An Opening of Tanwir

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Introduction

Experiments with political liberation and democratisation took place during the 1980s in the Middle East. However, the movement towards significant democratic change was not completed and authoritarian rule continued throughout the region. Now more than ever, we are witnessing overt dissatisfaction with several authoritarian regimes across the Middle East. Both democratic rights and space are literally being fought for. Prompted by Tunisia's successful revolution in January 2011, the citizens of Cairo began an occupation of Tahrir Square on Tuesday 25 January 2011, the "Day of Revolt", to protest against the rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Most of the Square had been *closed off* for many years, arguably to prevent precisely such public assemblies and to hold the public at the edge of democracy. But during the revolt's 18 days of protest, the barricaded edges were removed and the space opened, allowing the public to reclaim its space and fill it with a new perspective.

 The 1990s' claim by the Egyptian Government under Mubarak that it was an "enlightened government" (Abaza 2010: 34) proved to be a dissimulation. About the current Egyptian revolt, Elizabeth Kassab (2011) states that the public's "rejection of aggression and dehumanisation is the indispensable foundation for a move towards enlightenment". Can we claim that Egypt is now going through its own age of enlightenment or, at least, that it experienced a moment of enlightenment? Clearly not in the sense of an enlightenment in which reason breaks from religion. But perhaps (following Michel Foucault) in the sense of a set of events that advocate change, and by which the citizens free themselves from the darkness of imposed political and economical shadows. Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment in the eighteenth century as a "way out" of a self-imposed state of immaturity. Enlightenment, Kant suggested, is extremely difficult to achieve individually; it is more likely to be achieved through the public (Kant 1784). Despite some reservations, Foucault agrees with Kant that what is needed to achieve Enlightenment is a critical perspective: "Enlightenment is the age of critique" (1984: 38) and "[w]e have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. Criticism indeed consists of analysing and reflecting upon limits" (45). Against Kant's concerns with a universality of knowledge, though, Foucault insists on the singular and contingent, and on the transformation of a general critique into "a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression" (45).

This paper intends not to advocate Western Enlightenment meta-narratives of universal and rational knowledge but to examine how, if placed at the edge of the frontier (as in Foucault), enlightenment can unfold through a *rupturing*. The discussion will be grounded in the events that took place in Tahrir Square in Egypt to explore how the revolt transformed this space into an opened-enlightened public space.

Tahrir Square in 1941. Photographer unknown (Creative Commons)

Space of *Tanwir*

Built during the nineteenth century, Tahrir Square was originally known as Ismailia Square, named after Khedive Ismail. Ismail, whose reign lasted from 1863 to 1879, lived in Paris during the time of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann's transformation of the city. These experiences influenced him to modernise Cairo

in the image of Paris. However, to make this modernisation possible, the city had to take on a massive debt, and this ultimately contributed to Ismail's removal (AlSayyad 2011b: 2).

Over the course of its history, the square saw several rallies: amongst them the first violent protests in 1919 against the British occupation, which gave rise to Egypt's independence in 1922, and, in 1952, against the rule of King Farouk. In reference to these two successful uprisings, President Gamal Abdul Nasser (whose presidency lasted from 1953 to 1970) renamed Ismailia Square to Tahrir Square in 1955. *Tahrir* means liberty in Arabic. Decades later, the Mubarak government's so-called "enlightened policy" was to counteract the so-called "dark" Islamist activists (Abaza 2010: 34). An accompanying campaign was titled "A Hundred Years of *Tanwir*." *Tanwir* means enlightenment in Arabic. While claiming enlightenment, the Mubarak government took disciplinary action against anyone demonstrating against inadequate salaries and a worsening economic situation (32). Mubarak's neoliberal policies even led to a total deregulation of working conditions, unemployment and inflation, which caused the escalation of violence and the 2011 protests (33). Although Mubarak's government possibly presented Egypt with a new image of itself, it is evident that the concept of enlightenment was used for propaganda purposes and democracy still had to be fought for. For many years, though, confrontation was avoided since many "co-opted secular intellectuals" thought it was "better to tolerate the current corrupt regime and maintain the status quo than to aspire to change that is unknown" – this way, at least, they knew whom they were dealing with (34).

Contrary to popular conceptions of dictatorial power, Foucault holds that we are never "ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to precise strategy" (Foucault & Kritzman 1990: 123). Thus, we can activate discontinuity, or a *rupture*, that has positive effects. On 25 January 2011, demonstrators gathered in Tahrir Square to protest against poverty, rampant unemployment, government corruption and Mubarak's autocratic governance of over 30 years. As a *rupture*, this was an opening of enlightenment, one more real than the enlightenment version the Mubarak government laid claim to in the 1990s. Foucault (1984: 35) reads Kant to mean that "Enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally." For Kant, though, Enlightenment happens without subjection to authority and affects all of "mankind". By contrast, Foucault holds critique to be beneficial and powerful only when one understands its operations and position relative to history; the potential for Enlightenment emerges when we cease to accept knowledge as universal and recognise it as arising from an opening of discourse.

> It is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what must be hoped. (Foucault 1984: 38)

In this way, it could be argued, the crowd opened up a space of enlightenment through critique when they accumulated in Tahrir Square, even though this opening was initially confined within the square's spatial and political boundaries. The nature of these boundaries was changed: for if a "boundary establishes closure through inactivity", then "the edge-as-border" created in the process is more open and "full of events in time" (Sennett 2008). Thus, through rupturing

the boundaries the crowd was able to promote not only a "way out", as Kant would suggest, but also (following Sennett) a *way in*. The crowd accumulated energy and power for change: the sheer volume and increasing energy of the emerging public node radiated out to the Mubarak regime, the media, and the world. Through accumulation, the bodies became one: one movement that wanted to be heard, but more importantly *felt*.

The *Agora*

Tahrir Square had once before been known as a vibrant public space. Under Anwar Sadat's rule in the 1970s (Elshahed 2011), though, precisely the areas that define the public realm were fenced off. Thus, the public realm was closed off and vehicular traffic came to dominate the square. When Mubarak took office in 1981, he continued to enforce policies inherited from Anwar Sadat, which sought to control urban space by taking public space away from citizens: to prevent demonstrations and thereby the possibility that the public might challenge the regime. Mubarak clearly discouraged and even prohibited public assembly.

Richard Sennett argues that democracy depends on the ability of individuals to interact in public spaces, acquiring information and knowledge through debate and discussion with strangers. In public space, "cultural rituals and practices can be open rather than closed" (Sennett 2008). This conception of public space goes back to the development of the Greek *polis* which was, according to Charles Jencks, a "keystone in the evolution of democracy. It defined citizenship within the community and independence from all other cities" (1987: 10). Much like today, public buildings such as council chambers, town hall, and law courts were built around the *agora*. The *agora* itself, "a place for people to gather", was a flat open space where people could get to know each other and discuss politics. Without this "outdoor room", the public cannot collectively express its strength (11). As the citizens' stage set for democracy, the *agora* is also a space where symbols of power come together; the monumental buildings and statues surrounding the *agora* represent the authority of the State. Despite this presence of State power, if the space is open, democracy is also always present in it: the *agora* symbolises for the people a space that privileges their voice and their opinion. For Jencks, Greek architecture was an architecture of democracy (1987: 23-24). It represented what Hannah Arendt termed a "space of appearances": the "theatrical space which public architecture both actualises and symbolises at the same time. It is not the dramatisation of power, but rather the plurality of contending opinions which struggle for power in public" (23).

During the revolt, the mass performed public prayers, *namaz*, together in the Square, they turned it into a space of spiritual transformation. For individuals as well as the collective, it became a space of appearance. The *namaz*, normally performed in the quietness of a mosque, was in this instance made visible on the open ground of the square. The size of the square allowed the large number of people to perform Friday Prayer together, whereas they would normally pray in small groups at different mosques. The crowd lined up in rows, stood shoulder to shoulder and prayed in the direction of the Kaaba in Makkah (Mecca). Tahrir Square at that moment was not just an internal, inward-looking space but one that looked out at the same time.

A *rupture* can also make visible a critical reflection of our selves. A reflection, perhaps, much like the Greek ethic and aesthetics of existence, where it was admirable to turns one's life into a work of art through self-mastery and ethical stylisation (Best

Friday Prayer in *Tahrir* Square.
Photograph: Lilian Wagdy
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& Kellner, 1991: 13). The performance of *namaz* could be thought of in a similar way: although taking place within a space filled with tension, the performance of *namaz* reminds us of the beauty associated with the ethos of Islam as a way to peace.

Rupture

I have presented an argument that it wasn't until the Day of Revolt that there began a process of enlightenment, *Tanwir*, in Cairo – despite the Egyptian Government's assertion in the 1990s that it was an enlightened government. The enlightenment of the 2011 revolt was not one in the Kantian sense but instead, as Foucault would suggest, enlightenment caused by a form of *rupture*. This rupture, formed by the will and actions of demonstrators to redistribute power, re-configured boundaries according to new rules of knowledge and truth, and presented the "kind of moral energy, quite remarkable" Foucault commented on (Trombadori & Foucault 1994: 280). He claimed that the political crowds in the Arab world possessed an energy unlike anywhere else he had witnessed. The crowd of the 2011 Egyptian Revolt placed itself at a life-threatening frontier, in the hope that equality could be achieved. For within the crowd, as Elias Canetti states, "there is equality. This is absolute and indisputable and never questioned by the crowd itself. It is of fundamental importance and one might even define a crowd as a state of absolute equality" (1962: 29). It is worth noting that the revolt was based on peaceful demonstrations, on gathering the energy and support of a collective body. Although the demonstrators had to exert physical force in self-defence at times, the main factor to their success was their physical, political, and spatial resistance.

Technology also assisted the rupture. The Internet provides a democratic *interior* space, in the openness of social networking sites which allowed the crowd to virtually rally and organise the demonstrations outside. Sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* provided alternative perspectives to State propaganda and made visible what was not shown in the media. Images of bodies affected by State brutality multiplied throughout these public domains and gathered empathy. When the government realised how this open communication system assisted the protests, the Internet and mobile communication networks were closed down for several days. However, once the protests were off the ground, both virtual and physical

Spaces within *Tahrir* Square. Based on a photograph by Johnathan Rashad (Creative Commons)

communities proved to be unstoppable. The synergy between technology and public resonance had placed the revolt at the edge of the frontier.

Positioned at the frontier, protesters took down the fences that had closed off the urban public space and used them as barricades to protect themselves from the military and pro-Mubarak supporters. In the process, it became evident that the sites had remained undeveloped and that claims to the contrary were false. The boundary of exclusion was removed and the occupation of Tahrir Square saw a new internal borderland established, including a series of zones with different functions: a bloggers' station, a campsite, a kindergarten, a pharmacy, clinics, a water station, food stalls, an ablution area, a stage area, flag-selling stalls, a recycling area, a memorial space, a prayer space, and an art space. Tahrir Square, once again, became an *agora* where bodies gathered and debated and collectively shared opinions.

After many years, Tahrir Square was re-opened by the rupture that occurred on the Day of Revolt and allowed the demonstrators to cross over into what became again an urban public space, an *agora*. The importance Jencks and Sennett attributed to public space, as a form of democratic architecture that should be open to accommodate public gatherings in all their diversity, is still pertinent today. There is always a duality of power which needs to be kept in balance in the openness of public space.

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