

“You taught me what Egypt means”: some considerations on the ambivalent spaces and aesthetics of the Egyptian Revolution

Much has been said by scholars in order to discard the uncritical image of Tahrir as the ultimate space of the Revolution (i.e. Sowers&Toensig 2012). In this perspective scholars have argued how the 18 days of Tahrir have been possible also, and probably mainly, because of the four days of contemporaneous local frictions that were taking place in Suez, Alexandria, Ismailiyya, and other provinces, beyond those happening within other neighborhoods in greater Cairo itself, and which outbalanced the power relation between Mubarak’s police forces and the people. In a more diachronic perspective other works (i.e Bayat 2012, El-Ghobashy 2012;) have highlighted how Egyptians started practicing street protest at least a decade ago, preparing themselves for this event, and that Tahrir did not come out of the blue.

On their turn, anthropologists have discussed the image of ‘iconic revolutionary’ attached to the square. they have argued that an exclusive attention to the space of the square reinforces the iconic image of the young male revolutionary (Winegar 2012), concealing gender and other power relations that regulate the access to Midan Tahrir (Hafez 2012), and back-grounding modalities of participation in the national space other than the presence on the square (Abu-Lughod 2012).

Whereas such scholars have importantly contributed to question the redemptive image of Tahrir, responding to images, narratives and icons produced by the media, in this paper I wish to focus once again on the square, in order to highlight its agentive potentialities, which should not be overlooked. The persisting presence of crowds in Tahrir has opened up new notions of the public, the people and their relation to politics, which I seek to explore in their spatial and aesthetic dimensions. In particular I will look at the post-revolutionary phase in order to nuance the too rigid dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion with which the access and the significance of the public square have been described. A glimpse into Tahrir, nine months after the 25th of January, shows how the consequences of such presence on the square should be understood

also in a diachronic perspective, in terms of different times and levels of inclusiveness and exclusiveness of public space. If Tahrir square has been a privileged space during the initial 19 days, in the immediate post-revolutionary period it became more inclusive, calling for an encompassing notion of the public as a common space.

Of course such inclusiveness has been continuously contested, as sexual harassment has often tried to define gender boundaries, while Salafi violence has tried to define religious ones, among many others. However, by exploring the persisting uses of Tahrir, I wish to reconstitute voice to those who, notwithstanding the disillusionment of some of the worst outcomes, have not given up going there. And I will do so by reading into a drawing lying in the alleys behind Tahrir, on the first day I arrived to Cairo in 2011.

I will then expand on the aesthetics of the square and the spatial trajectories of different forms of artistic expression triggered by the Revolution. And this choice because, in contrast to those many who have decreed the end of the Revolution, I see, mirrored in the new form of street arts that has taken shape, one of the effective legacies of the Revolution itself, namely the defiance of hegemonic understandings of the public and the opening up to new possible visions of 'publicness'.

Through this chiasm, I wish to highlight the tension between the abstract idea of publicness and its spatial articulations, since it is within this tension and in the possibilities that this tension opens up that I see one of the unsettling effects of the persisting unstructured presence of undefined crowds, and of its various artistic expressions, on the square. The notion of publicness, intended as an abstract and ideal quality of openness and indeterminacy (Manoukian 2005), suggests a possibility of empowerment since it refers to spaces and multitudes/crowds that are recalcitrant to stable references, in dialectical tension with clear-cut definitions and governance of places/events, defined political subjects and the notion of the '(Egyptian) people', as articulated through a specific discursive regime of identity and governmentalized space¹.

¹ The intensive and extensive control of space in has a long modernist trajectory in Egypt, stretching back to Mohammed Ali, through the colonial period and to the modern (Mitchell 1988).

In a sense, such publicness triggered by the protests, still lives through the forms and modalities of artistic expressions they have enhanced. By staging and performing on the streets, new and old artists, on the one hand, pick up the legacy of contesting normalized uses of public space, hence appealing to a new public, different and indeterminate with respect to the 'Egyptian' public, as shaped by the national cultural policies. On the other hand, by representing the ongoing events, some of these art-works continuously pinpoint the ambivalences and inherent tensions that such events carry with them, highlighting their yet unfinished nature as well as their possible openings to new meanings.