

ROUNDTABLE

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

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

Yet political scientists have largely ignored popular culture and its role in the 2010–2011 uprisings. This reflects a general lack of attention to nonconventional forms of political agency alongside a narrow definition of what constitutes “the political” within the field of political science. Rather, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, political scientists have focused primarily on comparing structural or institutional factors or social movement dynamics to explain the outcomes of the 2011 uprisings across different countries.³ As Jillian Schwedler argues, such approaches have obscured important micro-level as well as transnational processes.⁴ In particular, these approaches are ill suited to capturing the shifting subjectivities and identities and contested meanings of the revolution that underpinned post-2011 political dynamics. I argue that to capture these important dynamics it is necessary to study the processes of meaning-making

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

²On ‘Ukasha, see Walter Armbrust, “The Trickster in Egypt’s January 25th Revolution,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 4 (2013): 834–64.

³Among others, Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism: Lessons of the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 127–49; Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Neil Ketchley, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴Jillian Schwedler, “Comparative Politics and the Arab Uprisings,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 7, no. 1 (2015): 141–52.

embedded in everyday life. In other words, political scientists should study culture, but not as a reified system of beliefs or values, as pursued by Orientalists and proponents of “political culture,” but rather, as Lisa Wedeen argues, as a social practice that gives meaning to politics.⁵ However, unlike Wedeen, I do not view culture as a “causal variable” that can explain political dynamics, such as individual compliance with authoritarian regimes or the reasons for violent conflict between ethnic groups.⁶ Rather, I view culture as *constitutive of politics*. By this, I mean that the construction of culture is intrinsically political because cultural meanings always exist in relation to power and, as Antonio Gramsci theorized, particular cultural meanings are crucial to the construction of hegemony for those who seek power.⁷ Such an understanding of the political is not merely interested in the direct expressions of politics within cultural production (for example, Ramy Essam singing “Irhal”) but also in the ways in which the meanings of the revolution were constructed and contested through representations of class, gender, and nation and their articulation with existing and emerging relations of power.

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

Rather than trying to present a definition of popular culture that attempts to fix the boundaries between high and low or authentic and alien culture, it is more useful to understand these boundaries as constructed and contingent, shifting over time. Indeed, the liminal moment of the Egyptian revolution is particularly fruitful for revealing both the constructed nature of the term and its fluidity in relation to sociopolitical transformations. During this period, artistic movements attempted to break down barriers between elite and popular culture. For example, the El-Fann Midan movement, formed soon after the

⁵Lisa Wedeen, “Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (2002): 713–28.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. Quinton Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 161. I have previously studied the construction of regime hegemony through the reproduction of particular notions of Egyptian identity and nationalism. For example, see Nicola Pratt, “Identity, Culture, and Democratization: The Case of Egypt,” *New Political Science* 27, no. 1 (2005): 69–86.

⁸This project, entitled “Politics and Popular Culture: Contested Narratives of the 25 January 2011 Revolution and its Aftermath,” was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (no. AH/N004353/1) and was conducted by Nicola Pratt, Dalia Mostafa, Dina Rezk, and Sara Salem. The project website can be found at <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/cpd/popularcultureegypt/>. An online archive based on the project called “Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution” can be found at <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/>.

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

¹⁰Walid el-Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, “Introduction: Popular Culture—A Site of Resistance,” in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa*, 1–2.

¹¹James R. Grippo, “The Fool Sings a Hero’s Song: Shaaban Abdel Rahim, Egyptian Shaabi, and the Video Clip Phenomenon,” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 16 (2006), <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/the-fool-sings-a-heros-song-shaaban-abdel-rahim-egyptian-shaabi-and-the-video-clip-phenomenon/>.

ousting of Mubarak, aimed to bring arts and culture to the streets of Egypt to create political and cultural awareness.¹² The monthly “street carnivals” hosted a mix of what would generally be considered high arts alongside performances of popular culture. Similarly, the annual Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) has hosted a mix of performing arts, visual arts, and films from both high and popular cultures in spaces across downtown Cairo. Unlike El-Fann Midan, not all of D-CAF’s events are free.

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

However, although some of these cultural initiatives positioned themselves against the regime and state hegemony, they were imbricated in wider relations of power that cannot be reduced to the people versus the regime. For example, the organizers of El-Fann Midan were motivated by the middle-class, modernizing sensibilities of Egyptian artists concerning the “enlightening” role of culture for the masses.¹⁵ Such sensibilities also were apparent in the aesthetic preferences of middle-class protesters in 2011.¹⁶ In a context of political, social, and cultural upheaval and following decades of economic reforms that hollowed out the middle class El-Fann Midan also may be understood as an effort to redefine the popular to include the middle classes and their aesthetic preferences, and so to maintain or even reassert their political relevance and cultural power. Meanwhile, D-CAF, which began in 2014, was the beneficiary of rather than an active participant in the opening up of public spaces and dismantling of aesthetic hierarchies in the post-2011 moment. It is an example of cultural entrepreneurship, in that particular aesthetics associated with the revolutionary moment were mobilized and commercialized in line with neoliberal logics as part of a broader neoliberal project of gentrification of downtown Cairo. In this regard, D-CAF has been criticized for its partnership with Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment, which had been buying up and gentrifying downtown buildings since 2008.¹⁷ Efforts to dismantle previously existing cultural boundaries and valorize popular culture cannot be reduced to instances of resistance to regime hegemony but rather were implicated in the political competition between different class factions over symbolic and material resources in post-2011 Egypt.

There has often been a tendency in the scholarly literature to view popular culture as a form of resistance to hegemony, particularly in the context of the Egyptian revolution, but, as described, the politics of

¹²Farah Montasser, “A Year of El-Fan Midan in Egypt,” *Ahram Online*, 10 April 2012, <http://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/5/0/38785/Arts--Culture/0/A-year-of-ElFan-Midan-in-Egypt.aspx>.

¹³Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1981), 234.

¹⁴El-Hamamsy and Soliman, “Introduction,” 1–2.

¹⁵Such attitudes toward culture are elaborated in Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). For a discussion of the relationship between intellectuals and the people in the context of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, see Ayman el-Desouki, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). For a discussion of the politics motivating the organizers of El-Fann Midan, see Darci Sprengel, “Loud and Quiet Politics: Questioning the Role of the Artist in Street Art Projects after the 2011 Revolution,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 208–26.

¹⁶Jessica Winegar, “A Civilised Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22.

¹⁷Marie-Jeanne Berger, “Cultural Enlightenment for Cairo’s Downtown Futures,” *Mada*, 17 July 2014, <https://madamasr.com/en/2014/07/17/feature/culture/cultural-enlightenment-for-cairos-downtown-futures/>.

popular culture are more complex and contradictory. An interesting example of this is the *mahragan* or festival music that emerged in economically marginalized Cairo neighborhoods, such as al-Matariyya, blending electronic dance and *sha'bi* music styles.¹⁸ It has been regarded as a form of resistance to the political and socioeconomic marginalization of these neighborhoods in urban Egypt.¹⁹ This music long predates the revolution, emerging around 2007; nonetheless, it became widely listened to after the revolution, far beyond the neighborhoods in which it is produced, and was often a feature of the cultural events discussed above. The lyrics of this music are primarily concerned with the everyday concerns of those living in these communities, rather than the big political slogans of the revolution. Indeed, *mahraganat* musicians have tended to distance themselves from politics.²⁰ Nonetheless, through their representation of the everyday concerns of this group of people, these songs produce a politics that does not seek to challenge power directly but rather to carve out an autonomous sphere in which the dominant cultural meanings underpinning hierarchies of power may be disrupted. For example, in the song “al-Sha‘b Yurid Khamsa Ginay Rasid” (The People Want LE5 Phone Credit), *mahraganat* musicians MC Sadat el-Alamy and Alaa Fifty Cent appropriate a key slogan of the eighteen days and subvert it with reference to an everyday, material concern. By questioning whether the people seeking to topple the regime are the same as the people who are tired, that is, the working classes and residents of the marginalized communities from where the musicians originate, the song disrupts celebratory representations of a unified Egyptian people and draws attention to the existence of different class interests.²¹ However, *mahraganat* song lyrics also have been criticized for their problematic representations of gender relations, portraying young women as immoral, sexual temptresses and denigrating their appearance and behavior.²² It is possible to contend that *mahraganat*, like popular culture more broadly, is a mix of dominant and oppositional cultural and ideological values.²³ Yet I argue that such an approach ignores the ways in which particular forms of masculinity may be bound up with resistance. It is precisely the socioeconomic and political exclusion and prevalent state security surveillance faced by young working-class men that shapes the performance of what could be considered alternative masculinities. Working-class male youth reclaim the urban public spaces within which they are marginalized through their “vulnerable listening practices.”²⁴ Meanwhile, they compensate for their “injured masculinity” through the surveillance and policing of sexuality and gender behavior of the neighborhood’s women, particularly young women, as revealed in Salwa Ismail’s study of the informal neighborhood of Bulaq al-Dakrur.²⁵ In other words, the cultural politics of *mahraganat* illustrate the need for a more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between popular culture and politics that goes beyond binary notions of resistance and domination to understand how different vectors of social inequality and hierarchies interact in contradictory ways.

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

¹⁸Swedenburg, “Egypt’s Music.”

¹⁹Tarek Adam Benchouia, “Festivals: The Culture and Politics of Mahraganat Music in Egypt” (MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2015).

²⁰See the 2013 feature documentary *Ele Beheb Rabena Erfaa Edoh Lefook*, dir. Salma el-Tarzi, which explores the *mahraganat* music scene in Cairo.

²¹Elliott Colla, “The People Want,” *Middle East Report*, 263 (2012), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer263/people-want>.

²²Mai Samir el-Falaky, “The Representation of Women in Street Songs: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Egyptian Mahraganat,” *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 6, no. 5 (2015).

²³Tony Bennett, “Popular Culture and the Turn to Gramsci,” in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1986), xv.

²⁴Benchouia, “Festivals.”

²⁵Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

whereas the leaders are treacherous) in his criticisms of the government. Similarly, ‘Ali al-Haggar’s “Ihna Sha’b wa Intu Sha’b” (We Are One People and You Are Another People), released in the summer of 2013, celebrated the military coup and demonized the Muslim Brotherhood as literally not part of the Egyptian people, also drawing on well-known anti-Brotherhood tropes.²⁶ Of course, the widespread opposition of artists and cultural figures to the Muslim Brotherhood also was motivated by the attempts of Morsi’s government to establish hegemony over the cultural scene. Yet, the representation of the Muslim Brotherhood as being fundamentally *culturally different* served to position the organization outside the boundaries of the Egyptian people, demonizing it and normalizing the unprecedented state violence perpetrated against their supporters after July 2013, culminating in the massacres at Rabi’a Square and al-Nahda Square on 14 August 2013.²⁷ Presciently, the cartoonist Andeel satirized the celebration and justification of anti-Brotherhood violence in his *Souvenir Portrait of the Great Egyptian Family* (in Arabic), published in July 2013.²⁸

Identifying the struggles over the meanings of the popular and the people in popular culture provides a more complex insight into the dynamics of the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. It enables us to go beyond binaries of resistance versus domination, or the people versus the regime, highlighting the often-contradictory ways in which popular culture and the people were positioned in relation to power. Specifically, it is important to look beyond the direct political messages that may be part of cultural production and to pay attention to the representations of class, gender, and nation and how these are positioned in relation to hegemonic meanings and existing and emerging relations of power. Moreover, rather than treating popular culture as a set of artifacts, it is more useful to view it as a terrain of struggle, in which even the definitions of popular culture and the popular are intrinsic to battles for power. In this way, popular culture becomes a crucial lens through which to rethink the political, going beyond formal political institutions and processes to include the everyday struggle over cultural meanings that are constitutive of power relations. In a revolutionary context in which there were new opportunities to challenge existing boundaries and categories and resist previously hegemonic cultural meanings, the political significance of popular culture was arguably amplified. Nonetheless, the ongoing political significance of popular culture also is demonstrated by the efforts of the Sisi regime to censor popular culture and to dominate its production, particularly in relation to Ramadan TV series.

²⁶Ali al-Haggar, “Ihna Sha’b wa Intu Sha’b,” July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE58cI5cAxA&feature=youtu.be>.

²⁷Nicola Pratt and Dina Rezk, “Securitizing the Muslim Brotherhood: State Violence and Authoritarianism in Egypt after the Arab Spring,” *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 3 (2019): 239–56.

²⁸Mohamed Andeel, *Souvenir Portrait of the Great Egyptian Family* (in Arabic), al-Masry al-Youm Online, July 2013. Reprinted at <https://africacartoons.com/mohamed-andeel-a-picture-of-egyptian-people/>.