cohesion and consensus is needed from friendship relations in order for them to become vehicles for social and political change? What roles have they played in parallel with outright enmity in the making of new generations and political progress in the post-Mubarak era? And, in what ways do friendship relations evolve in terms of emerging forms of public dissent and public consent in Egypt today?

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