

Imagining Citizens

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Events since 2011 replaced earlier discussions about authoritarian stability in the Middle East with new ones about the meaning of democracy and the nature of revolution. The experiences and debates of Egyptians in the last six years also raise important questions around citizenship and the nature of political community. Just as there have not always been nation-states, there have not always been feelings of membership, identification, and activity associated with them. Citizenship and political community are frequently discussed in relation to secularism and religion and relative to an argument that the affective claims of Islam are incompatible with the modern presumptively secular state. I argue, however, that the shoring up—or disintegration—of nationalism and citizenship are shaped by the imagination of everyday individuals and state elites.

Feelings of shared community can dissolve into raw antagonism. Witness, for example, the Egyptian police's violent dispersion of a large pro-Mursi demonstration in Rab'a al-Adawiya Square in August 2013. A year earlier when many Egyptians enthusiastically welcomed Muhammad Mursi's inaugural speech in Tahrir Square it appeared as if a new sense of national community had been founded. But in August large numbers of Egyptians welcomed clearing Rab'a al-Adawiya and justified the deaths of hundreds of people who demanded the return of the then recently deposed government. To understand such a dramatic disintegration of a sense of national community, and events such as those surrounding the ouster of the Mursi government, we need to think not simply of the response as a failure of politics but also as a failure of imagination. Usually when we talk about the nation-state we talk about particular citizens who imagine themselves to be rights-bearing and deliberative individuals who owe the state obedience. They identify themselves as such. Discussing identity is not the only way to think about nationalism, society, and politics. We can also consider emotional attachments between and among people and focus on what kinds of communities they imagine themselves to be members of.

One of the most widely cited and arguably most important works on modern nationalism is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.¹ This is a surprising title for a book that never discusses the mechanisms of imagination and lacks even an index entry for the word. Insofar as he discusses how the nation is imagined as a community Anderson means "a deep, horizontal comradeship."² The word comrade entered English at the end of the 16th century from Spanish as a term close to "roommate," although the shared room was more likely a soldier's tent or encampment. Comrades, unlike fellow citizens, knew each other intimately, fought together against a common enemy, and shared accommodations. Comradeship has rarely been used as a synonym for citizenship even in Communist countries or socialist movements. Comradeship, even if imagined, speaks to a strong emotional bond rather than a weak tie.

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum considers two emotions that play a major role in social and political life: compassion and disgust.³ Nussbaum argues that

emotions are evaluative mechanisms rather than sources of preference formation (as they were for Hume⁴) or shortcuts to reduce the costs of collective action. They are neither the raw stuff on which rational decision making is constructed nor are they momentary deflections from a predetermined set of imperatives.

Disgust, she notes, is an especially visceral reaction: it is the revulsion at the possibility of incorporating a contaminant into our own bodies. Visceral as it may be, disgust has a cognitive component; subjects who sniff the same odor react with disgust when told it is fecal material but with some pleasure when told it is cheese. Thus, “disgust is motivated primarily by ideational factors: the nature or origin of the item and its social history.”⁵ Disgust responds to contamination not violence and is linked to images of bodily fluids as well the female body, female sexuality, homosexuality, and anti-Semitism.⁶

Disgust as politics poses “a central challenge for a society that wants to teach a broad and appropriate compassion.”⁷ What exactly is compassion for Nussbaum? Compassion, she tells us, is connected to pity, empathy, and (especially in 18th-century writing) sympathy. If disgust is an emotion predicated on the possibility of an external contaminant, especially from another human being entering our own bodies, compassion is an emotion predicated on the possibility that we can imaginatively enter into the emotional life of other human beings.

Compassion, like disgust, has an evaluative component. We must believe, says Nussbaum, the suffering that evokes the emotion is somehow unfair, unjust, or unwarranted. Compassion is a recognition that the suffering of another is serious, and that it matters to the observer. Aristotle, from whom she derives this argument, appears to have thought that compassion functioned with a moral imagination grounded in the sense of “there but for the grace of God go I.” Nussbaum proposes a more stringent test—another’s well-being is part of my own.⁸

Nussbaum’s argument provides a useful way of thinking about how people imagine themselves to be part of communities and to understand community obligations. Disgust is an emotion that viscerally defines the limits of human interaction because it evaluates what might be taken for innocent difference as something else. We experience disgust by associating particular kinds of people with more immediate material experiences that disgust us. Compassion also has a cognitive and moral element because it requires us to imagine its objects as having experienced unfairness and as being our moral equals. We cannot feel compassion for those who disgust us.

Discussing emotions allows us to understand some important aspects of the 2011 uprisings that are otherwise inexplicable. Most accounts of the uprisings are framed through some form of social movement theory in which interests and opportunities rather than emotions carry the burden of explanation. These accounts of recent Egyptian political history place the January–February 2011 demonstrations in a framework constructed through the lens of rationality. In some, the 2003 demonstrations against the US invasion of Iraq and the 2008 strikes and associated solidarity movement (April 6) when Tahrir was occupied for twelve hours play a central role. Those demonstrations provide a learning experience and a political opportunity that later demonstrations employed more successfully. In the other major analytic narrative, working-class protests centered in Mahallah al-Kubra in 2008 are cited as initiating the 2011 uprising which then becomes the culmination of a decade of activity by the disadvantaged pursuing

economic interest. To the degree that emotions matter at all they are, as they were for David Hume, simply a form of agenda setting after which rational strategic decision making and action occur. In some accounts emotions appear almost as a stimulant that systematically misled followers and leaders and inhibited rational decision making. None of these analyses account for the rapid transformations in the emotional character of the mass demonstrations or Egyptian public life, or the ways in which Egyptian public support of the process of political change abruptly turned against the dominant political movement associated with the emergence of a new political order—the Muslim Brotherhood. The disappointment analysts felt (an understandable if deeply emotional response) with the outcome of a process initiated in the public squares has largely been expressed through accounts of a revolution betrayed, lost, or squandered.

The history of Egyptian protest is more complex than either of the two dominant narratives can account for and far more profoundly affected by emotional reactions to protests that invoked and threatened imaginations of the moral responsibilities incumbent in the imagination of national or other communities. It is fitting to recall that one large demonstration in metropolitan Cairo during the first decade of the 21st century has dropped out of our recollection in the dominant analytic narratives: the one by thousands of Sudanese refugees—men, women, and children—in Giza in autumn 2005. As the intensity of the civil war in southern Sudan increased, refugees fled north and millions are believed to have entered Egypt. For the first half of the 20th century Egyptian politicians thought of Sudan as part of Egypt and the 1976 Nile Valley Treaty gave Sudanese citizens the right to enter Egypt without visas, own property, and work. After President Husni Mubarak escaped an attempted assassination, the treaty was abrogated and Sudanese became equivalent to other foreign nationals.⁹ Many were unable to acquire this status and in September 2005 initiated a protest in Mustafa Mahmud Square in Mohandiseen (in 2011 a rallying point for marches into Tahrir Square). By December an estimated 2,000 people were camped out in the square where they organized committees, carried out informational briefings, and attempted to resolve the problems of any large informal encampment. At the end of December Egyptian police attacked the camp and dispersed the protesters with as many as two dozen dead and dozens seriously injured.¹⁰

The authorities hoped to excuse the violence of the dispersal with claims that the camp was a source of moral and physical corruption, notably AIDS and crime.¹¹ Many of the same accusations were later directed at the Rabʿa al-ʿAdawiya demonstration. The Sudanese, like the demonstrators in Rabʿa al-ʿAdawiya, were at some point part of the national community and enjoyed some measure of sympathy, but the government mobilized disgust and fear to excuse its violence. Far from enjoying compassion, the demonstrators were then seen as having forfeited any claim that their suffering was unjust or unwarranted. On the contrary, it was seen as a deserved rebuke for having contaminated the body politic.

The territorial nation-state is not likely to go away, but whether it continues to be made up of citizens is more open to question. The emotional content of inclusive citizenship is necessarily extremely thin and, as the return of exclusivist populism in the US and Europe shows, fragile. The imaginatively more intimate claims of comradeship (whether religious, racial, or linguistic) retain their power everywhere to animate enthusiasm. This, ironically, is the very ground of civil society that political scientists have

for decades argued is the liberal counterweight to the authoritarian state. Weak ties, as Mark Granovetter observed many decades ago, are important in ways social science is still troubled to comprehend.¹²

NOTES

¹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

²*Ibid.*, 7.

³Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 2, *Of the Passions*, pt. 3, "Of the Will and Direct Passions," sec. 3, "Of the Influencing Motives of the Will" (1738–40).

⁵*Ibid.*, 201–2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 346–49.

⁷*Ibid.*, 350.

⁸Nussbaum's lengthy discussion of compassion constitutes part 2 of *Upheavals of Thought*.

⁹"A Tragedy of Failures and False Expectations" (report by the Forced Migration Studies and Refugee Studies Program, American University in Cairo, 8 June 2006), accessed 7 December 2017, http://schools.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/cmrs/reports/Documents/Report_Edited_v.pdf.

¹⁰See Assad Salih, "Sudanese Demonstration in Cairo: Different Stands and Opinions" (paper presented to the 4th Annual Forced Migration and Postgraduate Student Conference, University of East London, 18–19 March 2006); Abeer Allam and Michael Slackman, "23 Sudanese Die as Egypt Clears Migrants' Camp," *New York Times*, 31 December 2005, accessed 7 December 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/31/world/africa/23-sudanese-die-as-egypt-clears-migrants-camp.html>; and Brian Whitaker, "20 Killed as Egyptian Police Evict Sudanese Protesters," *The Guardian*, 30 December 2005, accessed 7 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/dec/31/sudan.brianwhitaker>.

¹¹Minal Giri, "On Contagion: Sudanese Refugees, HIV/AIDS, and the Social Order in Egypt," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 4 (2007): 179–98.

¹²Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 1360–80.