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Vivienne Matthies-Boon *In:* 292/3 (Fall/Winter 2019)

Participation in mass social and political uprisings can create new identities, social bonds and liberating forms of collectivity—while the defeat of such uprisings can cause disappointment, betrayal and powerlessness. **Vivienne Matthies-Boon**—an assistant professor of international relations of the Middle East at the University of Amsterdam—has been researching and writing about the lived aftermath of Egypt's 2011 uprising. Many who actively participated in that moment now often experience depression, anxiety and withdrawal. In Matthies-Boon's forthcoming book *Breaking Intersubjectivity: Counter-Revolutionary Trauma in Egypt* (Rowman and Littlefield), she develops a notion of political trauma that is more a product of broken and damaged societal relations than a problem in a person's mind. On this view, trauma can be (and has been) weaponized as a counterrevolutionary strategy by military and political elites who seek to maintain and strengthen their economic and political power. MERIP editor Steve Niva and editorial committee member Atef Said interviewed her by email in November 2019. The interview has been edited and condensed for publication.

Why did you start to research political trauma in Egypt and what was the context?

Between 2011 and 2013, I was able to spend a considerable amount of time in Cairo as Egypt grappled with post-revolutionary developments. I was not there for research purposes: I was mostly just being there with friends. I think the lack of any pre-determined research focus helped me open up to what I saw happening around me. At the time, activists were often blamed in public commentary or analyses for the lack of revolutionary progress. They were deemed too leaderless, aimless, always reactionary. And while analytically some of that may have been true to a certain extent, these judgments did not take seriously the lived experience of post-revolutionary turmoil. It was a deeply tumultuous time, where often one woke up in the morning thinking "ok this is the political landscape and how things are going to go" and then by the afternoon it would have turned 90 degrees only to turn a full 360 degrees by the evening. The level and intensity of social and personal anxiety involved in this turmoil was extreme.

There were two friends in particular who motivated me to look into the existential effects of the post-revolutionary aftermath. One of them was suffering serious bouts of depression and anxiety, pacing up and down in his living room, chain-smoking cigarettes only to collapse for weeks and sometimes even months in utter apathy. Another—a younger person—was in an emotional state of turmoil as the revolution had brought him into a collision course with his parents, interrupted his education, and all for utter nothingness. He was left in a state of depression that impacted his daily life to such an extent that he could not function anymore. I believe that many suffered the same fate. My interest in political trauma, therefore, was foremost a response as a friend to them in which I wanted to make sense of what was going on. It only later turned into a full academic project. It then became even

more outspokenly academic when opportunities for civil engagement in Egypt increasingly closed, leaving few other options.

It sounds like Egyptian activists had symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (*PTSD*) experienced by soldiers in war, yet you don't use that terminology.

I have come to understand political trauma in a very different way from the common understanding of trauma through the lens of PTSD. The problem with PTSD is that it arose out of a particular positivist "revolution" within the American Psychological Association (APA) whereby the APA wanted therapy to become cost-effective by yielding quick and quantifiable clinical results (more beneficial for insurance companies). It particularly sought to get rid of long intersubjective (shared by more than one conscious mind) therapeutic processes such as psychoanalysis where results were not necessarily measurable and certainly not universalizable. The trouble with this direction is that the understanding of trauma was transformed from an intersubjective issue of meaning-making to a reified, conception of the trauma "object," which was now located in the pathological structures of the individual's mind.

Trauma would also now no longer be grasped through communicative clinical practice, but through detached and universalist "evidence-based research." Out of this arose the understanding that trauma is basically an (abnormal) event that is so overwhelming that your mind or brain cannot process it, resulting in intrusions (dreams, flashbacks) and dissociation (numbing). Yet, not only is the notion of a sovereign autonomous subject (which is now temporarily distraught by an external event)

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problematic, on closer examination it also turns out that the neuroscience behind this analysis is not as solid as is commonly presumed. Moreover, it prioritizes the traumatic event over and above continuous structural trauma.

employed for its incapacitating, depoliticizing effects.

In most parts of the world (and certainly Egypt), however, trauma is not necessarily only an event (such as killing, beatings or torture) that happens to an individual but may also be structural, continuous forms of political repression and socio-economic marginalization. In fact, it is often the combination of both. Furthermore, the dominant idea of trauma as PTSD ends up resulting in a possible *double injury*: The person who suffered a gross injustice to begin with is now also told that there is something wrong with his or her head. In doing so, the individualization of trauma has a depoliticizing effect: It encourages the victim to focus on bettering him or herself rather than fight for social justice. The problem is deemed to be within the self and not social and political institutions. The sad thing is that this individualization may end up directly contributing to the original aim and purpose of human-induced trauma: namely, the silencing and atomization of the other.

And so, in order to avoid these conceptual problems, I develop a new understanding of trauma in my book, based in the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser. I argue that what happens in trauma is actually that our fundamental (counterfactual) presupposition of intersubjective equality in relation to each other (rather than a relation of domination) is betrayed. The perpetrator violently subordinates the victim, either an individual or a group, which results in the crumbling down of our intersubjectively constituted lifeworld (the given experience and understanding of a shared world). And since the lifeworld functions as the realm from which we derive meaning, we lose our grip on the world. We lose our sense of orientation as we become atomized, isolated and estranged. We tumble down a hole of incapacitating anxiety and disorientation. We become alienated and feel unable to shape the world around us, which comes to stand over and above us.

Thus, rather than being a purely psychological affair, trauma is an instrumental tool that is employed for its incapacitating, depoliticizing effects. It is inflicted in pursuit of power: power directly over the victim but also—precisely through this incapacitation of the victim—over economic and political resources. I argue that trauma in any form is always already political: Its point is to rob agency through the violent breakdown of the lifeworld, through the instrumental pursuit of power. Hence, I see trauma through Nancy Fraser's concept of status subordination, which may be constituted by both traumatic events and structural conditions of traumatic marginalization. The benefit of regarding trauma not as impaired subjectivity but as impaired intersubjectivity is that trauma is no longer reified into an object of the mind, but rather becomes an issue of social and political justice. And whilst the traumatic breakdown of the lifeworld will have excruciating effects on the individual, we make it a social and political issue.

You argue that trauma at a variety of levels was deployed strategically, intentionally, by counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt to maintain their political and social power. What were the methods and means by which they did this, and how coordinated was this strategy?

When we look at trauma as traumatic status subordination, it becomes clear that the counter-revolutionary actors did not sit down and think through the concept of trauma as such. In this sense, they probably did not know what they were doing. What is clear, however, is that they are very well-versed and trained in inflicting counterrevolutionary violence, which started as soon as President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011. And more than that, they engaged in such violence because they understood its incapacitating

effects. This violence, I argue, is the pinnacle of traumatic status subordination —the violent betrayal of the equality of the Other, in the attempt to crush him or her, to take away their agency so that they are no longer a threat to their desired political and economic order. So, while they might not have employed the language of trauma as such, they were well-trained in its effects.

The methods through which they inflicted traumatic status subordination were twofold: extremely violent events as well as the structural marginalization and exclusion of what Joshua Stacher refers to as the anti-systematic opposition (who seek fundamental transformation rather than reform).[1] On the one hand, the military engaged in a brutal and violent crackdown on protestors, from torture outside the Egyptian museum, sexual torture of men in detention and women on the square to beatings, killings, you name it. They engaged in all of it. At the same time, they also engaged in a structural marginalization of the anti-systematic opposition from the political public sphere—and made sure that these voices were not only not even heard but had less of a chance to speak or utter so much as a breath. So, they engaged in a strategy of delegitimization and dehumanization of the opposition they felt they could not work with—namely those horizontally organized crowds that occupied the streets. The military delegitimized their claims, not only through their calls for a return to orderliness and stability (the same kind of discourse we had previously heard under Mubarak), but also by purposefully sidelining them from any meaningful political process. One of the ways in which they did so was pushing for quick elections, which resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood's victory.

Then, in 2012, after the disintegration of the Brotherhood-majority parliament by the military council, and the presidential elections that saw Mohammed Morsi's victory, we also see the betrayal of equal intersubjectivity. During Morsi's rule as president, oppositional protestors were marginalized, excluded, sidelined and dehumanized—as well as tortured, beaten and killed. Furthermore, Morsi's economic program—neoliberal in orientation—also did nothing to redress the socio-economic inequality and distress through which the majority of the population were struggling evermore.

All this reached an unprecedented peak after Morsi's removal by then Gen. Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi a year later, where the state pursued total domination and control over all aspects of life. Forget putting forward political claims: If you so much as breath in the wrong direction, you will be detained and end up in Egypt's judicial circus of hell. At the same time, while Sisi and the military pursued their economic interests and invested in megaprojects, the ordinary population not only suffered from increased austerity measures but also a devaluation of the Egyptian pound and further precariousness. The point here is that these patterns of systematic exclusion, dehumanization and impoverishment are part of a grave form of status subordination, which is traumatic in the sense that it destroys one's ability to engage in the world as equal peers. They rob people of their agency in the world.

Here we see the social nature of trauma—or rather how the political intersects with the social as it ends up destroying the social fabric that used to provide a network of support. Hence, one might end up feeling even more alienated from the surrounding world: It is not just the formal political sphere that one becomes estranged from, but also those family, friends and loved ones (as well as neighbors) that one used to be close to. One tends to become increasingly alienated, atomized and withdrawn. All this, of course, not only shows how the relationship between perpetrator and victim is not Manichean but rather complex, but this process itself also plays into the hand of the counterrevolutionary forces. So long as people beat each other up, they won't act in creative, collective self-becoming that challenges the authorities of the state.

Your work also analyzes how different coping strategies among activists play into the hands of counterrevolutionary trauma. Can you elaborate on this?

In order to understand how the alienating cycles of traumatization work, we need to understand not only how the person feels and experiences the traumatic betrayal of intersubjective equality but also how these are produced and reproduced through social institutions. We need to look at the personal, social and political realms simultaneously, because only then can we see not only the real purpose behind traumatization (namely the instrumental pursuit of power), but also how personal coping mechanisms and reactions may end up directly playing into the hands of the counterrevolutionary perpetrator's wishes.

So, for example, social withdrawal and increased atomization and depoliticization are precisely what counterrevolutionary violence strives after. It seeks to break the creative becoming of the collectivity so that the radical challenge posed to its unjust political system is contained. But looking at these perspectives simultaneously helps us understand why counterrevolutionary violence is so effective. In its violent crushing of the counterfactual presupposition of intersubjective parity—the belief that we are all worth something in relation to another—it destroys our lifeworld, our framework for orientation. We literally become lost in the world. If there is enough of a collective presence, the counterrevolutionary violence is in a sense buffered— the physical pain and death are more real than ever, but there is a collectivity to fall back on, to share the pain with. Through the simultaneous infliction of violence and systematic exclusion and marginalization, however, this collectivity broke down, people became (re)atomized and the buffer disappeared, leaving us alone, bewildered and estranged—as well as frustrated, angry and extremely depressed.

Thus, rather than a purely psychological affair, trauma is an instrumental tool that is employed for its incapacitating, depoliticizing effects.

What are some lessons that activists could draw from your analysis of political trauma?

I am hesitant to prescribe any lessons for anyone. People should decide for themselves if there are any lessons in there for them. My hope is that my work will offer a sense of recognition for them. A sense of yes, this is what has been happening to me or those around me. And then I hope that this recognition may help them to articulate where the origin of the problem lies, namely not within the mind or the psyche but in the injustice of the system which is then manifested in the social and personal realms. This is *not* to say the existential individual impacts of counterrevolutionary violence is not real. Rather it is precisely to recognize these deep personal impacts and to say: This is normal. What you are going through is normal and a direct result of gross social, political and economic injustice. This is what the counterrevolutionary forces were after.

And perhaps this recognition might also help to stop cycles of social aggression and revenge: If people recognize where the real injury lies, then perhaps it will help decrease the venting of anger and frustration on others who were not the original perpetrators. This is an immense task, especially as the regime is so bent on victim-blaming and the politics of revenge as a way of (propagandistic) distraction. But one can only hope that it might help a little because the injury needs to be redirected away from the social realm towards the political realm, the Egyptian military and state—the original perpetrators of counterrevolutionary violence. One can also only hope that once the regime explodes or implodes (which it will as it is inherently unstable), then in the unleashing of violence people will be prepared and stand better ground as collectivities in the face of such counterrevolutionary atomization.

One can only hope that activists understand what is happening and perhaps help raise awareness of this amongst others who do not read or are not academically engaged. Because to be honest, this awareness does not come from my book and any other academic scholarship, but much more from collective and communal relations on the ground. We need to rebuild collectivities. In a sense, the Egyptian regime might itself have already started paving the way for that by not only arresting and detaining those who are

politically active but anyone at all. This means grievances become more widely shared. But the problem is, of course, that they will not allow such collectivities to form, flourish and prosper. But still, the protests in September 2019 show that in the face of so much death and destruction, the will for life (or rather a dignified life wherein one has a say as an equal peer) persists.

Protests are escalating once again in the region. While the so-called January 2011 revolution generation has been dealing with intense and contradictory notions of defeat, exile and powerlessness, many in the younger generations have not experienced what it is like to be part of a revolution. How should those with more experience help new participants to better cope with the experiences of activism and possible traumas of defeat?

In a way the generational gap might be a good thing. I believe that while we older people often look down on the inexperience of the younger generation, we also have to recognize that youth have a zest for life that might be lost as we become older, and often more cynical and downbeat. So, I would say it is important not to crush their zest for life with our pessimism.

There is sometimes a tendency, in Egypt anyway, to belittle the younger generation or say that they have to listen to the older person in charge, but we need to be careful here that we do not impose our vision, our disappointments, our despair and experiences on them. What we may do of course is merely explain to them—as equal partners in debate—what the regime has done, the kind of things it is capable of and the deep existential impacts that this might have so that they may be prepared for this.

We may also offer them a shoulder of understanding, that we recognize their grievances are real, that these are social, political and economic injustices—and thus that we understand their desire to rise up. We may also advise them on how to try and avoid detention (as well as inform them of what happens when one is detained in Egypt). We may also warn them of the deep existential impact of all of this, so that they are prepared and will know where such feelings (should they arise within them) come from.

But I believe it is extremely important that we avoid speaking from a place of authority simply based on our previous experiences of counterrevolutionary defeat. The younger generation should be addressed as equal peers. Their grievances are real. Their desire is real. Let's recognize this. Also, because it is precisely this equality that the current military regime seeks to break, let's start practicing this in our own circles to begin with.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Joshua Stacher's forthcoming book *Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition* (Syracuse University Press) on this distinction between systematic and anti-systematic opposition.

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