

## THE ORDINARINESS OF ETHICS AND THE EXTRAORDINARINESS OF REVOLUTION: Ethical Selves and the Egyptian January Revolution at Home and School

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The notion that we have much to learn from those who were “not there” seems somewhat counterintuitive; nonetheless I argue that there is much to learn about the Egyptian revolution from the experiences of those too young or too sheltered to take part in it in a conventional way. Considered children at the time (eleven to thirteen years old) and today in their early twenties, my interlocutors—Amer, Ahmed, Osama, Farida, Youssef, and Maha—describe themselves as having “missed out” on a unique experience. We can understand their sense of absence given the privileged place that street protests, social movements, and high politics have played in accounts of the 2011 revolution.

The final decade of Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year rule was marked by vocal public opposition and challenges to his authority and policies (see [El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009](#)). On National Police Day, January 25, 2011, an uncertain and loosely defined coalition of Egyptians took to the streets to protest systematic police brutality in cities across the country, emboldened by the dramatic ousting of the Tunisian dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali just ten days earlier. By the end of the first day, thousands had taken to the streets throughout the country, two protestors had been shot dead in the port city of Suez, and in Cairo, at the heart of the government district, Tahrir Square had been occupied. In the coming weeks, the

government reaction turned ever more violent and deaf to the emerging demands of “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice, and Human Dignity.” By the time Mubarak abdicated on February 11, at least nine hundred people had reportedly lost their lives in confrontations with the Ministry of the Interior.

In the following year, hundreds would be killed and thousands injured as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (to whom Mubarak had abdicated) attempted to stop the revolution and criminalize protests in a bid to restore the militarized republican order established in 1952. Despite the regular, dramatic, and deadly confrontations throughout 2011 and 2012, people widely took up their right to protest and organize, leading to a flourishing of campaigning, art, and culture. For the first time, Egyptians experienced a degree of electoral transparency and voted in their millions in six major elections and referendums in eighteen months. These brought about an amended constitution, a parliament dominated by Islamists, and the election of the country’s first civilian president, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who won the 2012 elections with the thinnest of majorities. Just a year later, public anger against the Muslim Brotherhood led to mass protests. The intelligence and military establishments exploited these protests through orchestration and opportunism to overthrow the elected president in a coup d’état on July 3, 2013, with the backing of an seemingly secular-liberal coalition. The massacres of Muslim Brotherhood supporters at Rabaa and Nahda Squares a month later signaled the beginning of a process that ushered in direct military rule and a widespread and brutal political purge of all dissent, which has continued with ever increasing brutality to this day. Over the past ten years, the Egyptian regime has devoted massive energies and resources into making the January revolution *instantaneous*, an abrupt disruption, one consigned to the past and cast as a moment of national ruin. Despite its ostensible failure, the January revolution has remained spectral, haunting the regime and animating its approach to governance.

My interest in the experiences of children during the revolution began in 2016, a particularly difficult year that started with the brutal murder of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge PhD student studying independent labor unions, by the security services on January 25. In one of my classes at the American University of Cairo, fresh-faced juniors talked about the January revolution with a surprising sense of ownership and investment, given that they were too young to have taken part in it. I often dismissed these claims to *elsawra* (the revolution) as the bravado of privileged AUCians, or a gesture to me as a teacher whom they perceived as anti-establishment.<sup>1</sup> As the semesters wore on, time and again I came into contact with young people who “weren’t there,” and had come of age at a time of brutal political

repression, yet who had an urge to talk and write about the revolution in spite of its state-led erasure. It was not until 2019 that I began talking to people about their experiences, but my timing proved awful. We were six years into a brutal crackdown on any form of dissent, and in September 2019, protestors had briefly taken to the streets, leading to another round of mass arrests of mostly young demonstrators. Tens of thousands of people continue to languish in administrative detention for an array of speech and political crimes over these years. Talking to young people about their experiences of the revolution felt unsafe—people faced arrest for far less. Yet I learned through experience and by following others that it was possible to navigate this situation, to use whatever privilege and access I had available to nurture relationships carefully and discreetly, even around the most sensitive of subjects (Aly 2019).

Just as Ahmed, my research assistant, and I started to collect these accounts, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Even before restrictions on face-to-face sociality, it had proven difficult to find a physical space that would allow us to safely and comfortably talk about the revolution. My office at the university and my home were options, but these were hardly fertile ground for naturally occurring conversation about the revolution. Politics and public health set a particular direction and scale for this engagement. Over the following eighteen months of lockdowns, and under the cacophony of online sociality, we gathered eighteen in-depth narratives, six of which appear in this article. The bleakest political conditions and the pandemic cut through our interactions, but they did not cut out the possibilities of sharing and engaging in meaningful conversation.

Our narrators described themselves as “middle-class” and sometimes as “privileged.” Arguments in favor of anthropologies of the middle classes and elites have been lucidly and plentiful made in recent decades (Abbink and Salverda 2013; Aguiar and Schneider 2016). Nonetheless, I was still afflicted with disciplinary self-reproach for researching horizontally and upward rather than downward, not least because Rabab El-Mahdi (2011) and Noha Mellor (2014) have argued that the vanguard of the revolution has often been distilled in the figure of secular, peaceful, internet-savvy, middle-class “yuppie[s]” driven by patriotic romanticism and liberal sensibilities, rather than economic injustice.

Our task was far removed from times when international news crews roamed the streets of Egypt snatching sound bites from people their audiences would relate to. The fear that my interlocutors would somehow emerge as cut-out caricatures of Egyptian yuppies was not borne out. They hailed from different parts of Egypt, with different religious and political sensibilities; they attended both public

and private schools and universities; some were bilingual, others were not. All claimed middle-classness, but I doubt that they would see each other as belonging to the same social class in a straightforward way.

In this article, I focus on the first twelve to eighteen months of the revolution, when my interlocutors were first confined to their homes for long periods of time, followed by their return to school in September 2011. Although thousands of school-aged children had experienced the dangers and exhilaration of street protests, my interviewees emphasized that they weren't there. Yet what they shared with us illustrated that much was happening in their lives. They had worked through the uncertainties and dilemmas of the revolution and at times had acted on these in ways worthy of attention, inviting us to rethink what the revolution might have been then and now.

Following [Jessica Winegar \(2012\)](#), [Lila Abu-Lughod \(2012\)](#), [Amira Mittermaier \(2014, 2019\)](#), and [Samuli Schielke \(2015\)](#), I decenter the streets in my account of the revolution by turning my attention to children, home, school, and the relationships and experiences that animate them. [Zina Sawaf \(2013\)](#) suggests that young people's subjectivities were intimately tied to those of their families during the revolution. This undoubtedly holds true, but the families that emerge in these narratives are far from straightforward sociological units. We see much contestation and tension: often members of the same family did not share a position on the revolution or where they stood in relation to it. Rupture was not only occurring at the level of state power; the politics of the family and the family's politics suddenly burst into the everyday lives of young people with unprecedented urgency.

From the perspective of lived experience, the protagonists of the revolution were not only the names that dominated the airwaves and platforms of the time. These were important, but so were people's mothers and fathers, siblings, cousins and grandparents, uncles and aunts, neighbors, teachers, and schoolmates. The social locations and institutions we perceive as formalistically separate are experientially entangled. In the immediate and extended family, next door, and at school there are friends and family who work in the military or the police, who are members of the Muslim Brotherhood or of a church. There are others employed by the state, some aligned with the revolution and others with the regime, and many more with no clear political leanings.

Relationships within and between home and school offer a vantage point from which to consider the back-and-forth between biography, national history, and social memory ([Bellagamba 2006](#)). Yet what exercises me about this far-flung corner of the revolutionary tableau is that it offers an opportunity to think

about how people narrate the revolution as a process of ethical self-reflection and self-formation, in this case, not one forged on the streets, in protests and political activism, but through everyday relationships that took on a new meaning during the social drama of revolution. These narratives prove theoretically generative and disruptive; they speak to debates among anthropologists about whether ethics are continuous or eventual, conscious or unconscious. In doing so, they draw the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of revolution into conversation.

Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi (2020) argue that anthropologies of revolution should move away from paradigms that focus on the issues of definition, causality, chronology, and consequences found in other social sciences. Often these have led to a “purification” of what counts as a “true” revolution. Anthropologies of revolution should pluralize and recognize the complex and variable ways that revolutions are experienced. Ethnography relocates revolution from the macro to the everyday, but this does not disconnect it from local cosmologies of kinship, myth, personhood, time, ritual, space, and power, all of which constitute and are reconstituted in revolutions (Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020, 14–16, 50).

Egypt has proved a fruitful setting for alternative approaches to revolution and anthropological explorations of ethics. Researched and written prior to the revolution, Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2011) questions an assumed universal liberal feminist subject through her reading of self-cultivation and moral practice among women in piety movements. In a village, far removed from Tahrir Square, Abu-Lughod (2012) finds that “moral action” and articulations of the revolution were local while also being directed at an unfolding national stage. Mittermaier (2014, 2019) develops a notion of an “ethics of immediacy” in her explorations of the Sufi Khidmah and an Islamic ethics of giving that inhabited but also exceeded the revolutionary moment. The most direct reading of ethics and the Egyptian revolution is Schielke’s *Egypt in the Future Tense* (2015), which looks at the lives and futures imagined during and after the revolution. Yet the book does not deal with the revolution as such, but with “the experience of living in a world that is not solid,” where things are not obvious and where survival depends on reflection (20). Schielke finds aspirational ethics and anticipation in people’s attitudes, appearances, reputations, dreams, and frustrations. Ethics are constantly reflected on with different degrees of urgency at different times and locations in society in differing degrees. Schielke (2015, 21) claims that ethics are not his starting point, and he remains largely unconcerned with the tensions around the nature, locations, and subjects of ethics in anthropology. This is undoubtedly not an omission,

but, rather, implicit to phenomenological anthropology, which, as [Michael Jackson \(1996, 8\)](#) has it, concerns itself less with philosophy and more with lifeworlds, their habits, crises, biographical particularities, and indecisive strategies whose complexity philosophy and theory can address but never define or capture. My reading of an emergent literature on the anthropology of ethics, however, has been shaped by the contestations between phenomenological and structuralist perspectives. These have debated whether morality and ethics can be studied from the perspective of lived experience at all, the nature of and relationships between morality and ethics, and whether particular moments can stand out from the everyday as moments of ethical reflection and action. I shall first turn to these debates to locate the ethical.

### ORDINARINESS OF ETHICS AND EXTRAORDINARY REVOLUTIONS

Twenty years after [James Laidlaw's \(2002\)](#) provocation that there was no sustained anthropological reflection on the nature of ethics, a large and recognizable body of anthropological work on ethics now exists. Three broad positions have emerged: the *ordinary ethics* approach, grounded in acts, utterances, and everyday language philosophy; a Foucauldian and Aristotelian approach focusing on virtue ethics and lived *praxis*; and a *phenomenological* approach that emphasizes first-person, relational moral experience ([Mattingly and Throop 2018, 478](#)). These different locations and philosophical traditions determine the terrains on which the ethical should be studied: for some it is in everyday language, for others in discursive conditions of possibility, and for still others in the experiential (read biographical). While these three locations and terrains of the ethical are necessarily entangled, anthropologists of ethics have found it hard to agree about location and terrain, particularly when philosophy has overtaken anthropological concerns.

Among the many well-spirited exchanges in this body of work we find questions about where to locate ethical reflection and action (sometimes described as *problematization*). Broad consensus proffers that ethical reflection and action are continuous and thus *ordinary*. [Jarret Zigon's \(2009, 296; 2007\)](#) position that ethics only emerges from extraordinary moments of *moral breakdown*, “when people actually have to ‘stop and consider’ how to act or be morally appropriate,” has fueled intense and productive debate. Laidlaw critiques the notion of the *moral breakdown* because it locates ethics “outside the flow of everyday life” ([2014, 119](#); see also [Lambek 2010](#); [Das 2010, 2012](#); [Faubion 2010](#); [Robbins 2009](#)). While both Zigon and Laidlaw adopt Michel Foucault's notion of *problematization*, they disagree

on its location. For Laidlaw, problematization is not, as Zigon presents it, an experiential episode of moral breakdown or a distinct event in a biographical life. Rather, it constitutes an aspect of Foucault's genealogical method, located in periods, milieus, texts, and discourses. Zigon has spent ten years clarifying and reworking the concept of the *moral breakdown* (see Zigon 2013, 2014, 2018), yet it still seems to irk his ordinary ethicist contemporaries. In *Disappointment*, he asserts that moral breakdowns form part of *ordinary social life* and that these are disrupted but not ruptured by moments of moral breakdown along a spectrum of disruptive intensity which in turn create reflections and actions of differing intensities (Zigon 2018, 147). He argues for an analytical and methodological need to recognize these, because in making ethics intrinsic to all action, ordinary ethicists have made ethics analytically indistinguishable (Zigon 2018, 107–9). Zigon has also faced criticism for suggesting that moral and ethical life are unconsciously inhabited, what he calls *embodied*, and that the ethical reflections and actions occurring when moral breakdowns ensue have comfort and coexistence as their vectors. Some read this to imply that ordinary life remains without reflection or self-reflexivity, making social life uncontested (Faubion 2012, 18).

It is notable that despite these disagreements, anthropologists of the ethical seem to share a sense that moral life should seem natural, but at times, and for different reasons, an awareness of the strangeness, contradictions, and problems of a taken-for-granted morality are thrown into relief. Zigon expresses this as *embodied ethics*, on the one hand, and *ethics*, on the other. In James Faubion (2010), it emerges as the *themitical/ethical*. And Michael Lambek (2010, 83) differentiates between *tacit* everyday moral intimacy and *distantiating* everyday experiences that activate the ethical. For those working within the tradition of cultural analysis like Joel Robbins (2009), it is expressed as conditions of possibility that lend themselves to reproduction, on the one hand, and freedom, on the other. All these approaches share a sense of morality as structure and of ethics as practice. Lambek (2017, 139–40) cautions that the notion of morality as convention and of ethics as the freedom to break free from it is grounded in theory and philosophy, not in the thick of everyday life and practice.

According to Laidlaw (2014, 111), morality and ethics constitute two aspects of one phenomenon, yet they should remain analytically separate because they change independently of each other. Moral codes, Laidlaw argues, change very little across societies and time. In contrast, ethical practice has taken diverse forms and can exhibit profound change. Laidlaw goes to great lengths to show that Zigon's reading of Foucault is flawed because it suggests that morality is akin to

an embodied habitus, an unreflective everyday set of dispositions only questioned by unexpected moments of moral crisis during which ethical reflection and action have a return to an unreflective moral equilibrium as their desired goal. This schema, Laidlaw suggests, places ethical thought outside the flow of everyday life, but it also means that ethical reflection and work on the self are episodic rather than everyday.

While ethicists disagree on the premise of giving certain moments more ethical prominence than others, anthropologists of revolution frame revolutions unequivocally as unprecedented and extraordinary sociocultural events that disturb, refract, and reflect local cosmologies. They are seen as events existing in time and place that must be understood through experience. Debates around the notion of the moral breakdown as an extraordinary moment of ethical reflection where systems of morality are disrupted (consciously or unconsciously) remain generative, particularly in relation to revolutions (see [Cole 2003](#); [Vacchiano and Afailal 2021](#)). Revolutions do not happen every day, even if their causes and the experience of them are necessarily everyday.

The anthropological literature on revolutions has been greatly influenced by Victor Turner's fourfold ritual form of "breach—crisis—redress—reintegration" which, like the social drama and ritual process from which it emerges, must be considered in terms of time, place, and experience ([Thomassen 2012](#)). Indeed, liminality emerges as the central theme of [Walter Armbrust's \*Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution\* \(2019\)](#). Revolutions, [Bjørn Thomassen](#) argues, are clear-cut liminal situations in large-scale settings, and *liminality* is more than just a hiatus; it is a terrain of action in which personality is shaped, where agency is more explicit, bringing together thought and experience ([Armbrust 2019](#), 684–88). Moments of liminal crises are *schismogenic*, as [Gregory Bateson \(1958\)](#) has put it, sides are taken. In the process some are captivated by the gravitational pull of the status quo. Others are swayed by what Turner describes as "the romantic qualities of willing and feeling" (qtd. in [Thomassen 2012](#), 689). For Turner, this side-taking is driven by people's affective attitudes, the stirring or appeal to the emotional, but less so by calculation ([Thomassen 2012](#), 689). Many of the debates about the nature of moral life, the nature of crisis—where, how, and why they happen—are shared by those studying revolutions and those interested in ethics. Where my approach differs and hopefully adds to Thomassen and Armbrust is that while they maintain a focus on ritual form and themes considered somewhat *macro* to the revolutionary drama (such as leadership, tricksters, mass mobilization, crowds, memesis, mass mediation, and public spaces), my material



is far removed in terms of scale and location: home, family, and school for people unable to take part in the revolution in a conventional sense. These locations offer insights into how twenty-somethings today felt and thought their way through the revolution relationally, which in turn, necessitates a phenomenological and experiential approach to ethics and revolution. By this I mean that in narrative form, certain experiences and moments are given ethical consequence and the character of moral rupture and disruption. The narratives illustrate that conscious reflection on experiences need not happen in their moments alone. They have an unforeseeable latency, an iterability, so that at times an experience can be morally extraneous and at other times morally critical. Indeed, in narrative form, experiences both in, before, and after the revolution are grafted and re-grafted in relation to each other to tell a story about how a self has been fashioned relationally and how these selves then relate to moral codes. While the ordinariness of ethics and processes of subjectivation can clearly be seen at work in the context of family and school, set against the backdrop of revolution, it is precisely the phenomenological particulars of people's journeys that articulate subjectivation and ordinariness more fully and critically.

During conversations with our narrators, Ahmed and I were led by their remembrances, their sense of episodic coherence and causality; but we also explored the sites and relationships glossed over or just not seen as important to a revolution or scholarship about it. We certainly did not ask any questions about either morality or ethics. These emerged as prominent themes quite some time afterward, because one of the affordances of narrative is that it cannot help but set events and experiences "against a larger horizon of what we consider to be human passions, virtues, philosophies, actions, and relationships" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 30). Narratives are shaped by and convey peoples moral and existential predicaments (Cole 2003, 122). For these reasons anthropologists have taken so readily to narratives as a way of apprehending people's sense of the moral and the ethical (Mattingly and Garro 2000; Mattingly 2014; Cole 2003; Kleinman 2006; Zigon 2009, 2010, 2012, 2018; Schielke 2015; Vacchiano and Afailal 2021). Zigon (2012, 205) has suggested that narratives constitute more than acts of meaning-making per se; they offer a way of expressing "the embodied struggle to be morally with oneself and others in the social world," and it is to this that I now turn.

### **MAMA, BABA, AND THE STATE**

Amer was thirteen years old in January 2011, an only child, living with his family in the Miami neighbourhood of Alexandria, his mother and father both

working as state employees.<sup>2</sup> Amer considered the closing years of the Mubarak era key to understanding what happened in 2011. In his experience, it all began with the 2008 parliamentary elections, in which his family had a stake. His maternal uncle was a member of the ruling National Democratic Party that had dominated the political system between 1978 and 2011. *Khalo* (or maternal uncle) ran for a seat in the south of the country, a place where Amer had spent many summers. The parliamentary seat bought with its influence and power for the family and so, Amer says, they rallied to support his uncle's campaign. *Khalo* boasted that his campaign team had photocopied ballot papers and rigged the election. Amer was watching a Champions League match between Liverpool and Arsenal when his uncle's victory was announced at home.

Amer's other maternal uncle was a police officer. On January 28, 2011, the Friday of Rage, protestors clashed with anyone in uniform. "But he [*khalo*] was plainclothes, so he joined a demo and wasn't injured . . . he died in an accident a few years later. . . . I was confused, how should I see him, as my uncle that I love or my uncle the police officer?" Amer explained that the images of Khalid Saeed's mutilated corpse jarred with his feelings towards *khalo*. In June 2010, Saeed, a twenty-eight-year-old Alexandrian, was beaten to death by two police officers. A baggie of marijuana was stuffed down his esophagus, his face beaten beyond recognition. For Amer, the police were not an anonymous state apparatus; the police meant *khalo*, whom he loved and admired so much that as a child he wanted to be a policeman just like him. Amer talked to his cousins about Saeed. "Baba would never do that . . . Baba would never lie to us," they would tell him. For Amer and his cousins, the crisis was intimate and deeply personal: *Baba* and *khalo* had been recast by large swathes of public opinion as a thug and murderer by association.

*Khalo*, the politician, had his farm attacked in the south of the country on January 28. "He had to defend himself, shots were fired," says Amer. "*Khalo* had told my mum that the protesters in Tahrir were being given free *Kentakey* [KFC] and that they were mostly foreigners and spies . . . my mum was 100 percent behind my uncles." His mother's family featured prominently in the national drama, changing the way Amer related to them: "I questioned the sanctity of 'family'. . . at home there were pictures of my uncle hanging on my bedroom wall, from the 2008 election campaign; I took them down." His parents asked him why. "They're old," he had replied, "but really it was about the revolution, and I liked him less anyway."

Amer's simple gesture of taking down his uncle's posters speaks clearly to the notion of a moral breakdown. As [Laidlaw \(2014\)](#) might put it, his gesture entailed

no structural efficacy, in the sense that it did not alter structures, yet it unmistakably marked a conscious act of ethical reflection and action, potentially a mode of political action, and at least a moment of moral realignment. As Cheryl Mattingly (2014, 78) puts it, the idea of a moral breakdown of an unreflective everyday habituation does not adequately capture what is going on. Amer's narrative evokes questions: What is being problematized? How is it demarcated in practice? What connections might there be between genealogical and phenomenological scales of problematization?

"Al-khal walid" (the maternal uncle is like a father), the saying goes. Amer's sense of relationality was produced through a system of idiomatic morality, what Suad Joseph (1996, 12) has called "patriarchal connectivity." *Khalo* the policeman and *khalo* the politician personified the system that protestors sought to expose and depose. Sawaf (2013, 10) argues that the "father" has played a central role in the birthing and re-birthing of the Egyptian nation. If the 1919 revolution was about "fathering" the nation, then 2011 was about patricide, or the "death of the father." Indeed, Mubarak infamously took on the role of "father" during his thirty years in power. John Borneman (2003) illustrates that the "death of the father" at the end of authoritarian rule incurs a bifurcate collapse of paternal authority in domestic and governmental arrangements, something experienced as both loss and liberation. The idioms of fatherhood, family, and their connections to political and gendered power have been problematized in Arabic literary works and in philosophical, historical, and feminist scholarship since the late nineteenth century (see Sharabi 1988; Idriss 2019; Rooke van Leeuwen 2000; Cohen-Mor 2013). In other words, the problematization of patriarchal authoritarianism has a clear genealogy, but the extent to which it constitutes conditions of possibility is not straightforward, particularly for a child. The literary corpus most closely associated with the problematization of patriarchal order in Egypt is almost always phenomenologically grounded, reflecting how writers as diverse as Bint el-Shati, Ahmed Amin, Naguib Mahfouz, Nawal el-Saadawi, and Tawfiq el-Hakeem (to name a few) have used their personal experiences as the grounds for their critiques and representations of a patriarchal society.

Amer's biological father seems to have been spared this paternal fall from grace, in part because of his indecision in the face of the upheaval. At the height of the uprising, people who did not take part in protests, movements, and campaigns were described as *Hizb el-Kanaba* (the Sofa Party). Amer explained that his father did not really take part in the revolution, while also not opposing it. Still, he would not let Amer join street protests or allow him to stand guard with the

neighborhood brigades at the entrance to their building. He could not even watch from their balcony. Yet today, Amer has no hard feelings. He situates his father's reticence in relation to his political subjectivation. "My dad was born in 1967. I think he never imagined that the regime could fall, but when Mubarak stepped down, he supported it." Unlike his uncles' affiliations and behaviors, his father's indecision and non-participation constituted no blight for Amer. He was a product of the system and had to tread carefully, especially given the profound implications for his wife's family. "I was stuck in the middle," says Amer. "I was too young to understand what was going on, so most of the time I was just listening. Even so, I was more sympathetic to the revolution, I thought, we have something to look forward to."

I learned from Amer that experiences are grafted and re-grafted in relation to other experiences; their ordinariness should not remain limited to the insinuations of routine and banality only but also to an unforeseeable latency, an *iterability*, so that at times a moment proves morally extraneous and at other times morally critical. *Khalo's* brazen vote-rigging did not trouble Amer in 2008; the hanging of the election posters in his bedroom might be taken as a testament to his successful inculcation into a particular political habitus. Yet unforeseeable events gave those same images a different resonance in 2011. Jacques Derrida's (1982) suggestion that we must *differ* our desire to foreclose meaning comes thundering into this thought. As Mattingly (2019, 430) argues, a commitment to description and the lived perspective creates an Arendtian defrosting of certainties where "anthropological artifact[s] keep the story moving and unfinished," and in so doing, strengthening and challenging our critiques and deepening our appreciation of the complexity of life (see also Guenther 2019, 2021). Our narrators' sense of moral belonging and ethical self were clearly entangled with others, but not fixed by their relationality and social location.

### WHERE DO WE / I STAND?

Although Amer's family was aligned with the state both explicitly and implicitly, the extent to which that family politics was transmitted to Amer cannot be taken for granted, and the revolution played a part in that disruption. Sian Lazar (2017) explores how younger members of Peronist unionist families in Argentina experience ethical and political subjectivation in an everyday sense over the course of their childhood and adolescence. Yet even within this established nexus of kinship, community, and politics, transmission is not seamless or certain. Amer, Farida, Ahmed, Osama, Youssef, and Maha felt that their families did not form

part of any recognizable political tradition or social movement, although these do undoubtedly exist in Egypt. This does not mean to suggest that these families had no politics; rather, the ordinariness of family politics was thrown into sharp relief by the dramatically unfolding crises.

In their narratives there was a clear sense that as children they relied on their parents, siblings, and members of the extended family for many matters of everyday life, the need for trusted explanations for events around the country proved no exception. Where “we” (as a family stand) in relation to the revolution was a question answered in the words and deeds of different family members, the examples they set, and the explanations they offered. When the uprising took hold, Ahmed was thirteen and lived in the well-to-do suburb of Heliopolis in north-eastern Cairo. His wealthy family followed the dictum that they “made money in silence,” leaving him with the overall impression that “politics is dangerous.” This feeling was confirmed in the early weeks of the uprising as he watched his father sitting at the entrance to their building, “armed with a gun and lots of tea . . . the closest I ever saw him to being political,” Ahmed said. Ahmed was allowed to stand watch at the building entrance sometimes, and he followed the events on TV and social media. But knowing what was happening was not the same as knowing where his family, and, by implication, he himself, stood in relation to it. Listening to and talking with his parents proved crucial in working through that.

“I never had any Mubarak resentment myself; we were very comfortable, so I had no reason to,” Ahmed stated. The pressing question for him was—why people were protesting? His politics-averse parents conceded that people wanted more freedom, but he noted that his mother seems to have regarded the events as a threat to her family interests. “My dad is ‘one plus one equals two,’” Ahmed said, using a common phrase emphasizing a person’s or situation’s rationalism or logic. One evening, as his dad sat on the sofa in Ahmed’s bedroom and Ahmed on the carpet, his father explained that uprisings in Egypt had resulted from the historic governmental economic mismanagement. The erosion of subsidies meant that poverty was rife, making the poor eventually take to the streets. “That made sense, but the revolutionaries didn’t seem like the kind of people who needed subsidies, so I wasn’t sure,” Ahmed remembered. He, like many others, saw this as a bourgeois revolution. “What about Khalid Saeed?” he asked his mother. He showed her the images that circulated at school and asked, “Why do the police do that?” His mother gave no ground: “Who is he?” she snapped, “Why did they do that to him? He must have done something wrong; we’ve been living here our whole lives and we’ve never seen anything like this, we’re fine.” Torture, police brutality, and

corruption were state policy, part of the ordinary function of everyday life, but, I would argue, never morally ordinary. Ahmed was unsatisfied with his parents' explanations and justifications. In this regard Ahmed was not alone.

Farida lived between Alexandria and Dubai as her father's job and school holidays determined. She, too, remembers Saeed's murder and how it resonated at school. During her last year of primary school in Alexandria and on her way home, she watched a policeman beating a tok-tok driver. "Whatever the tok-tok driver had done, there was no need for him to be beaten like that," and so from that point onward, she says, "I had this impression that the police in Egypt were the problem." Her father did not support the revolution, but Farida and her mom did. She describes the two of them glued to the television set, singing the songs that had become the soundtrack to the uprising. "I felt proud and patriotic, I felt that somehow I belonged to this category of people who rebelled, protested, and refused a tyrant."

Farida returned to Egypt during the winter break in December 2011. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had been in power since February and, she said, "that didn't bother me much." Most of her friends and family were making "pro-SCAF arguments" on social media. "I was so young and didn't understand the complex relationship between the army, police, and the state." She had been captivated by images of soldiers carrying children and protestors on top of tanks and zealously defended the army, "mostly because my parents support the army above everything else." But in December 2011 footage emerged of a young woman being dragged across Tahrir Square, stamped on and kicked by military police. Her clothes were torn, revealing a blue bra, naked torso, and blue jeans under her black *abaya*. Pro-SCAF media framed protestors at the time as "outliers and a threat to Egyptian family values by reducing protesting women to dishonourable, sexually promiscuous, and impious subjects" (Hafez 2014, 27). In response, women gathered in huge numbers in protests dubbed "Egypt's Daughters Are a Red Line," appropriating the axiom of Egyptian political culture that the "Military Is a Red Line."

Farida was shocked by the footage. Echoing pro-military commentators, her parents told her the images were fake and that conspirators against the army had staged the incident. "At the time," she says, "I bought it. . . . all I had to make sense of what was going on was my parents and Twitter." At the outset of the revolution, Farida's mom and dad stood on opposite sides of the political divide, but by the end of the year, "it was more docile at home . . . now my mum was telling me that SCAF is not the *Dakhliya* ([Ministry of the Interior].)" She was exposed to a

chorus of vilification of activists like Asma Mahfouz, Ahmed Doma, and Alaa Abd El-Fattah: “They kept on saying things like, ‘I don’t understand what they want, why are you still on the streets’ . . . . I placed myself as the messenger, using my parents’ words, word-for-word on Twitter. . . . I don’t have the best relationship with my father, but even so, what he was saying was convincing; I trusted my parents’ judgment.” Farida did not unthinkingly parrot her family’s pro-SCAF politics. The situation needed explanation and justification, and importantly, she marks out the moments that she retrospectively understands as a departure from parental politics. Farida’s and Ahmed’s parents had to account for themselves and where they stood. They had to offer explanations for why the revolution came about and to explain right from wrong to their children. How those explanations, accounts, and justifications dwell inside their children and for how long, and what ethical self they will come to form, is unpredictable.

For Youssef, who I will introduce more fully later, the revolution was the first time that he learnt about his parents Nasserist politics and its undoing once they had come to acknowledge that Mubarak’s thirty-year rule ultimately resulted from the autocratic system established by their *beau idéal*. In the early weeks of the uprising, while work, school, and social life were suspended, time spent with family offered opportunities for his parents to share their political biographies with him. Political subjectivation is processual, unpredictable, and does not necessarily stabilize in straightforward ways. For activists and those with a seasoned sense of the political terrain, the revolution primarily constituted a call to action, but for many others, it was a call to problematize and reflect.

### ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL

The return to school in September 2011 seems to have opened new terrains and horizons for experiencing and expressing the revolution for some young people. Osama, who lived in New Cairo, had also turned to his family to understand why the uprising had taken hold. He described his parents as conservative but, like many others, of no clear political persuasion. Osama’s dad had ventured out on January 28, only to be hit by buckshot. The sight of his father’s bleeding wounds proved a turning point. Osama felt his dad was trying to set an example for him and his siblings. Osama, thirteen at the time, says that he “took it really personally . . . blood had been spilled.”

Just days after his return to school, Osama joined demonstrations outside the Israeli embassy with school friends and a teacher. Some of the students at his school shared the feeling that direct action had brought change to the country

and that the same was possible at school. Even as a school-aged child, Osama, like many others, had been hailed as the young vanguard of national redemption, and it was at school that he enacted this sense of self. “We wanted longer breaks and more sports, so we protested and boycotted classes. We were always revolting at that time; it was just a childish thing in a way.” Osama’s agitation at school got him expelled: “The headmaster came to us and said, ‘Just as there are losses in the revolution, there will be losses here.’” Osama’s mom felt upset that he had got himself into so much trouble. His father lectured him on choosing his battles.

Youssef, mentioned earlier, was the youngest of three brothers, and while he, too, stayed at home, his older brothers took part in the protests, coming home with stories of what was unfolding on the streets. Youssef remembers waking up on January 29 to his middle brother’s bloodied clothes strewn across their bedroom floor. He had been hit by buckshot. “I saw reality through their eyes, what happened to them was like it was happening to me.” Just a few years separated Youssef from his brothers’ ability to participate in protests where the highs and lows of mingling with fellow protestors and confronting counterprotestors and the security forces were the ways in which they “formed their ideas,” as Youssef put it. He did occasionally join neighbors guarding their building and soon came to realize that many of them were hostile to the protestors and the revolution. He sensed a widening gap between the sentiments of his family and those of many of his neighbors. Back at school and barely thirteen, Youssef found that his peers regarded his family as pro-revolution.

At the time Youssef expected change in every institution in the country, as well as in every relationship—teachers and students, parents and children, all would be subject to reassessment. But “people weren’t used to debating and talking about anything really,” and so, he says, “everyone was very aggressive.” He recounted an incident where one of his teachers casually swore at the class, which the students filmed on their phones and took to the headmaster demanding that she be held accountable. “There was a lot of revolutionary energy because of our age, but not necessarily revolutionary ideas,” Youssef said. He argued a lot with his teachers, many of whom made clear that they thought the revolution a waste of time, something holding the country back, damaging people’s livelihoods. His teachers began labeling Youssef as *bīta el-sawra*, the resident revolutionary. Debate among students at the time did not prove very constructive, he says. They reflected everybody’s family interests—“it was clear where everyone stood.”

Ten years on, Osama and Youssef make light of the protests and class boycotts for longer break times, more sports, and a different approach to the relationship



between teachers and students. It is difficult to see these protests and boycotts as unrelated to the emergent ethics of the revolutionary. Lazar (2014, 102) explores Antonio Negri's (2003) notion of *kairos* as "a moment of rupture where the 'to-come' is made evident" and imaginable. The *kairos* of revolutionary time hails people in different ways and temporal sequences to imagine and act (Lazar 2014, 103). Schielke turns to Michel De Certeau's point that people appropriate structures in unpredictable ways and in the process accomplish small tactical victories in an asymmetrical struggle, but Schielke (2015, 218) continues, De Certeau does "not consider how the tactics of *making do* fail, backfire or end up constituting that against which they are directed."

At school, as in the rest of the country, there were those who opposed the revolution. Osama's headmaster responded to the revolution at school with disciplinary exclusion and activation of the authority (and duty) that parents have to tame their children with persuasion and punishment. His intimidation seemed all the more ominous given that the "losses" in the revolution too often came in the form of eyes, limbs, and life itself. Those who nurtured their newfound sense of entitlement and encouraged self-expression were remembered, but more often than not, those who opposed youthful rebelliousness and sought to restore order left an indelible mark, their words and actions more resonant since, ten years on, they appear to have prevailed.

Being in school at this time did not just mean a confrontation with figures of authority. Schoolchildren and their families were judged in relation to where they stood in terms of the revolution. At Ahmed's school, a cluster of active and pro-revolution parents set the tone of how the revolution was to be reflected in their children's education. But not everyone basked in the light of the revolution. "There was a culture of shaming. If you were seen as not taking part in the support and celebration of the revolution, you were bullied," Ahmed admitted. In spite of his family's politics, Ahmed had an enthusiasm for and investment in the revolution. But his age and his family's politics meant that his peers did not see him as supportive of fundamental change in the country. People that did not take clear sides or participate in the swelling mood of engagement were dubbed, as already mentioned, *Hijb el-Kanaba* (the Sofa Party); families that benefited from Mubarak's system of patronage and opposed the revolution were dubbed *felool* (remnants of the ancien régime)—people to be publicly shamed, boycotted, and held accountable. "You're torn," Ahmed said; despite how he felt about the revolution, at school he carried a guilt for what he described as his "very *felool* family."

Maha, our youngest narrator, was just eleven at the time. All she worried about in January 2011, she told us, was that her school trip to the fairground had been cancelled. In the early days of the protests, she remembers her grandmother telling the rest of the family “You can’t say anything about Mubarak, the walls have ears,” which Maha took quite literally. Even on the day Mubarak abdicated, her grandma was telling her to pipe down. “We were all happy that day . . . Today I’m sad about it all and wonder if it was worth it,” Maha says. The daily schoolbus ride saw Maha most exposed to the politics of her schoolmates and their families. Children debated and argued about everything, from the “martyrs” and the Mubaraks to Islam and politics. “I can’t believe we had the patience,” Maha admitted. At the end of that autumn term, the headmistress decreed a ban on any political discussion on the bus or at school from that moment on. “It was before 2013, everyone was talking about everything,” said Maha, marking out the year of the coup and the silencing of politics. Maha started to impose the rule herself. “It wasn’t just talk and opinions anymore—for people on both sides. There were personal stories behind these opinions, everyone had someone who had been affected, who had died or been arrested.” For Maha, the social and physical injuries, the loss of life made her feel that everyone needed to step back from what was happening and, as [Zigon \(2012, 218\)](#) puts it, to be charitably together without the need for mutual understanding. Without this possibility, people would turn away from each other, unable to coexist.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to illustrate that we have much to learn about ethics and revolution from those who “were not there.” Through their narratives, Amer, Farida, Ahmed, Osama, Youssef, and Maha explain how they worked through the pressing questions, dilemmas, and demands the revolution generated. Revolutionary crises and schisms involved children and their families in compelling ways. The ordinarieness of family politics suddenly and intensely came into sharp relief through events impossible to ignore, events that required explanation and navigation. The revolution offered an unprecedented and highly public crisis and critique of Egyptian culture, its hierarchies, and institutional arrangements—and thus of its very morality. It demanded that people and families adopt a position toward the past, the unfolding present, and imagined futures. The narratives of Amer, Farida, Ahmed, Osama, Youssef, and Maha offer a biographical account of the early weeks and months of the revolution and the ways in which they reflected and acted in revolutionary times by relying on their families for guidance, asking difficult questions

(and not always accepting the answers), engaging in discussion with their peers, family, teachers, and others. As an emerging discourse of a youthful revolution took hold, they were hailed to enact the revolution within their realms of everyday experience. These experiences were not straightforward; the children often felt stuck, torn, and sometimes afraid, disappointed, or left out. Crucially, their narratives are situated ten years after the event and their sense of self today has been considerably shaped by those times. None of them claimed to be revolutionaries then or now, but the revolution animated them in complex and long-lasting ways. Today, Osama wants nothing to do with Egypt anymore. Through a *wasta* (connection), Amer's parents secured a well-paid job for him in a state enterprise, but to their fury, he turned down the position because, he says, *maleesh kalam ma' el-dawla* (I have nothing to say to the state). Farida hopes for another revolution and believes knowledge and education are the route. Ahmed has spent years reading and writing about Egypt and working for better labor conditions within his family business. Maha has finished her dental degree but wants to leave it behind to become a filmmaker, while Youssef has taken to the theater, performing plays grounded in social and political critique.

To survive in Egypt during the past ten years has meant to recognize and be conscious of an apparatus of fear and incarceration. Work on the self is one way in which people continue to imagine new possibilities. Ethical reflection takes place every day, ordinarily, as people work through choices, dilemmas, and relationships. Narratives constitute a technique of the self, but if these narratives show anything, it is that fashioning an ethical self is decidedly relational. It is difficult to consider how we can adequately account for subjectivation as an experience and a process without the phenomenological first person, without the particulars of people's journeys.

Revolutions do not happen every day, even if their causes and how they are experienced are necessarily everyday. Some moments do stand out when we account for ourselves narratively; here they are shown as transtemporal in their moral and ethical resonance. Experiences are not worked out at once, but have an unforeseeable latency, an iterability, so that at times they are morally extraneous, at other times morally critical. Experiences of, in, before, and after the revolution are grafted and re-grafted in relation to each other to tell a story about how an ethical self has been fashioned relationally. The way in which the Egyptian regime has sought to make the January revolution *instantaneous* is emblematic of the debates around the ordinariness and/ or eventfulness of ethical reflection and action. The problem should not be that there are moments of ethical reflection and action

that stand out, or that some moments do constitute moments of moral breakdown. Rather, it should be that we cannot disconnect these from those that preceded them and from those that will supersede them, or to finalize those moments analytically. Ordinary ethics and subjectivation can clearly be seen at work in the context of family and school in these narratives set against the backdrop of revolution, but precisely the phenomenological particulars of people's journeys articulate subjectivation and ordinariness more fully and generatively. Like most revolutions, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 failed to bring about institutional change at the level of state power. Yet there is more at stake than the political endgame. Revolutions are markers of cultural change. By narrating how the revolution has been part of their self-formation, Amer, Farida, Ahmed, Osama, Youssef, and Maha have "defrosted" the revolution, as [Mattingly \(2019\)](#) puts it, dragging it into the realm of experience and illustrating how it took place in less obvious ways and places. These are ways and places difficult for the state to foreclose and silence, or for theory to fully schematize.

#### ABSTRACT

*In this article I present experiences of Egyptians too young to have taken part in the street protests and movement of the 2011 revolution. Today in their early twenties, they narrate their experiences during the early months of the uprising. None claimed to be revolutionaries then or now, but the revolution seems to animate them in complex and long-lasting ways. The January revolution failed to bring about change at the level of state power. Yet more is at stake than the political endgame. I turn my attention to how people narrate the revolution as a process of ethical reflection and self-formation through everyday relationships and settings that took on new meanings. These accounts challenge notions of what it means to participate in a revolution and where it is located and generate a conversation between the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of revolutions. [January revolution; Egypt; family and relatedness; anthropology of revolution; anthropology of ethics; moral breakdown; ethical self-formation]*

#### NOTES

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1. I have used a phonetic approach to transliteration to try and maintain the specificities of the Egyptian dialect.
2. I owe the brilliant formulation of the section heading to the anthropologist Reem Saad.

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