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ROUNDTABLE

Living through Thick Concepts in Revolutionary Egypt

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On the eve of the third anniversary of the Egyptian revolution in 2014, Hamza Namira's music video "What Can I Say?" (*Wa Ūlak Ay?*) struck all the right chords with Mustafa Husni's media team at Iqraa, the world's first Islamic television channel.[1] Although it did not offer solutions, the song's reenactment of the iconography of the violent polarization that unraveled the heady promise of 2011 was cathartic and, for many my revivalist interlocutors, a revolutionary gesture. Others disagreed, seeing Namira's art and its promotion by television preachers like Husni a further entrenchment of conservatism.

Husni is one of Egypt's "New Preachers," *al-duaʿā al-judud,* so named because of their novel styles of television preaching. Over the past two decades, the New Preachers have collaborated with artists on cultural productions they see as entertaining and edifying. Husni and Namira are also close friends. For the members of the preacher's media production team at Iqraa, Namira is exemplary of an ethical artist, *fannān hadīf,* because his work is responsive to social concerns and mindful of divine dictate. And in the wake of the 2011 uprising he became for many of my interlocutors *the* artist of the revolution, *fannān al-thawra,* as he sang to crowds in Tahrir about a better tomorrow already here.[2] What made the musician's friendship with the preacher even more significant during this time was the explicit reorientation of Islamic media as revolutionary media by Husni's production team. His directors, editors, and scriptwriters believed that the preaching programs they were making could become powerful sites for the mass cultivation of "the spirit of Tahrir Square" across a deeply divided nation. For these revivalists as much as for secular activists, Tahrir was exemplary in transcending difference, including religious difference. Tahrir was not only a site of political protest. It was a space of collective redemption, a space where one could "see God." And Husni's Islamic media could sustain the ethics of coexistence of which Tahrir had offered a tantalizing taste. It would do so using media forms that were reflective of Egypt's various subcultures and publics to broadcast a religious message that celebrated the very idea of a shared space as at once revolutionary and Islamic.

Reflecting deeply held assumptions about art and creativity that traverse regions, Middle East studies scholars have looked to artistic productions of various kinds, whether music, graffiti, or theater, as privileged sites for analyzing revolutionary expression and praxis. Some even argue that the sensibilities honed within various art subcultures constituted an "important strand of the DNA of the Arab uprisings."[3] As the extraordinary events of 2011 gave way to a wearying familiar authoritarianism, creative

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[1]Anas Tolba, who has worked several times with Namira, directed the video. Tolba later directed Zap Tharwat's music videos for Axeer, an alternative media production company. For more on Axeer, see Nama Khalil, "Making a Difference: Youth, Business, and Re-Envisioning Media Practice in Egypt" (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2019).

[2]Namira got his start in Alexandria's live music scene. He rose to national prominence when Wael Ghonim linked the title song of Namira's album *Dream with Me* (*Ihlam Maʿaya*) to the last post on the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page before Ghonim's arrest on the eve of the 25 January mobilization. Ghonim mentions the song in both his widely watched interview with Mona al-Shazli during the uprising and his memoir *Revolution 2.0,* where he writes that it was "a call to everyone to dream of a better tomorrow that we would share in making"; Sean Foley, "When Life Imitates Art: The Arab Spring, the Middle East and the Modern World," *Alternatives: The Turkish Journal of International Relations* (2013): 40. Namira performed regularly in Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the revolution. He was one of a select group of "democracy advocates" invited to meet with David Cameron, Britain's prime minister, during his first visit to Egypt after Hosni Mubarak's resignation.

[3]Mark LeVine, "Music and the Aura of Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 4 (2012): 795.

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cultural production stubbornly remained a site of hopeful futurity. In the face of prison and bullets, song and canvas offered political relief, even redemption.[4]

But observers of art and activism in Egypt, as well as Egyptian artists and activists themselves, might raise a skeptical eyebrow at the idea that religiously inflected projects of ethical entertainment are another strand of the Arab Spring's revolutionary genome. Indeed, outside of the social world of Islamic television, most revolutionary-minded Egyptians I knew doubted that Islamic idioms could facilitate their demands. From this perspective, Islamic television preachers like Husni and pious artists like Namira were highly unlikely candidates for inclusion in the ranks of either the truly revolutionary or the truly creative. If anything, their embodied dispositions and modes of reasoning were obstacles to both.[5] This skepticism also was present in the scholarly literature before the uprisings, with some positing "Islamic fun" as an oxymoron.[6] And even as research in this area flourished across disciplines in the new millennium, with a few exceptions scholars did not track the intersections of Islam and artistic production within revolutionary circles.[7]

Instead of trying to resolve such divergent assessments of the revolutionary on an analytical level, I want to suggest that these interpretive impasses offer a productive opening for a conceptual and methodological shift in understanding Egypt's revolution and its afterlife a decade removed. Contests over both the stakes of the uprisings and what forces, material and intangible, have enabled the popular authoritarianism of the present call for, first, thicker descriptions of thick concepts and, second, taking more seriously how some Egyptians connect what they code as revolutionary change to ethical formation.

Thick Concepts

In my discipline of anthropology, "thick description" aims at the contextual interpretation of human interaction. Although the Geertzian interpretivism of its origin may be out of theoretical fashion, thick description resists displacement as both a core methodology and a writing ideal. No anthropologist wants to be accused of being ethnographically thin.[8] "Thick concepts," however, are less familiar stomping grounds for ethnographers. Moral philosophers define thick ethical concepts as at once descriptive and evaluative. Examples are courageous or cruel: these moral concepts have a substantive heft that thin evaluations like right or wrong lack. They tell us something about the narrated action or attitude and how we should orient toward it. An anthropological reworking of thick concepts would recognize that what counts as courageous or cruel, as much as what is right or wrong, varies enormously not just across time and space, but also within the same social formation. This sociological unevenness and cultural contingency make thick concepts analytical tricksters unsuitable for scholarly abstraction aimed at second-order understanding, including theoretical comparison. But it is precisely the prismatic

[4]The Egyptian artist in exile Ramy Essam characterizes art as part of the solution for youth "vulnerable to a variety of political, criminal and religious agendas." He goes on, "Artists are their only hope—culture the only tool that can show them the way. It's so hard to demonstrate now in public, but we can still sing"; Hadani Ditmar, "Egypt's Rock Rebel Ramy Essam: 'My cause is humanity and freedom,'" *Middle East Eye*, 28 July 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/egypts-rock-rebel-ramy-essam-my-cause-humanity-and-freedom. The privileging of the aesthetic as salutary is pervasive in Egypt across religious-secular lines; for critical discussions see Jessica Winegar, "A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22, and Jessica Winegar, "Civilizing Muslim Youth: Egyptian State Culture Programs and Islamic Television Preachers," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 4 (2014): 445–65.

[5]Andeel, "Hamza Namira's Conservative Revolution." *Mada Masr*, 17 December 2014, https://madamasr.com/en/2014/12/17/feature/culture/hamza-namiras-conservative-revolution/.

[6]Asef Bayet, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007): 433–59. Other scholars see the "Islamic trend" in Egypt in a primarily censorious relationship with creative expression; its participants "try to constrain and contaminate the intrinsic values of the cultural field by imposing dominant conservative religious ones on the secular players"; Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.

[7]For recent contributions, see Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark LeVine, and Martin Stokes, eds., *Islam and Popular Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016).

[8]The moral philosopher Bernard Williams coined the phrase "thick concept." He was reportedly inspired by Geertz's "thick description," which Geertz himself took from the language philosopher Gilbert Ryle; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30. For an introduction to thick concepts in moral philosophy, see Pekka Väyrynen, "Thick Ethical Concepts," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, summer 2019 ed., https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/thick-ethical-concepts.

nature of thick concepts, their straddling of the descriptive and the prescriptive, that makes them ideal for ethnographic investigation focused on the process of becoming. This process calls for fine-grained attention to the knotty entwinements of expression and evaluation that constitute charged moments of social life.

To be more concrete, understanding how cultural productions come to be revolutionary for some Egyptians or contested as insufficiently so by others requires being methodologically attuned to categories like the revolutionary as *made*, not found. The same goes for the Islamic. This was a concept my interlocutors in Islamic television brought into being through their situationally shifting evaluations of specific phenomena even as they claimed a priori to find it through scripturally oriented description. For them, Namira was without question a revolutionary artist. He also was for them profoundly Islamic on ethical and doctrinal grounds, an assessment passionately contested by Salafi revivalists. From the Salafi perspective, the New Preachers' appropriation of mass entertainment forms for preaching (*daʿwa*) and their public support for performing artists constituted an insidious colonization of religious spaces and subjects by secular sensibilities and desires. Indeed, Salafi television preachers devote much air time to deriding the New Preachers' normative claims about cultural production as un-Islamic and disparaging them as *shuyūkh al-fannānāt*, "women artists" being in this Salafi theological imaginary the only group who could possibly take their religious authority seriously.

Significantly, the category of ethical entertainment makes secular-minded Egyptians as anxious as Salafi Egyptians, but for the opposite reason. Rather than worrying that religion would cease to be properly religious through illegitimate innovation in its forms of publicity, these observers fret that art would no longer be truly artistic once governed by ethico-religious criteria. An Egyptian diplomat who overheard me speaking about my research at a social gathering in 2012 was quick to interject that it was hard for him to wrap his head around something like an Islamic music video: "What is the point of taking something that is not Islamic and pretending it is? What does religion have to do with entertainment or creativity?"

Unpacking what such divergent appraisals reveal about the intersections of religious reason and artistic endeavor in Egypt and their constitution of certain subjects and publics requires a methodological sensitivity to how descriptive parameters already implicate evaluative criteria.[9] Such criteria should be the *object* of our analysis, not its starting point. Indeed, the scholarly output on Egypt's revolution frequently takes 'revolutionary' as a stable referent when it is in fact a shape-shifting constellation of sensibilities, actions, and expectations.[10] These are definitionally dependent on their binary other, the counterrevolutionary, in the same way that the Islamic needs the un-Islamic or non-Islamic to exist. We should not use these thick ethical concepts as analytical categories, or even as categories in need of analytical interrogation, but rather trace how these categories become meaningful, and fraught, in social life. Put differently, what we need are thicker descriptions of thick concepts.

The Ethical Revolution

This methodological attunement to conceptual thickness is all the more important during this moment in Egypt when lively public thickness is flattened in the name of stability and security. Indeed, in important ways understanding Egypt's revolution ten years after the toppling of Mubarak requires understanding what Egyptians who were committed to the success of a "New Egypt" imagine as standing in its way. For my interlocutors in Islamic television, beyond the sheer repression of prisons and bullets, there were certain dispositions, beliefs, and ways of relating that facilitated counterrevolution. The xenophobic

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[9]Although often considered by academic and social observers alike as particular to Egypt's current political economy, attempts at a specifically Islamic praxis of entertainment and the religious and secular critiques these invariably provoke have a long and rich history. See, for example, Heba Arafa Abdelfattah, "The *Maslaha* of Film Production in Pre-Revolutionary Egypt, 1896–1952: A Sanctioning Apparatus or Covert Censorship?" *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 1–37.

[10]For excellent exceptions, see Farha Ghannam, "Meanings and Feelings: Local Interpretations of the Use of Violence in the Egyptian Revolution," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012): 32–36; Sarah Anne Rennick, "Contested Meanings in the Egyptian Revolution." *Socio* 2 (2013): 121–34; and Mark Allen Peterson, "Re-Envisioning Tahrir: The Changing Meanings of Tahrir Square in Egypt's Ongoing Revolution," in *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles,* ed. Reem Abou el-Fadl (London: Routledge, 2015): 64–82.

nationalism and virulent militarism of counterrevolutionary Egypt was not just a political failure but also an ethical one, a failure of the individuals composing the body politic to enact, in their own interactions, alternatives to statist violence. The politics of prefiguration went both ways.

When Namira's music video came out in 2014, a senior member of Husni's media team at Iqraa whom I will call Zayna sent me the link in a Facebook message. "You have to watch this," she wrote. "I watched it like fifty times already and still cry every time." Namira's lyrics and accompanying visuals speak of a nation deeply polarized and riven by violence and indifference: "What can I say? Where has the path of hatred led us?" A headscarfed woman in a doctor's coat clutches the hand of a small girl as she dodges bullets; a spray can–wielding graffitist is water cannoned. "Our hope in our country has died. None of us is a stranger to loss or pain." A protestor is teargassed after making the sign of the cross; a conscript cowers behind his Plexiglas shield, deflecting rocks.

Zayna felt that Namira had captured her feeling of overwhelming despair and her inability to speak in the bloody aftermath of the 2013 coup. Her speechlessness was a function of the increasingly censorious security state and its selection of which words would be rewarded and allowed publicity and which punished and silenced. But more distressingly for Zayna and some of her colleagues at Iqraa, speechlessness also was the result of an everyday animosity among friends and within families over reasons of state. Indeed, the divisions Namira queried played out not only in staid newspaper headlines or satirical memes, not only in convictions or acquittals, not only in whose deaths were cheered or whose were mourned. They also were the hard and shiny shards of family dinners unfinished, coffee dates cancelled, phone numbers deleted, divorces threatened. For Zayna and other Islamic media producers, Namira's single was a sonic intervention into the polarization that people felt in the everyday.

Not everyone agreed with Zayna's positive assessment of the music video. The state banned all Namira's music from the radio, citing his "opposition to the ruling regime in Egypt."[11] Members of the Muslim Brotherhood denounced the song. Backstage at his concert in Detroit in 2019, Namira explained to me that the Muslim Brotherhood and what he called the *dawlagiyya*—state apologists—didn't like the song for the same reason. In calling on Egyptians on "both sides" to recognize the pain of the other, it presented an equivalence that was from their perspectives false. But even beyond state and Brotherhood partisans, within the revolutionary circles Namira would identify as his own, the song fell flat for similar reasons: to try to identify common ground or to cultivate empathy across divides was to legitimize the illegitimate grievances of "the other side." "All of this kumbaya stuff is problematic if it doesn't address core power imbalances," one Egypt scholar wrote to me in a Facebook discussion when the song came out in 2014. "In fact, it is counterrevolutionary, despite whatever intentions might be behind it."

But what happens when we consider more carefully the frameworks that render the address of power imbalances a question of ethical sedimentation? For my interlocutors in Islamic media, the revolutionary demands for dignity and social justice were not only political or economic (in other words, addressing "power imbalances" in the sense of the Facebook critic) but also clearly ethical demands that manifested themselves in everyday habits of interaction, in feelings about others, and in how one responded to inflicted hurt. For them the revolution was as much about cultivating particular ways of thinking, feeling, and doing as it was about the downfall of a regime. For example, a significant way in which Tahrir Square prefigured the "New Egypt" was not through its absence of disagreement but rather precisely through the presence of difference without discord. Iqraa's media producers felt that their channel could similarly cultivate within pious viewers what they called *thaqāfit al-ikhtilāf,* a habitual culture of civil disagreement, through broadcasting programs from a variety of Islamic orientations and theological approaches, even if they were mutually contradictory. Countenancing or, better yet, celebrating, interpretive pluralism was a religious ethic with revolutionary significance. In this way, the revolution is both in the world and within the self. And the arts of preaching and singing alike, or better yet creatively conjoined, could bring about both.

Of course, these Islamic revivalists were not alone in seeing the dispositional as inherent to the revolutionary project, as the almost immediate nostalgia for the "spirit of Tahrir"—Its solidarity! Its parity!

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[11]"Al-Idhaʻa al-Misriyya Tamnaʻ Baththa Aghani Hamza Namira li-l-Intiqadihi al-Nizam," BBC News Arabic, 20 November 2014.

Its tolerance!—among activists across the ideological spectrum shows. The ethical emerges here as a key site for political futurity. For differently minded revolutionaries, however, this focus on ethical self-cultivation individualizes harm and dodges hard questions of entrenched power structures. It also reproduces the normative impetus of religious discourses and their associated sensibilities many find to be constraining and conforming and thus incompatible with what they feel is true revolutionary change.[12]

Again, my suggestion here is not to try to resolve these impasses through an analytical adjudication, by figuring out, for example, whether ethics are *truly* constitutive of political change or if religiously informed cultural production can *really* be creative, but to approach them as conceptually thick and thus in need of more nuanced description attuned to the processes by which evaluative categories come into being, change over time, and engender ongoing contention. The revolutionary emerges here less as a transparent term of political analysis and more as an ethical concept that summons or entreats others to do, think, or feel in particular—and inevitably contested—ways. Indeed, it is precisely because of, not despite, the simultaneous descriptive specificity and prescriptive thrust of thick concepts that their scholarly investigation can help us make better sense of how people fight over and live out their present realities and desired futures.

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[12]Although conventionally associated with conservative religious movements, the reform of individual ethical conduct is of fundamental concern for many secular leftists as well. Programmatic reflections on the ethics of a socialist society and promotion of socialist habits in individuals, including through art, were pervasive in 1960s Egypt; see, for example, Mahmud al-Basyuni, *al-Tarbiyya li-l-Mujtma'na al-Ishtiraki* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1970). Even avowedly atheistic revolutionaries linked political success to ethical transformation; for Vietnamese communists, for example, see Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 216–40.