The battle of Muhammad Mahmud street in Cairo

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Poetics and Politics of Urban Violence in Revolutionary Time

Muhammad Mahmoud huwa muftah al-thawra
'Muhammad Mahmoud [battle] is the key to the [Egyptian] revolution.'[1]

al-thawra aslan mush siyasa
'Revolution is actually not about politics.'[2]

I

This is a story of an urban battle that took place in Cairo in November 2011, a crucial episode of the Egyptian January 25th revolution.[3] The battle lasted for 5 days and nights, pitting protesters throwing stones and Molotov cocktails against security forces clad in full riot gear, heavily armed with shotguns, rubber bullets, teargas grenades, and live ammunition. This reciprocated, but deeply uneven, revolutionary violence claimed around 50 dead and many more injured, the overwhelming majority being young working class men. Despite the disproportionate force they were up against, as the battle wore on many more young men poured towards the frontline every hour, especially at night. While often described as 'protesters,' the participants understood themselves rather as fighters. From their perspective, being part of the frontline was an honor and a privilege. It was also fun. Their understanding of 'politics' and of 'revolution' differed significantly from the revolutionary utopia enacted by articulate middle-class activists just a few hundred meters away, in Tahrir Square, amplified through the ether by media and reproduced in scholarly accounts since. The young men's fight could not be won. But winning was not the point; the fight itself was the message.

The November battle took place in the midst of the transitional period, ten months after the January protests had opened up a revolutionary process that lasted two and half years. This revolutionary process had three distinct stages. The first was

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[1] 'Ammar and 'Ammo, Cairo, July 2015.
[2] Alex, Cairo, August 2014.
[3] Research for this essay was undertaken between 2011 and 2017 in Cairo, and is based on a combination of participant observation and oral history interviews. I witnessed the events discussed here at close range, as the battle took place literally under my doorsteps. Part of my 2010-12 stay was supported by a Leverhulme Early Career fellowship, intended for an entirely different research project. In 2013 I started researching the Muhammad Mahmud Street battle more methodically, carrying out extensive interviews with two dozens direct participants. Their names have been anonymised.

the iconic occupation of Tahrir Square, accompanied by countrywide protests and strikes that erupted on January 25th, 2011, and 18 days later brought down the Mubarak regime (hereafter 'the 18 Days'). This initial stage was famously marked by an alternative utopian community that emerged spontaneously in the Tahrir square sit-in.[4] The second stage was the 'transitional period' under the rule of the Army (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, or SCAF), which lasted from SCAF's assumption of power upon Mubarak's resignation on February 11, until its handing over power to a newly elected civilian government under Dr Muhammad Mursi, a Muslim Brotherhood member, 16 months later (June 2012). The third stage was the year of the Muslim Brotherhood in power (July 2012 - July 2013). This revolutionary process ended with a military coup in the summer of 2013, which brought the Army back into power. A major massacre of Mursi's supporters in August 2013 marks the end of the revolutionary period, followed by an unprecedented crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood as well as all other forms of opposition (including leftists, liberals and various youth groups) and the gradual but by now complete stifling of all political activity in the country.

The Battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in November 2011 was not the only urban battle of the Egyptian revolution, but it occupies a very special—almost mythical—place in the memory of the revolutionaries. Especially among the younger generation, the events of November 2011 are commemorated as strongly and tenaciously as the 25th January itself, but also differently. Whereas remembering the 25th January brings up painful memories of a whole political project defeated, the events of November conjure up more cheerful associations that do not require political reckoning. Despite the violence of it, it is remembered as something legendary, euphoric, intoxicating, at once doomed and victorious. For historians, it is also a particularly interesting event to think with.

I will examine the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street through three different frames. The middle frame is the battle's position within the history of the Egyptian revolution itself, where it crystalized political alliances that shaped the unfolding of the revolutionary process on the political level. My focus de-emphasizes

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[4] Mark Peterson, 'In Search of Antistructure: The Meaning of Tahrir Square in Egypt's Ongoing Social Drama,' in Ágnes Horváth, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra eds, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (New York 2015); Hanan Sabea, 'A "Time out of Time": Tahrir, the Political and the Imaginary in the Context of the January 25[th]Revolution in Egypt,' HotSpots, *Cultural Anthropology* website (9 May 2013).

the initial 18 days of Tahrir Square—which have received disproportionate attention in scholarly accounts—in favor of the months that followed.[5] Focusing on the events of Muhammad Mahmud Street allows us to understand the dynamics of the revolutionary process from within its own temporality, characterized by a generic flexibility of outcomes instead of being rooted in, or determined by, pre-existing conditions.[6] A second frame zooms in on the street, where raw experience on the ground reveals subjective meanings of 'violence,' 'politics,' and 'revolution' from the perspective of those who were most directly involved in their making. Here I focus especially on the nexus of class, masculinity, and urban violence—aspects that remain conspicuously unaddressed in scholarship of the so-called Arab Spring. My analysis in this frame emphases the spontaneously enacted carnivalesque and ritualised character of frontline action. This foreground again decenters Tahrir Square sit-ins as the sole epicenter of events, instead observing the revolution from the back streets; a position which—far from doubting the realness or importance of what was going on in Tahrir Square—allows us to see it relationally to other sites, and to acknowledge less conventional repertoires of revolutionary action and forms of agency than the 'mainly nonviolent ways of associating and making collective claims' typically seen

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[5] Most observers and revolutionaries alike at first thought that the original 18 Days of Tahrir protests were 'it.' This view soon proved to be shortsighted; yet we still have little understanding of the period that followed. Recent authoritative account based on late 20th century models on revolutionary change claims that a revolutionary situation in January-February was never properly established and instead subsided into 'a conventional democratic transition' characterized by a formal political process that unfolded in constitutional and electoral forums under the direction of the military, Neil Ketchley, *Egypt in Time of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2017), 5-6. Yet, while the Muslim Brotherhood (a key actor of the transitional period on whom Ketchley's argument is based) did indeed demobilize and focus on electoral politics, other revolutionary forces actively refused this demobilization; like Hannah Arendt, they understood 'revolution' as the very opposite of 'politics.' Far from representing a failed revolutionary process, the months that followed the initial January-February mobilization represented the most crucial revolutionary period, a liminal passage when power was literally 'in the street.'

[6] The wave of democratic uprisings that swept the Arab world in the early 2010s has so far remained the domain of social scientists rather than historians. For a critical overview of the early historiography, see Charles Kurzman, 'The Arab Spring Uncoiled,' *Mobilization* 17: 4 (2012). The overwhelming concern has been a focus on causes and outcomes. Authoritative accounts see these events as episodes in a much longer revolutionary struggle, whether rooted in the contradictions of capitalism in the region or in Egypt's own protest history; Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues in Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago, 2013); Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want* (Berkeley, 2014); Maha Abdel Rahman, *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* (Routledge, 2014); John Chalcraft *Popular Politics: The Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2016). These crucial insights take us a long ways towards understanding the motives that informed participation; yet, causal logics must not overshadow our understanding revolutionary dynamics on their own terms, as primarily the product of a revolutionary situation. For a critical assessment, also inspired by the Arab Spring, see Mounia Bennani Shraibi et al, 'Towards a Sociology of Revolutionary Situations' *Revue française de science politique* 62/5 (2012), and her 'Beyond structure and contingency' *Middle East Critique* 26:4 (2017).

as the bread and butter of contentious politics.[7] Uncovering the role of class here is less about seeing contentious politics as being rooted in class and more about asking what happens to class as such in this liminal context. My third and widest frame is historical. The battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street shared strong similarities with historical forms of crowd action characterized by liminal temporality, heightened symbolism and the potentiality for violence, such as carnivals and riots both past and present. Indeed, informed observers would say that the battle really was part riot, part carnival. I shall reflect on these resonances. At the risk of straddling some entrenched disciplinary boundaries—between history and ethnography, the past and the present— the events of November 2011 open up new ways of thinking about the affinities between riots and carnivals, the persistence of the riotous and the carnivalesque within modern revolutionary situations, as it may help us understand the resurgence of riots within the contemporary world.

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The historiography of the Egyptian 25th January revolution has been uncritically dominated by a focus on articulate middle class activists. Reflecting a strategic need to secure support among both domestic and international publics, local activists and sympathetic foreign observers found it imperative to mediate the revolution as non-violent and politically mature. 'Peacefulness' (*silmiyya*) became one of the key slogans of early protests and remained a powerful discursive and political weapon throughout the revolutionary process. Participation was presented through the prism of ideology and purpose—demands for a democratic future--, whether pre-meditated or spontaneously enacted.[8] Yet, spontaneous revolutionary violence (accompanied as it often is by riotous and carnivalesque features) is what makes the Egyptian revolution most familiar and most *like any other* revolutionary situation in history. When violence is spontaneous, it is by no means random, illogical or unstructured.

Time plays a role in this story on several levels. Firstly, revolutionary time is politically and socially distinctive. It is liminal time bracketed off from ordinary time,

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[7] Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 52-3.
[8] Three scholars (among hundreds) have addressed the role of violence in revolutionary events in Egypt: Zeinab Abul-Magd, 'Occupying Tahrir Square: The Myths and the Realities of the Egyptian Revolution' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111/3 (Summer 2012); Salwa Ismail, 'The Egyptian Revolution against the Police,' *Journal of Social Research* 79/2 (2012); Ketchley, *Egypt*, Chapter 2 (from a quantitative perspective).

when the order of the world has crumbled and established ways of doing things stopped making sense. The concept of liminality is analytically important here. Liminality is a category of experience, an empirical state of being that describes moments, people or places in transition between stable categories.[9] It is also a temporal *and* historical condition: it describes unstructured moments of fluidity within our otherwise normal, structured lives; or periods of major historical transitions, such as revolutions or uprisings, wars or civil wars, or profound historical crises.[10] It is a kind of temporal limbo, a state of fluidity and open-endedness that contrasts directly with the order or structures of normative time. It should be born in mind that what appears from hindsight as a 'transition' between two historical periods or forms of social or political order, manifests, rather, to actors on the ground as profound indeterminacy where no clear outcome is yet visible. In such a limbo, old structures melt, things and people find themselves temporarily out of their place and established social boundaries—such as of class, gender or ideology—become unstable and porous. While most liminal moments within our lives are typically contained through ritualized action (say, from carnivals to commercialized leisure), revolutionary periods or periods of profound crises represent liminal passages with no script, no 'ritual' to contain them. (Although, as I demonstrate below, like any other form of collective action, also revolutionary periods are likely to crystalize rituals of their own.) Revolutions invariably start with a plunge into euphoria (revolutionary utopia, or *communitas*/'commune') but this can never last long; sooner or later this

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[9] Liminality, the quality of being inbetween, was first identified as an element of social transitions in Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1909), and elaborated in the work of Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Ithaca, NY, 1977). While providing a major inspiration for the study of medieval and early modern ritual in the 1980s, Turner's work has also been misunderstood and misread through a narrow focus on ritual action. His key contribution lay in the concept of liminality, of which ritual is only one possible form. Focusing on liminality (as opposed to ritual) allows us to understand not just how structures reproduce themselves, but also how change happens, given the transformative potential of liminality. Ritual exists to control the destabilizing effect of liminality in known and expected transitions, but liminality occurs in many other transitional contexts for which no conventions or institutions of control exist. See Bjørn Thomassen, 'Notes toward an Anthropology of Political Revolutions,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (3), 2012; Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Farnham, 2014), esp. Chapter 8; Rebecca Bryant, "On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present." *History and Anthropology* 27 (1), 2016.

[10] For seeing revolutionary processes through the concept of liminality, see Walter Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters* (Princeton, 2019); Bjørn Thomassen 'Wandering in the Wilderness or Entering a Promised Land'? *Middle East Critique* 26:3 (2017); Armbrust, 'The Trickster in Egypt's January 25th Revolution,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55/4 (2013). This angle addresses the same situational dynamics observed by sociologists cited at the end of note 6; and informs the work of anthropologists describing Tahrir Square protests cited in note 4.

protracted state of anti-structure becomes perceived as a crisis as the suspension of political order opens a barrage of new or previously hidden claims.

One of the key implications of this conceptual framework is that revolutionary time cannot be fully understood through reference to rational causes or previous lineages of mobilisation, but only through its own internal logics and dynamics. New ways of doing emerge; things that were unthinkable become possible, even necessary. Marked by a deeply uncertain ending, this liminal time is characterized by instability, the possibility of great violence as well as intense creativity and radical utopia. For some, this liminal time appears as chaos, and consequently the need to restore stability and order becomes mobilized by counter-revolutionary forces as a political weapon. Others see this fluidity as a condition of possibility. Everything is at stake, authority is up for grabs, new heroes and leaders emerge as subjectivities and ways of being and belonging are profoundly reshaped, whether temporarily or permanently.[11] Unsurprisingly, revolutionary time is also experienced differently from the linear flow of normal time: it may change its flow, it slows down or quickens, or meanders and bends on itself.

The beginning and the end of this liminal time differs according to the proximity or distance of various actors to the epicenter of events, and/or on their subjective acceptance that something fundamental about the world in which they live has changed. This liminal time opened uncertainly on the 25th January 2011, but realized its revolutionary possibilities three days later.[12] The 28th January was Egypt's Bastille Day, a transformative event that imposed a new reality on the ground. 'Revolution' emerged as the new interpretive framework that informed the language and praxis of claim-making. By the night of the 28th January, there was no way back. The regime itself acknowledged defeat: the police withdrew from the streets, and the Army was called in to secure vital institutions. From then on, revolutionary liminality continued 'sucking in' actors who may not have been part of the earlier events, like a

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[11] Revolutions create their own subjects: revolutions create revolutionaries and not vice versa. See Youssef El Chazli and Jasper Cooper, 'How did "depoliticized" Egyptians become revolutionaries?' *Revue française de science politique* 62/5 (2012); Youssef El Chazli, 'Devenir révolutionnaire à Alexandrie,' Doctoral thesis, Universite de Lausanne, 2018; Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron, *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution* (London, 2013).
[12] For the early days see Mona El Ghobashy, 'The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution, and Ahmad Shokr, 'The Eighteen Days of Tahrir,' both in Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing (eds.), *The Journey to Tahrir* (London, 2012). For first-hand testimonies see Hatem Rushdy, *18 Days in Tahrir: Stories from Egypt's Revolution* (Hong Kong, 2012), and a major online archive https://858.ma/.

black hole.[13] Tahrir square was a laboratory of radical ideas; but a revolutionary atmosphere engulfed social spaces well beyond Tahrir: from schools to workplaces, from cafés to metro carriages, busses and taxis, to satellite TV stations many of which switched towards revolutionary loyalties throughout 2011. All of these spaces were saturated by intense discussions about the nature of the collective future that should emerge from here.[14] Within this long liminal period, there were further liminal episodes. Urban battles, such as Muhammad Mahmoud (and others), were such moments of condensed liminality, or productive chaos when time slowed down, and which developed logics and poetics of its own. Similarly, while we shall understand the Rabʿa Square massacre of August 2013 as the end of the revolutionary process, it took many actors months to realize that it was truly over. To many, this 'slow' realization was fatal.[15] The fact that there was a clear temporal ending (even if often realised retrospectively) adds to the strength of this experience a complete temporal bracket.

Secondly, a specific temporal horizon sets modern revolutions apart from other forms of contentious crowd action. Not only did 'revolution' come to mean the expression of a sovereign will, a mode of collective action directed toward the goal of radical transformation (typically by means of taking over of the state) but 'revolutions' came to imply collective forward-looking projects. Indeed, the protestors in Tahrir Square acted precisely according to such a 20th century script; their call for 'the end of the [Mubarak] regime' was underpinned by demands for a democratic future based on principles of social justice for all citizens.[16] It is equally predicated on specific political imageries and practices—indeed, on the modern concept of 'politics' as such, understood as institutionalized and ritualized participation in this forward-looking future, variously conceived as emancipation, the onward march of progress, or the pursuit of happiness, freedom or democracy. But such temporal horizon—an inclusive progressive future—is itself historical.[17] Yet the

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[13] Cf countless narratives of people saying 'I was not there on the 25th, or 28th, but I went down to Tahrir a week later (or so) to see what was going on. I was instantly part of it.'

[14] See Gunning and Baron, *Why Occupy*, chapter 7, and note 4 above.

[15] The Rabʿa Square massacre worked here like a closing act or what McAdam and Sewell call a 'downscaling event.' For the post-Rabʿa mobilization and its suppression see Ketchley, *Egypt,* Chapter 6.

[16] For the concept of 'revolutionary script' see Baker and Edelstein, *Scripting Revolution*.

[17] Reinhardt Kosseleck, *Futures Past*: *On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (New York, 2004), 47-57; Hannah Arendt *On Revolution* (London, 1963), esp. 21, 45-49; Walter Benjamin *Illuminations* (New York, 1968), George Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London, 1993),

presence of the riotous and the carnivalesque (sometimes as an enabler, sometimes as the unwanted by-product of events) within most modern revolutionary situations points to other temporalities coexisting on the margins of this project. The events of Muhammad Mahmud street can only be described as an urban battle fought by social actors who lacked any political plan; who had no notion of, and no faith in, any long-term political purpose. The present essay focuses on these other temporalities.

<center>II</center>

The battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street unfolded in the context of heightened political tension over the army's mishandling of the so-called 'transitional period.' The SCAF's mandate as an interim ruler was to guide the country through a democratic transition until power could be transferred to democratically-elected civilian institutions. This mandate stemmed from the SCAF's position during the January protests, when—after initial hesitation—the army posed as 'the protector of the revolution,' ostensibly refusing orders to disperse anti-Mubarak protests in Tahrir square with brute force. While no longer as closely related to the political establishment as it had once been under Nasser and Sadat, the army in the late-Mubarak era remained an ultra-powerful institution whose system of privileges (both symbolic and real) was deeply entrenched in Egypt's social, institutional and, especially, economic fabric.[18] The fundamental contradiction between these two positions—the army as the foundation of the regime as well as the 'protector of the revolution'—was not immediately obvious to most. A revolutionary euphoria resulting from a successful ousting of an entrenched dictator, coupled with the army's

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pp. 99-115; and more concretely by historians, Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984); Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990); Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (London, 2015).

[18] On the army's position during the early stages of the revolution, see Ketchley *Egypt*, Chapter 3, and Amy Austin Holmes, 'There are Weeks When Decades Happen: Structure and Strategy in the Egyptian Revolution," *Mobilization* 17:4 (2012); for the role of the military in Egyptian politics, see Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen. Egypt's Road to Revolt* (London, 2012); and Zeinab Abul Magd, *Militarising the Nation: The Army, Business, and Revolution in Egypt* (New York, 2017). Ever since the demilitarization following the Camp-David accords, the Egyptian Army concentrated on cultivating a vast economic empire while politically (first by Sadat then by Mubarak) it found itself played off against an increasingly more powerful security apparatus. A further intra-elite conflict brew in the final decade of Mubarak's rule between a rising group of businessmen around the president's two sons whose ultra-neoliberal economic direction threatened the army's economic interests. Mubarak was also apparently grooming his eldest son for succession. By siding with the protestors, the army sacrificed the Mubarak family and saved its own empire.

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very special position among most Egyptians,[19] made the prospect of taming the role of the military in Egyptian public life seem like a real possibility. This was to change substantially though the months that followed.

For its part, the SCAF was happy with getting rid of the Mubarak regime and eager to proclaim the revolution 'over.' Its major concern during the rest of 2011 was to whom to hand over power in ways that would guarantee the continuation of its privileges. The generals were carefully negotiating with all revolutionary groups, especially the strongest of them, the Muslim Brotherhood, who eventually crystallized as their key political partner.[20] Continued mobilization in the street threatened the fragile stability of the transitional period based on the fiction that with Mubarak's departure, a revolutionary transformation was successfully over. Among the revolutionary camp, however, many realized that all that had been gained so far had been won through direct street action. Once the precedent was set, continuous mass mobilization was the only way to continue the revolution and to achieve outstanding demands.

These demands, however, were less 'outstanding' as they were, rather, growing as the revolutionary process itself matured. Much more was at stake now than had been the case during the initial stage in January-February. The January protests started with aims limited to the indictment of police brutality and (for some) the rejection of *tawrith* (political transition by inheritance, as Mubarak had been grooming his son for succession); they grew to include calls for the fall of Mubarak's rule as such, and culminated, at the moment of his resignation with demands for the prosecution of his cronies and the abolishment of key features of his regime in the spheres of security and economy. Through the summer of 2011, however, revolutionary demands grew in number and kind, assuming even more ambitious proportions.[21] They increasingly questioned the very foundation of Egypt's regime as

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[19] Historically, the army's special position stems from its role in decolonisation (1952 revolution) and subsequently as a defender of the newly independent nation from Israel. Egyptian popular culture has been permeated with glorification of the army for decades; see Dalia Mostafa, *The Egyptian Military in Popular Culture: Context and Critique* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

[20] Initially (from February) the SCAF negotiated with all oppositional groups (many of whom were relatively small youth groups), but the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the most powerful, willing, and prepared partner. This eventually led to a deal between SCAF and the Brotherhood, whereby the SCAF handed power over to them in exchange for reassurances of the army's continued privileges; later, however, it betrayed them. See Kandil, *Soldiers*, and Sylvana Toska, 'The Multiple Scripts of the Arab Revolutions,' in Baker and Edelstein, *Scripting Revolution*.

[21] They included end to neoliberal austerity measures such as the privatization of key sectors of the economy, replacing it by structural reform based on principles of social justice, and the legal

it had existed for decades, addressing the largest public taboo: the Army's extensive privileges and its existence outside of civilian control.

Street mobilization continued throughout the spring and summer of 2011, taking two distinct forms.[22] One was periodic mass demonstrations, usually on a Friday, which brought hundreds of thousands to Tahrir square (often paralleled in other squares across Egypt). Organized by an alliance of revolutionary forces, each of them typically had a specific demand.[23] Another form of mobilization was periodic sit-ins, whereby a relatively small group of protestors set camp in Tahrir Square in replication of the January-February sit-in. This action stemmed from an essential disagreement back in February, whereby a smaller number of protestors disputed the notion that they should leave the square upon Mubarak's resignation.[24] The overwhelming majority, however, 'went home,' putting faith in the SCAF's shepherding of the transitional period. But as months went by, the generals' unwillingness to carry out revolutionary demands was becoming more obvious, hence more people were joining the protests on both levels: the Friday mass demonstrations as well as the smaller but permanent ('until-demands-are-met') sit-ins organized by hardcore revolutionaries. Most of these sit-ins were dispersed by force, usually at dawn when their numbers dwindled and there were no cameras around.[25] The Army's bet was that these acts of violence against a relatively small number of protestors

determination of minimum and maximum salaries (see Walter Armbrust, 'Egypt: A Revolution Against Neoliberalism?' *Al-Jazeera English*, 24 January 2011); cleansing of the corrupt judiciary (*tathir al-quda'*); the restructuring of the police apparatus (*i'adat haikala al-wizara al-dakhiliyya*) and the abolishment of the hated State Security; the dissolution of politically appointed regional and municipal councils, instead making them elected. As the revolutionary community begun to splinter along ideological lines throughout the summer of 2011, more radical demands emerged on each end of the political spectrum, stretching from 'municipalities to the youth' on the radical left to 'implementation of the shari'a' on the religious right. For the fragmentation of the utopian Tahrir community see Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*. A more fine-grained analysis of how these demands developed over the course of the transitional period—what demands were voiced by whom, when, and the gradual turn against the SCAF—remains lacking.

[22] In addition to multiple workers' strikes across the country; cf Joel Benin, *Workers and Thieves: Labour Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford, 2015).

[23] By the fall of 2011, a competition developed between secular (i.e. liberal and leftist) revolutionary forces on the one hand and Islamists on the other. Islamists were by now engaged in deal-making with the SCAF, and preparing for parliamentary elections which they were relatively certain to win. On Islamist 'demobilisation' see Ketchley, *Egypt*, Chapter 4. Importantly, the Friday demonstration that ushered into the events of November as discussed below brought together all of these groups, which was by then rare.

[24] By 'smaller number' I mean hundreds to a few thousands maximum, as opposed to tens or hundreds of thousands during the initial 18 Days and later the major Friday demonstrations of the Summer of 2011.

[25] See below. For the army's violence against remaining revolutionaries in Tahrir Square during the spring and summer of 2011 see the Oscar-nominated documentary *The Square* (Dir. Jehanne Noujaim, 2013), available on Netflix.

would fail to gain wider support among broader segments of a middle class increasingly weary of revolutionary turmoil and bent on 'restoring stability.' This did not work. SCAF's violence on protestors was broadly mediated; though what mattered even more to the SCAF's gradual loss of mandate was its inaction on the political front. Two concrete revolutionary demands directly threatened the army: free presidential elections and a brand new constitution, both of which may have considerably curbed the army's influence in political life and its privileges. By November 2011, one key demand thus begun to overshadow all others: the end of military rule, which increasingly came to be perceived as the main obstacle to true revolutionary change. The slogan 'Down with Military Rule' became widely adopted by large segments of the middle class, well beyond the circle of hardcore revolutionaries.

The events of November grew from this established pattern of mobilization. The explosion started with a major Friday demonstration in Tahrir square on November 18, called for by an alliance of revolutionary forces, including leftists, liberals and Islamists. Titled 'The Friday of One Demand' (*Gum'at al-matlab al-wahed*), this 'million-man' demonstration aimed to exert pressure on the SCAF to hand over power to civilian institutions. It was sparked by a document proposed by the SCAF, that laid down 'fundamental [or 'supra-constitutional'] principles' that all parties should agree on prior to any formal exercise in constitution-writing. Most controversially, these principles included exempting the military from any meaningful civilian oversight.[26] With the demonstration over by nightfall, a small group of protestors and families of those killed since the outbreak of the Revolution continued a sit-in that had begun a few days earlier. Their cause was not to protest against 'supra-constitutional principles.' Rather, it was to protest the lack of retribution for the revolution's victims, another key demand that remained unmet. Their small camp in the middle of Tahrir Square was violently dispersed by military police on the morning of Saturday, 19th November. The news spread like a wildfire through social

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[26] This included the right to declare war as well as the army's budget, both of which would remain outside of the control of the new parliament. The document is known as the 'Silmi Declaration' after Deputy Prime Minister 'Ali Silmi, the SCAF's man on the interim government who proposed it. See 'Draft Declaration of the Fundamental Principles for the New Egyptian State,' http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/2011.11_-_constitutional_principles_document_english.pdf (accessed on 11 September 2013). On the immediate political context of the November mobilization, see also Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), *'An Muhammad Mahmoud wa al-sira' hawla al-hikaya* ('About Muhammad Mahmud and the Struggle about the Story,' Cairo 2016), 14-17.

media, and brought sizeable numbers to Tahrir Square in their support. In the early afternoon the next day, Sunday, military police once again cleared Tahrir Square with brute force. Videos of soldiers throwing lifeless bodies on trash piles shocked the world. By Sunday evening, the confrontation between protestors and the security forces took on epic proportions.

A particular spatial dynamic emerged that was to last over the next five days. It consisted of two distinct zones differentiated by the nature of action as well as a distinct social composition. Tahrir Square was the main site of protest, with thousands of protesters occupying the square day and night. Camp was set and tents were erected in a conscious replication of the January sit-in.[27] This was the largest sit-in yet by far since the resignation of Mubarak, and was spontaneously dubbed 'the Second Revolution.' The tent city in Tahrir Square became a perfectly safe, 'liberated' zone, populated day and night by protesters from all walks of life, men, women and families, young and old, some of them activists but most of them not. Most were 'middle-class' but located on very different scales of what being middle-class can mean in contemporary Egypt. It was a truly socially mixed crowd of a sort rarely seen in Egypt. South-east of the Square, however, Muhammad Mahmoud Street and its environs developed into a shifting battlefield. Here the demographic was mostly young, male, and socially marginal.

This 'frontline' emerged organically in the aftermath of the Saturday police attack, when young and able-bodied men formed a front to protect the peaceful crowd in Tahrir Square from further police raids which would, and did, come from the direction of Muhammad Mahmoud Street, linked by several smaller alleys to the nearby compound of the Ministry of Interior. But what was initially a line of defense soon developed into a battle for its own sake. Whereas Tahrir Square represented articulate political demands broadcast to the world through social media, Muhammad Mahmoud Street did not need publicity. For the next five days and nights, young low-income men came here to fight: to throw stones and Molotov cocktails at the line of police clad in full riot gear, oblivious to the much stronger possibility of being hit with shotgun pellets and even live ammunition.

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[27] 'We were fools to leave the Square in February (upon Mubarak's resignation)' was on everyone's lips. Previously the position of a minority of hardcore revolutionaries, this disenchantment and distrust of the Army now became publicly endorsed by the Square.

There emerged a momentous symbiosis between these two worlds, in which one legitimized and protected the other. By engaging the police, the fighters in Muhammad Mahmoud Street protected the Square, even if this protection came as a byproduct of their own fight. Their 'motorcycle cavalry,' normally a fear-inducing sight for middle-class people for its association with petty crime, provided the lifeline of the battle, playing a crucial role as an improvised ambulance service carrying the wounded from the frontline to field hospitals in the rear. For their part, young working-class men were coded as 'protesters,' and their fight was given legitimacy by the articulate political demands of the Tahrir sit-in. Without this legitimacy, they would have been easily dismissed as vandals and thugs, and dispersed by force.[28]

The battle ended after five days with a ceasefire. A wall made of concrete blocks was erected in the middle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street, on the no-man's land area that separated the two embattled camps. Erecting a physical barrier was the only way to stop the clashes. But given the massively uneven force between the two camps, this also meant a symbolic victory for the protestors, or for 'the people' as they called themselves.[29] By this time the Tahrir sit-in was also disbanded.[30] While parliamentary elections went ahead as planned, the November mobilization had achieved major political gains. The SCAF did finally set a date for presidential elections, thereby committing to a clear deadline for handing power to civilian hands; the Silmi declaration of supra-constitutional principles was also nominally scrapped. Activists who insisted that street mobilization was the only way to achieve more of the revolution's goals were clearly right. The military regime was then at its weakest, and literally on the defensive. However, the political success of the November mobilization had also accelerated the deal struck between the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood, as both major actors agreed that revolutionary street mobilization was

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[28] Indeed, SCAF members and representatives of the Ministry of Interior tried to claim that while the people in Tahrir are 'peaceful protesters' with 'legitimate demands,' then those in Muhammad Mahmoud Street are thugs and vandals. These debates took place in multiple talkshows and news analyses on TV and in the press as the battle unfolded. See AFTE, *'An Muhammad Mahmoud*, 25, 46, 51. Their argument carried little weight because of the symbiosis with Tahrir sit-in described above.

[29] More walls were soon to follow in other key areas of Downtown Cairo, which signified the intrepid force of street mobilization, which could only be stopped by concrete barriers. See Mona Abaza, 'Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Muhammad Mahmud Street Graffiti,' *Theory, Culture, Society* 30/1 (2012).

[30] Though importantly, it relocated to the nearby area of the Cabinet building and the sit-in continued for another three weeks until it was brutally dispersed in another iconic moment of regime violence, known as the Cabinet Clashes,' on December 16th, 2011. This event is internationally known for the so-called 'blue-bra girl' incident.

antithetical to their interests.[31] Even if today the army's privileges have only multiplied, it is important to acknowledge that in the winter of 2011 this was by no means a foregone conclusion.

But the events of November 2011 were also about more than this. The battle—and more broadly, reciprocated violence which was to repeat itself on a number of occasions throughout the rest of the revolutionary process—was understood, rather, in deeply existential terms: as a permanent street action much bigger than 'politics,' or even directly opposed to it. My two opening quotes, both spoken by direct participants, eloquently illustrate this understanding. 'Muhammad Mahmoud is the key to the Egyptian revolution,' as my interlocutors kept insisting, points to the way in which the events of November crystalized political positions that had been unclear or obscure, and forced everyone to 'reveal their true colors.' This applied first and foremost to the SCAF, whose claim to be the 'protector of the revolution' and a neutral shepherd of the transitional period lost any semblance of plausibility, even for those who remained unaware of the army's violence towards Tahrir square protestors through the spring and summer. Unable to halt police violence, three days into the battle the post-revolutionary government of Dr 'Isam Sharaf resigned, refusing responsibility for the deaths and injuries and sending a clear political signal about the limits of civilian power in the transitional period.[32]

Still more revealing was the 'betrayal' by the Muslim Brotherhood who refused to take part in the November protests.[33] The Brotherhood's mobilization back in January and February was instrumental in tipping the balance against the Mubarak regime, but the Brotherhood had since demobilized and concentrated all its efforts on its widely anticipated parliamentary electoral victory.[34] In November, secular revolutionaries were 'alone,' abandoned by this key ally, who, up until then,

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[31] My interpretation, shared by my interlocutors; Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*, reaches the same conclusion.

[32] AFTE, *'An Muhammad Mahmoud*, 43.

[33] This betrayal is the most salient political aspect of the November events, repeated endlessly by secular revolutionaries. See, for instance here [http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/three-years-fissure-mohamed-mahmoud-remains-576751321]. Famously, the next year during the battle's anniversary a banner was erected at the entrance to the street saying 'Entry forbidden to [Muslim] Brothers, Army, and Old Regime,' pointing to the three enemies that the 'people' in Muhammad Mahmoud fought. Here lay the roots of the split between secular revolutionary forces and the Islamists, which became crucial in the Spring and Summer of 2013 to enable the military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood presidency.

[34] On the Brotherhood's role in January-February 2011 (the Tahrir phase) see Carrie Rosefsky-Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton, 2013), Chapter 7; on their political strategy of demobilisation during the Summer and Fall of 2011 see Ketchley, *Egypt*, Chapter 4.

pretended to be part of the revolutionary effort. This feeling of abandonment strengthened the perception among revolutionary youth that the battle was 'theirs only;' and it amplified the symbolic legacy of the battle for years to come. On the ground, where a sense of 'being at war' was more reflective of real experience, very different understandings of 'politics' and 'revolution' emerged. A salient generational split developed here between the younger revolutionaries in Muhammad Mahmoud Street and the more senior activists in Tahrir Square, not to mention established oppositional political parties. Although on the surface this split appeared to be one of tactics between continued street mobilization and the return to formal political channels such as elections, it eventually proved to be one of essence. 'Revolution is actually not about politics,' insisted one of my interlocutors; his words echoed throughout my encounters with veterans of the events. What we need now is to change the camera angle, and to observe the revolution from a street-level close-up. When we shift the focus away from the politically articulate utopia of Tahrir Square and zoom instead towards the back streets of Bab al-Luq, a neighborhood in the hinterland between Tahrir Square and the Ministry of Interior, the picture changes.

III.

The atmosphere on the frontline was euphoric, almost festive. The air smelled of teargas, as had been the case on many occasions since January. By now, something of a fetishism around teargas had developed, as it came to signify the presence of revolutionary action, or a haptic trace of it. It was referred to as the 'scent of freedom' or 'perfume of revolutionaries.'[35] The frontline had its own distinctive smells, sounds and lights, and a collective dramaturgy of playing cat and mouse with the police through the back streets of Bab al-Luq. When a police advance was impending, those at the front warned the crowds of supporters and onlookers at the rear by drum-like banging on metal fences and lampposts, which were met with cheering and whistling. Most spectacular were the lights. At night, electricity was off in the whole neighborhood, but there was no darkness. Sporadic fires of car tires and rubbish bins lit up the small streets. *Shamarikh*, colored fireworks used during weddings and football matches illuminated the night sky above the battlefield. [See FIGURE 1] This

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[35] See Samuli Shielke, 'Longing for the smell of teargas,' *You will be late for the revolution* blog (25 November 2011), http://samuliegypt.blogspot.com/2011/11/longing-for-smell-of-teargas.html. Teargas is emerging as a global signifier of anti-austerity protests, see Anna Feigenbaum, *Tear Gas: From the Battlefield of WWII to the Streets of Today* (London, 2017).

haptic repertoire of smells, sounds and lights gave the battle an energizing flavor in which the lines between violence, sport, and carnival became blurred. They also accentuated the battle's performative character, which grew stronger every day.

Figure 1 © Fireworks near MM street, by Mosaab Elshamy

But referring to the order of the battle as a 'dramaturgy' should not be understood as diminishing its severity. The violence was real, and the presence of death and injury was constant. Police snipers were targeting especially the eyes of protesters, and eye injuries became an iconic symbol of the events.[36] Secret agents planted themselves among the front line fighters, snatching them and tripping them, though it soon became possible to recognize and neutralize them. In such a context, loyalty, trust and bravery were essential, and they remain the values most associated with frontline action. Perhaps the most well-known slogan that emerged out of the battle, repeated at every anniversary on social media, goes: 'Testify, oh Muhammad

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[36] AFTE, *'An Muhammad Mahmoud*, 13, gives a conservative count of 43 deaths (some participants claim this was much higher), and over 3000 injured of which 1000 required hospital treatment. For eye injuries see especially 21-3. The policy of deliberately aiming at protestors' eyes became known through a leaked video from the police side, and a junior officer (internationally known as the 'eye sniper of Muhammad Mahmud') was put on trial in 2013.

Mahmoud, they were dogs and we were lions.'[37] Calling someone a dog in Egyptian vernacular culture signifies lowness and malice, the opposite of bravery and honour, which is here signified by a lion, an animal perceived as noble and courageous.

Over its five days and nights the battle became increasingly routinized as well as ritualised. For the fighters, the 'hot' time was night when the battlefield spilled over well beyond Muhammad Mahmoud Street to include surrounding streets deep into the Bab-al-Luq neighborhood. Dozens of young men flocked towards the frontline, usually in small groups, each having their preferred spot and time.[38] At its peak, the frontline was reminiscent of classic battles in which two armies faced each other across a field [See FIGURE 2]. This analogy was self-consciously accentuated by the presence of a flag-bearer ahead of the frontline, carrying a battle flag with the stenciled face of Mina Daniel, a young revolutionary who died under SCAF bullets during the Maspero massacre a little over a month earlier. [See FIGURE 3] Space gained when a police cordon was forced to retreat was briskly covered with graffiti to mark the conquered territory. Part of this routinisation included observed knowledge of the enemy's tactical patterns, who, being an institution, worked like a clockwork: everything had its time, the armored vehicle's entry on the battlefield as well as the change of conscripts, which usually signaled a time of respite.[39]

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[37] '*Ishhad ya Muhammad Mahmoud, kanu kilab wa kunna usud,*' used on dozens of memes which circulated widely on social media throughout 2012-2015, and reappear reposted on social media every November around the battle's anniversary.
[38] Afternoon was the time of the 'schoolkids' or 'lion cubs' (*ashbal*) as older fighters refer to them. They had to be home by night. That's when the Ultras came in, and more mature young men. See also Mekkawi Sa'id's memoir, *Karrasa al-Tahrir* ('Tahrir Notebook'), Cairo 2014, 67-8.
[39] However, it often worked the other way round: at times the police signaled for a repose, but used this time to change guard and suddenly attacked with new force while the fighters were resting. But this tactic soon became known and predictable.

Figures 2: The frontline: like two armies facing each other

The urban space mattered. The battle could only happen the way it did in this particular place, given Downtown Cairo's unique urban character. Formerly the heart of the colonial metropolis, during the postcolonial era the area has been gradually abandoned by elites. This urban decline accelerated in the last three decades of the 20th century, despite the fact that parts of this colonial heartland have become the object of a newfound colonial nostalgia and gentrification in the last years of Mubarak's rule. Downtown Cairo's particular urban character includes a long history of bohemian culture and dissent; an absence of a socially coherent group of inhabitants that would claim this area as 'theirs;' and a high concentration of government buildings, banks and institutions; all of which give this space a 'no-man's-land' quality that makes it particularly suitable as a performative stage for political claim-making.[40]

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[40] For a detailed historical discussion see Lucie Ryzova, 'Strolling in enemy territory: Downtown Cairo, its publics and urban heterotopias,' *Orient-Institut Studies* (Orient-Institut Beirut, 2015), [URL]. Foucault's concept of heterotopia is particularly analytically useful here, though it is worth stressing that his 'heterotopia' is essentially spatilised liminality. It must also be noted that Muhammad Mahmoud Street became the epicentre of the Egyptian revolutionary graffiti movement; see, for instance, Basma Hamdi and Don Karl, *Walls of Freedom* (Berlin, 2014).

Figure 3. Mina Daniel flag and its flag-bearer.

The most spectacular rituals were brought in by the Ultras, Egypt's hardcore football fans—particularly the UA07 and UWK groups (followers of the nationally prominent teams al-Ahli and Zamalek). Their historic enmity with the police was legendary.[41] Both major clubs were present, though always keeping carefully apart, each having their particular ritualized 'entrance' (*dakhla*) to the arena of battle every night, choreographed as a spectacle. In this case they cast their usual enmity temporarily aside, as they had a more important 'job' to do.[42] Their experience in collective maneuvering and playing cat-and-mouse with police, rendered to aesthetic perfection with the use of fireworks, gave them a pride of place on the front line. But their specific know-how and repertoire—how to move and when, and when to hold ground; how to prepare Molotov cocktails and how to throw them; how to watch out

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[41] The Ultras are essentially fraternities of young rebellious males, which, while centred on unconditional devotion to one's football team, were really about fierce autonomy and a culture of confrontation. Their semi-formalized fights, best understandable as rituals of young masculinity, are directed towards two main enemies: fans of the opposite club and, especially, the police, which famously took particular pleasure in treating the Ultras like criminals. The Ultras' presence on the frontline was instrumental, but also overstated in scholarly accounts, in the sense that *all* rebellious and fight-ready working-class youngsters have been labeled as Ultras. See Dag Tuastad, 'From football riot to revolution,' *Soccer & Society*, 15:3 (2014); James Dorsey, 'Pitched Battles: The Role of Ultras Soccer Fans in the Arab Spring,' *Mobilization*, 17:4 (2012); Robbert Woltering, 'Unusual Suspects: 'Ultras' as Political Actors in the Egyptian Revolution,' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 35:3 (2013); and most extensively Carl Rommel, 'Revolution, Play and Feeling: Assembling Emotionality, National Subjectivity and Football in Cairo, 1990-2013' (SOAS PhD thesis, 2015).
[42] Testimonies from the 2011 London Riots similarly speak of how gangs observed truce and worked side by side against the police; see The Guardian & LSE, *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Discontent* (London, 2011).

and rescue others—soon spread well beyond the tightly-knit Ultras units, learned and reproduced by everyone present.[43] Some people discovered talents they did not know they had and worked assiduously on perfecting them—like the art of grabbing a teargas canister just as it landed and throwing it back at the police; others actively searched for new skills to acquire, such as learning to make a slingshot or a Molotov, for which funds were collected on the spot. Yet others provided first aid to those overwhelmed by teargas or hit by birdshot. This was anarchy that worked like clockwork: there was no overall coordination and yet all the parts appeared perfectly synchronized.

Frontline action assumed a playful, even poetic character. There was no palpable sense of danger or defeat; rather, the atmosphere radiated concentration, euphoria and a sense of privilege stemming from having an extremely serious—but also eminently enjoyable—job to do. A whole genre of commemorative memes and murals depict the frontline as a space populated by ballerinas in reference to the acrobatic skills and elegance of young men dodging bullets. Some of these artworks depict the frontline fighters with wings, casting their bravado and heroism as something mythical and other-worldly [see FIGURES 4]. A distinct mythology emerged from the events and continues to live in memory.[44] Reminiscing on their experience, some of my interlocutors assigned protective powers to the Mina Daniel flag; others reflected on the fact that they did not die, while the person standing nearby, whether a friend or a complete stranger, did. Interviews conducted five years later were marked by narrative tropes of out-of-the-body experiences and of superhuman strength through which my interlocutors portrayed their actions.[45]

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[43] Several of my interviewees were members of one or another Ultras fraternity, but they never cast the frontline action as solely belonging to the Ultras. Some people emerged as natural organizers who maintained a clear head and strategized; they were dubbed 'generals' by popular acclaim.

[44] It is possible that this mythology grows stronger every year, but this is beyond the scope of this essay.

[45] Interviews with Zabadi and Tareq (December 2015); 'Abdo and Mahdy (multiple interviews 2014-16); Karim (November 2017).

FIGURES 4: the poetics of the frontline artworks

A distinct poetics emerged here, parallel to and different from the articulate poetics of Tahrir Square and its revolutionary humour that often drew on literary

references.[46] By contrast, the frontline poetics was profane; it was distinctly Bakhtinian, drawing on local imagery relating to masculinity and sex. Sexualised insults in the form of words and gestures flew in both directions. The police used obscene gestures, such as raising the middle finger towards protesters, or pointing at the crotch as if masturbating, in order to demean their opponents' masculinity or to suggest 'I will screw you.' The fighters on the frontline reciprocated. Hurling insults towards the other camp worked like casting spells, with the same symbolic power known from oral poetry or rap contests, where words fly like weapons. The vernacular of the conflict was along the lines of 'we are fucking them' or 'we are getting fucked,' depending on who happened to be holding the upper hand in the cat and mouse game at the given moment.[47]

This sexualised tone of the action extended well beyond the battlefield. Memes circulating through 2011-2013 among revolutionary youth on social media elaborated on these profane themes. They typically show burned police vehicles with captions saying 'With Love,' or 'The Police and the People are Getting Married.' [See FIGURES 5] One memorable meme shows simply a bloody handkerchief with the insignia of the Ministry of Interior captioned as 'Wedding night.' The reference here is to an old Arab custom in which the groom on the morning after nuptials was expected to show a bloody handkerchief as a proof of his bride's virginity. This long-defunct 'folkloric' custom remains a potent metaphor for either backward tradition or local authenticity, depending on context. Here, it is deployed for its ambiguous associations between violence and pleasure, body/sex and honour/marriage. This ambiguity serves to further accentuate the grotesque effect of sexualising the encounter between people and police. Other memes play on and subvert the revolution's own vocabulary, subtly referencing the slogans of Tahrir Square. A stencilled photograph of the frontline shows the fighters addressing the police by saying 'We'll make a "peaceful one" with you' (*Hana'mel ma'akum silmiyya*). The pun here is on the discourse of 'peacefulness' inserted into a colloquial phrase that

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[46] On the poetics of Tahrir, see Elliott Colla, 'The Poetry of Revolt,' in Sowers and Toensing, *Journey*; Reem Saad, 'The Egyptian Revolution: A Triumph of Poetry,' *American Ethnologist* 39/1 (2012); Iman Mersal, 'Revolutionary Humor,' *Globalizations* 8/5 (2011); essays in Samia Mehrez (ed), *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (Cairo, 2012). See also Pnina Webner et al (eds), *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2014), which situates this Tahrir poetics within a wider global framework stretching from Greece to the Occupy movement.

[47] See, for instance, the documentary film *Abdo: Coming of Age in a Revolution* (Dir. Jakob Gross 2015). The extensive frontline footage shown there is from the Port Said battle on February 2-5, 2012.

means to make sex ('to make one'). Yet another meme shows a protestor wearing a gas mask pointing a middle finger with a caption: 'Let's Fill the Earth with Songs of Peace.' 'Peacefulness,' of course, was the magic keyword that pervaded both global and local middle-class imageries of the revolutionary process evoked by the Tahrir Square sit-in just about two hundred meters away from the battlefield.

FIGURES 5: Bakhtinian memes:
Upper: Two memes showing burned police vehicles, captioned 'with love'
Lower: 'Wedding Night' (a bloody handkerchief with the insignia of the Ministry of Interior) and 'Let's Fill the Earth with Songs of Peace' (by El Zeft, 2012)

Ballerinas dodging bullets, people and police getting married (or, in another rendering of this trope, the people fucking the police): we recognize here some classic carnivalesque themes, notably the reversal of normative social roles, hierarchies and relationships, a Bakhtinian 'inside out' (*le monde a l'envers*). But before I continue this analogy with carnivals, let us have a closer look at who the people on the frontline were, and what may have possibly brought them there.

The majority of the young fight-ready men on the frontline came from low-income backgrounds, typically from informal neighbourhoods. We could call them 'working class' except that their position in the labour force is precarious, unstable and informal. While they were virtually everywhere during the revolution's many events (if only because they are simply everywhere in the city), they also had an ambiguous relationship to the articulate middle-class utopia in Tahrir square. Demonstrations and slogans are not their thing. Many of them did not instinctively feel included, or welcome, in the articulate middle class crowd. This is partly the result of a long legacy of classism in which the figure of the young working-class male has been consistently constructed in Egyptian mainstream culture as the internal other, vilified as the social monster, the loitering petty criminal and sexual harasser. This exclusion was also increasingly spatialised, as it fuelled the urban flight of middle and upper middle class Egyptians to new peripheral cities, resulting in wholesale association of inner-city spaces with danger and chaos.[48] Young low-income men were often plentiful in Tahrir Square, but most of them were not setting up camp nor holding signs stating their demands. Rather, they were cruising and loitering about, always in small groups and often with their cheap Chinese motorcycles parked nearby.

They had no prior experience in politics, though they were profoundly politically 'subjectified.' Theirs is a gender and class inflected experience of neoliberal security violence; they are routinely stopped and searched at the whim of the police at every checkpoint, based on their low-income looks, occupation or place of residence, or taken to the police station from which they can extricate themselves only after paying a bribe. Ill-treatment and torture was rampant in their encounters with the police.[49] This embodied experience of police violence was largely unknown to middle-class Egyptians, which was what made the exception of Khaled Said in 2010 so notable—a young man from a 'good family,' whose brutal death by police

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[48] For informality see David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: Logic of a City Out of Control* (Cairo, 2010); for the dynamics of class and space see Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar (eds.), *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (Cairo, 2006) and Diane Singerman (ed.), *Cairo Contested* (Cairo, 2009).

[49] See Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis, MN, 2006), and her 'Revolution Against the Police.' As the neoliberal state gradually 'shrunk' and withdrew as the provider of social services, the Police remained the only institution through which ordinary working-class people 'encountered' the State. These encounters meant negative policing and rent extraction through bribes. Torture and physical abuse at police stations was rampant among this demographic. A. Seif Al-Dawla, 'Torture: A State Policy' in R. Al-Mahdi and P. Marfleet (Eds.), *Egypt: The Moment of Change* (London, 2009).

sparked public outrage six months before the January revolution and is widely perceived to have been a contributing factor to the January 25th mobilization. By contrast, for low-income males, power had long been inscribed and performed on their bodies, and often specifically on sexual organs; and spatialised in police stations. Sexual insults on the frontline in Muhammad Mahmoud Street battle were thus deeply rooted in the physicality of everyday classed encounters between the security state and young low-income men.

Their payback came, serendipitiously and spontaneously, in the early days of the Revolution. On the 28th of January, the third day of country-wide protests, and as the attention of media concentrated on the protestors' efforts to reach Tahrir square, police stations across the capital were attacked, ravaged and burned down. This happened in informal, low-income neighbourhoods, uncoordinated with the articulate activist leadership of the protests. These simultaneous attacks brought about the crucial tipping point that overpowered the security apparatus. Low-income young men were the sans-culottes who provided the cannon-fodder for revolutionary action, and who literally made its early success possible. But they also remained the revolution's Achilles heel, a potential liability, as their role never fit comfortably with the necessity to portray the revolution as peaceful and politically articulate in a register comprehensible on national and international stages. The battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street was their second appearance en-masse.

The notion of victimhood is of course crucial to their actions; but it was not the kind of obvious and easily mediated victimhood in which peaceful protesters are beaten virtually in real time in front of the cameras. A substantial part of the non-middle-class revolutionary demographics came here to actively avenge victimhood that had happened elsewhere, at other times. As long-term victims of the neoliberal security state, they came in order to *not be victims* this time, and indeed to actively inflict symbolic violence on their enemy. Put in their own words, they came here to 'take back their rights.'[50] On this class location, subjectivity is always deeply gendered, hence the aspect of restoring one's manhood (as synonymous with

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[50] Interview with Hosam (November 2017): 'I immediately joined the burning of police stations (this was the *real revolution* for me), because *'ana kan liyya haqq 3anduhum.'* Then goes on to narrate his arbitrary arrest and humiliation two months prior, when only substantial bribes and entreating from his brothers got him out of the police station. Six years later Hosam knew exactly in which order the police stations were burned on the 28th of January: first al-Khalifa, then Basatin, then Dar al-Salam (and then many others), all being police stations in low-income, informal neighborhoods, known as centers of humiliation and torture. Similar stories in interviews with Biba (2011), and Mishmish (2014).

autonomy) is crucial here.[51] Rights are to be taken; and *men* take their rights themselves. [52] In this context the logic is that either you are a man or you are not; either you are an autonomous subject or you are not; and if not, then you are dead anyways: 'Either die while standing, or live your life kneeling.'[53] For these young men danger on the frontline was a secondary concern because they are no strangers to danger. Everything in their life is potentially 'dangerous;' they might die any time from lack of access to medical care; or, if they do go to a hospital, they can end up dead because of a wrong prescription or procedure.[54] Or they can die from the occasional jobs they do without safety. It is thus crucial to realize that the 'danger' part of the battle was rather ordinary, unremarkable. It was the fun of it, the adrenalin resulting from the instantaneous feeling of full autonomy—a complete control over one's body and destiny, and the negation of any form of structural subjugation—that were entirely unique to that moment.[55]

What separated these men from the forward-looking middle class utopia in Tahrir Square demanding democracy, social justice and the rule of law was an essentially different subject position, realised within a different temporality. From their perspective, there was no brighter 'tomorrow' understood in linear progressive

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[51] Ismail, *Political Life*, 96-97, 123, speaks of 'injured masculinity.'

[52] Other forms of 'taking rights' in the revolutionary context included the occupation of empty houses in gated communities, see Nicolas Simcik Arese 'Practicing Informality and Property in Cairo's Gated Suburbs, from Theft to Virtue,' *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* (2017); or the looting of upscale shopping centres, such as, famously, the Egyptian Duty Free store in Muhandisin, which, on the night of the 28th, was overtaken by crowds from the nearby informal area Bulaq al-Dakrur. The 'rights' here took the form of TV sets, fridges, and when those were gone, at least booze (interviews with Mishmish and taxi driver, 2014).

[53] A line from a song specifically inspired by the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street, titled *Stand your ground* (a chant from the frontline); which expresses this fundamental sense of dignity, Kairokee band (2012). The song is decidedly middle class, but I explain below how this is possible. The music of the low-income men is full of references to dignity; see, for one, *Nahnu nuridha hals*, where the refrain goes 'I take my rights with my own hands' (*Ana haqqi bi dira'i hagibo*)

[54] Decades of neoliberal 'restructuring' in Egypt has effectively eliminated universal healthcare. Organ theft, and organ selling, have become widespread. See, for example, Sherine Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God: Organ Transplants, Islam, and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Egypt* (Oakland, CA, 2012).

[55] Street children were strongly represented among the frontline fighters. Activists and social workers reported that it was literally impossible to get them out of there. For an arresting report with street children voices from another battle see Mayssoon Sukkarieh, 'Egyptian Revolts' *CounterPunch* 26 November 2012, available at https://www.counterpunch.org/2012/11/26/egyptian-revolts/. The frontline equally included other deeply marginal characters, notably men who straddle an ambiguous boundary with the *baltagiyya*, the regime's paid thugs. The Mubarak regime wielded an arsenal of petty offenders with a 'record,' whom it used to carry out its dirty work, most famously to suppress elections and demonstrations. Here, such men came to restore their structural subjugation; it is not impossible that there were individuals who may have been on the other side of the barricade during the revolutions' other events. Certainly this was confirmed by the more observant Egyptian revolutionaries I talked to.

terms in which society, or the state, would give them their rights, let alone making their lives better.[56] This was not necessarily perceived as a problem; rather, the problem was that the state did not leave them alone, and instead infringed on their very right to live. Revolutionary time brought an opportunity that turned them into an iteration of Hobsbawmian primitive rebels, in a context in which the urban space becomes a neoliberal jungle.[57] As in the Hobsbawmian case, engaging a faraway oppressor (a stranger who is always an intruder, typically an agent of the oppressive state apparatus), theirs was a deeply moral understanding of the violence in which they were engaging. Nobody expected to take over the Ministry of Interior, and (crucially) nobody brought guns to the fight, despite the fact that guns were plentiful, especially in the low-income peripheral neighbourhoods from which they came.[58] From their perspective, the kind of violence in which they engaged was productive, and it was above all, *just*. It was a highly performative action—a Darntonian 'spectacle of symbolic violence' whereby the fighters were both actors and spectators at once. The purpose here was not understood as political gains cast within a longer, forward-looking democratic future; but as a momentous 'here and now' restoration of basic rights to life and dignity, understood in gendered terms as 'full manhood.'

But their actions on the 28th January and then in Muhammad Mahmoud Street were also not unprecedented, and were performed, rather, according to a known script: attacking local police stations represents a long-standing tactic of popular

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[56] This is based on many discussions I've had with young working class men, who could not relate to the revolution's political goals. See also the *Muhakamat 'Askariyya* documentary, (Tahrir Diaries, May 2012), where a working class man is stopped by police near Tahrir square; the police asks: 'what is your politics?' he retorts 'What "politics"? Are you going to turn this into "politics"? We just want our rights!'

[57] I am using this hyperbole of 'neoliberal jungle' to refer to the phenomenon of urban informality (see note 49) whereby the assemblage of neoliberal urbanism, spatialized wholesale vilification of the poor (from specific laws to the press and mainstream public culture), negative policing and routine police violence, and the absence of the state, produce a situation where local identifications and loyalties (as opposed to national ones) are paramount. But there are more analogies with Hobsbawm's social bandits: these are the 'nameless ones,' always young, for whom autonomy/freedom is hard to come by as much as it is valued above anything (34, 36-7). Their strong sense of right to honourable existence and the rightful use of violence is elaborated in the Egyptian context by Farha Ghannam (*Live and Die like a Man*, Stanford, CA, 2013): masculinity is defined by independence and the capacity to use force; however, *how* one uses force (violence) is everything. It is what makes all the difference between a 'real man,' potentially a 'hero,' on the one hand and a mere criminal or thug (a *baltagi*) on the other. For Hobsbawm, this rightful use of violence is also what distinguishes the social bandit from a mere criminal.

[58] Interview with Tareq (August 2015): his uncle, a local boss, could not believe that Tareq goes to Muhammad Mahmoud Street fight unarmed and insisted to give him a gun, which Tareq never used; nor did anyone else. Tareq laughed when telling me this, it was utterly absurd to him, but not to his uncle. For an investigation regarding the allegation of weapons, see also AFTE, *'An Muhammad Mahmoud*, 70-1.

insurrections in Egypt.[59] Conventionally, however, such revolts remain invisible: localized and violent as they are, they are easily dismissed as riots of the rabble and swiftly suppressed by the police. In the context of a revolutionary situation, however, these young men were protected as 'protestors' while their actions supported a just cause, making History in the process.

But young low-income men, while providing the bulk of the cannon fodder on the frontline, were not the only demographic there. The battlefront equally included young revolutionaries from decidedly (if sometimes ambiguously) middle-class backgrounds. Indeed, these are the creators of the memes, songs and revolutionary art I have been citing. Their middle class position was either the result of their income level (or more likely, that of their families), or their level of education. The decisive characteristic in this case is that they were educated people for whom violence had not previously figured in their revolutionary experience. Their involvement with the revolutionary project started through having articulate political demands, as typically expressed through protests in Tahrir Square, either in January-February or later through the summer of 2011 (in some cases, their political 'awakening' happened earlier, during 2010 or even 2008). By November, however, they turned into intrepid fighters in Muhammad Mahmoud Street, throwing stones or preparing Molotovs. What we see here could be described as their 'descent into violence.' But it is also more complicated than that, and more interesting. The liminal character of revolutionary time creates its own actors and ways of acting. Class becomes irrelevant as all social categories and boundaries are temporarily cast aside. Actions cannot be explained by class position, only by one's positionality within this liminal time. This positionality is then the effect of one's experience. Among the non-educated low-income working-class youth there were some who developed an articulate view of politics and became members of one activist group or another; and vice-versa, among the educated middle-class revolutionary youth there were many who lost faith in 'peacefulness' and gradually adopted an articulate (and often poetic) understanding of violence as a method of revolutionary action.[60]

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[59] Ismail, *Political Life*, 162-4.
[60] There were instances when working class men from informal neighborhoods learned new repertoires and asserted their presence in Tahrir Square as 'protestors,' while proudly claiming their local identifications. During the November mobilization, some held banners in Tahrir Square stating 'The Men of Bulaq present their readiness for sacrifice' (*Rigala Bulaq yuqaddimuna li shehada*).

How did this happen? Their change of heart was the pragmatic result of direct, embodied experiences of recent vintage. Unaware for the most part of the everyday violence and humiliation long familiar to working-class men, they nevertheless had plenty of opportunities to experience brute force deployed by the army, the interim ruler ostensibly carrying out the demands of the January 25th Revolution. These encounters included, most notably but not exclusively, March 9th and April 8th, when military police attacked protesters camping in Tahrir square, dragging several dozens of protesters to the nearby Egyptian museum, where women were subjected to forced 'virginity tests' and men beaten with metal sticks and chains;[61] in June, clashes at the Balloon Theatre where riot police brutally attacked the families of the revolution's victims; and most of all, on October 9th, the Maspero massacre—up until then the largest massacre of peaceful protesters—in which at least 28 demonstrators were mowed down by automatic weapons and run over by military vehicles. All these incidents happened after the resignation of Mubarak, which, as mainstream discourse had it then, signalled the victory of the revolution and the dawn of a democratic transition.

These raw first-hand experiences produced a special kind of insight, a 'street wisdom,' which amounted to an epiphany of sorts. The concept of having been 'in the street' or having witnessed the revolution 'from the street' came up repeatedly and insistently in my encounters.[62] My interlocutors insisted that only those who were 'in the street' truly knew what was going on: that the regime did not fall with Mubarak's resignation, that the army's 'transitional rule' was all about containing the possibility of a true revolutionary change; that all that happened with Mubarak's resignation was the falling of a curtain, thereby uncovering the true nature of the regime in all its deceptiveness, its brute ugliness. This epiphany made it crystal clear that the moment your opponent decides to kill you, he will.[63]

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[61] See, for March 9th: 'End Torture, Military Trials for Civilians,' HRW report March 11, 2011, accessible at https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/11/egypt-end-torture-military-trials-civilians (last accessed 18 January 2018); for April 8th: 'Egyptian soldiers attack Tahrir Square protesters,' *The Guardian* 9 April 2011; for Baloon Theatre clashes (28-29 June): 'Cairo Violence Highlights Need to Reform Riot Police,' HRW report 8th July 2011. For the Maspero massacre see: 'The Cairo massacre and How to invent a religious conflict,' *Anthropologi.info* blog 12 October 2011 accessible at https://www.antropologi.info/blog/anthropology/2011/cairo-clashes (last accessed 18 January 2018).
[62] This insistence on 'street experience' acquires its currency in contrast to revolution as primarily a mediated experience, whereby so much of 'revolutionary talk' and analysis happened on Twitter.
[63] Interviews with Hamada (December 2016), and Mahdi and 'Abdo (July 2015). See also the testimonies collected for the NGO report on the events, AFTE, *'An Muhammad Mahmoud*, 38: a

There emerged a split between this 'street wisdom' on the one hand, and what was understood as 'politics' on the other. The crucial divide was thus not one along class lines on the battlefront (between working class youths and educated middle class youths), but rather one between those on the frontline or 'in the street' (regardless of their class background or education) and everyone else: meaning those chanting slogans in Tahrir Square or tweeting from home, preparing for elections and debating future political strategies. In Tahrir square and among senior activists, street mobilization was understood pragmatically and functionally as a means to an end, a political purpose. In November, this purpose was to pressure the SCAF into setting a date for handing power over to civilian hands. On the frontline, however, revolution was not understood as a tool for anything, but as an end in itself. Revolution was understood as a visceral, holistic, and existential experience, opposed to 'politics' understood in narrow institutional or procedural terms.[64] 'Politics' now stood for something unclean and insincere, a game of positions assumed by those who, while knowing that the army are killers and bastards, continue playing the 'peacefulness' game, concentrating on electoral victory and calculated mobilisation.

The understanding of a revolution existentially as a more or less permanent fight was underpinned by the fact that, as those who had been 'in the street' knew, the struggle could not be won. From their perspective, the 28th January was also a decisive date; but it was not remembered so much as a victory as it was for the working class youths who thought of this date as the 'real' revolution, a self-explanatory storming of the Bastille. For the educated middle-class youths, the 28th January was marked, rather, by betrayal and the loss of innocence. While working-class men were busy 'taking their rights' from their local police stations, middle-class protestors in organised demonstrations heading towards Tahrir Square in the city centre got their first taste of what they were up against: this is when dozens of the revolution's first martyrs fell, often through deception such as when the police asked for a ceasefire and then—once supplies arrived or a shift changed—started shooting

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participant says: 'we cannot win this fight…they are not merely injuring people, they are purposefully blinding them. It is as if there was a red line and they crossed it.'

[64] This split had a strong generational undertone. It pitched the younger revolutionaries against senior activists. 'They claim they 'know,' they claim they have experience, and they want to strategize everything from afar… they tweet…and we are the ones who get killed here.' Interviews with Moshir and 'Abdo (August 2017); also a scene in the documentary '*Abdo: Coming of Age in a Revolution* (Dir. Jakob Gross, 2015). Senior activists held the opposite potion, saying roughly: 'this is the wrong fight! Our fight now is political.'

live ammunition into the unsuspecting peaceful crowd.[65] Here, the 28th of January was a cataclysmic transformative event, which had structuring effects over a long run: it radically changed their interpretation of what was going on and shaped their process of sense-making.[66] 'We lost the revolution on the 28th of January, when the army descended in the streets,' my interlocutors insisted, 'all we have had ever since was this fight. It is about grasping every moment we can to fuck them.' Thus from the wise and informed perspective of those who were 'in the street,' the revolution as a political project had long been a lost cause. But for the same people, the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street also remains celebrated as the time when 'the police got beaten,' and more broadly the winter of 2011 as the time 'when we fucked the SCAF.'[67] From their perspective, this was the legendary moment when 'we took back our rights.' While we may have lost the war, there remain battles that must be fought. All that remains is a beating we can inflict on the dogs here and there, moments we can steal to restore ourselves as fully autonomous subjects with dignity.

Their fight was therefore understood in deeply existential terms. They considered themselves angels in a metaphysical battle between absolute truth and justice on the one hand, and absolute evil on another. The 'evil' was crystal-clear: a state and its security apparatus that wields weapons against its own people, a regime that has by now shed too much blood of peaceful protesters. This regime had many heads; it was at first Mubarak's state, then the SCAF, and eventually the Muslim Brotherhood, but the continuity through these political iterations was too painfully clear to those who witnessed it from the street level, and of course the key embodiment of this continuity was the security forces, which remained the same.[68] The resonances with battles of old times, complete with a flag bearer, where regime forces and protestors face each other, eye to eye, worked to accentuate this analogy. The soundscape on the frontline equally included invocations of God's name (*Allahu Akbar*) as a protective spell. It implied that Truth was on their side. Frontline action was understood as a battle of absolute truth against absolute evil where death did not

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[65] See the documentary '*Abdo*. 664 people were killed on the 28th January across all of Egypt, according to the independent statistical initiative *WikiThawra* https://wikithawra.wordpress.com/.
[66] McAdams and Sewell, 'It's about Time,' on the structuring effects of transformative events (101-10), and the process of sense-making (118-19).
[67] Interviews with 'Abdo (2014); implicitly all others among this group. There is a whole generation of young people, now in their early to mid-20s, who self-consciously claim they were 'born' in Muhammad Mahmoud Street.
[68] Ideally, insert a figure here that shows a graffiti on the corner of Tahrir and Muhammad Mahmoud Street, depicting the change between these regimes as a mere matter of changing masks.

matter as long as one was on the side of Justice. If 'politics' is about shades of grey, then there is no space for this any more, as everyone was forced to reveal their true colours. Here, in Muhammad Mahmoud Street, there was only Black and White, Angels and Demons, Dogs and Lions. [69] Unsurprisingly then, and for years to come, Muhammad Mahmoud Street has been commemorated as a sacred site, a place where 'Truth was revealed.'[70]

This 'street wisdom' proved right. The police were indeed 'dogs;' and they were on the same wave-length as the Muhammad Mahmoud Street youths in the sense that this was now the time when only 'force speaks.' The winter of 2011 was a battle for existence where the ends legitimated all means as the scale of street mobilisation represented the greatest challenge to the very foundations of Egypt's regime. While the battle ended after five days with a ceasefire, more regime violence was soon to follow. First was the brutal dispersal of the Cabinet sit-in in mid-December. Then came the Port Said massacre on February 2nd 2012. Seventy-two young men were slaughtered by thugs in a stadium following a football match between Egypt's largest football club Ahly and al-Masry, the Port Said team, in the city of Port Said. This was a pre-meditated attack in which the transitional regime clearly had a hand; it is widely believed to represent the regime's revenge for its symbolic defeat in Muhammad Mahmoud Street two months prior as well as for the emergence of the Ultras as a political force during the Fall of 2011.[71] The incident immediately led to another major urban battle when Ultras al-Ahly attacked the ministry of Interior. This battle, which lasted three days and nights, is known as Port Said clashes.[72] Then came Muhammad Mahmoud 2.0 in November 2012, intended as a replay of the first. These

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[69] See the self-produced song *Shaytan wa Malak*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l94fVkO7-jY. Veterans of the battle, the friends of these young men got killed in Muhammad Mahmoud Street; they founded the Egyptian Black Block, briefly active in 2012. In Burke, 'Virgin,' the rioters in 1647 Naples similarly believed that God, the Virgin, and the saints were on their side (p. 12).

[70] This was an often repeated theme in interviews with 'Ammar and 'Ammo (August 2016), and 'Abdo and Mahdi (August 2015). See also Ahmad Abu al-Hasan's novel *'Usba al-Sirr* ('A Secret League,' Cairo 2017); Hamdi and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*; Mona Abaza, 'Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo's Graffiti,' *e-International Relations*, 7 October 2013, http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/07/mourning-narratives-and-interactions-with-the-martyrs-through-cairos-graffiti/. In 2015 veterans of the events defended the holiness of the street from the encroachment of commercial graffiti, 'Egyptian street art in search of a code of ethics' *Ahram Online* 7 April 2015, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/127132/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Egyptian-street-art-in-search-of-a-code-of-ethics.aspx

[71] See Karl Rommel, 'Revolution.'

[72] There are countless press reports on each of these events. This battle is extensively covered in the *'Abdo* documentary. However, while the Ultras al-Ahly, the victims of the massacre, dominated this battle, many non-Ultras members joined in ('Abdo, for one, is a member of the opposite fraternity, Ultras White Kings).

battles, each keyed to a different situational pretext that sparked it, also resembled the Muhammad Mahmoud Street battle in that they had recourse to the same Bakhtinian imaginaries. Here, the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street provided a new template for action meaningful for the specific context of the Egyptian revolutionary process, a master script that was to repeat itself during subsequent events. As the impossibility of victory, of political purpose, became increasingly obvious, the performative carnivalesque character of urban violence gained further traction.

<div align="center">V</div>

Let me now return to the Bakhtinian world-upside-down and my larger, historical frame. Observing the battle close up, there were striking similarities between 'my' event and other events made famous by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladourie, Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton, Peter Burke, Bob Scribner, Bakhtin, among others. Clearly, the frontline action in Muhammad Mahmoud Street was part riot, part carnival. Despite, or perhaps because of, the omnipresent danger of death and injury, what looked like grim urban warfare to outside observers was perceived and experienced by its direct participants as pure joy. The battle was one big party, equipped with fireworks and haptic expressions common to weddings and sport events. Indeed, participants and informed observers sometimes referred to its festive atmosphere as a *mulid*, a saint's festival in the Muslim Sufi tradition, strongly associated with 'folk' religion and reminiscent of early modern saint's festivals in Europe. My point is certainly not to compare contemporary Arab history to European early modernity. Similar events exist in the contemporary West if one cares to see them: anti-globalization protests from Seattle 2011 to Hamburg 2017, or ongoing anti-austerity protests in Greece, share the same emphasis on ritualised frontline action blurring the lines between fun and symbolic violence. At least one political theorist has recently called our time the Age of Riots.[73] Rather my point is to reflect on these salient similarities with other forms of liminal events in history, both synchronically and diachronically. Instead of noting that there were some really interesting moments of rightful working-class violence on the margins of an important progressive project in Tahrir Square, I want to argue that it may have been the democratic utopia of Tahrir

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[73] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot. The New Era of Uprisings* (London 2016).

square that was historically peripheral, whereas the rightful working-class violence was, rather, more of a historical constant. While the battle of Muhammad Mahmud Street clearly resembled riots and carnivals of earlier times, it may be even more relevant as an emerging protest repertoire of the 21st century.

While rarely studied together, carnivals and a riots share more than meets the eye. The possibility of carnival turning into a riot and riots spontaneously assuming carnivalesque character runs across the classical historical literature on both.[74] Whatever their specific contexts, both riots and carnivals are condensed social dramas, liminal temporal brackets where social order is put into a 'subjunctive mode' and allowed to reflect back on itself, when social hierarchies are questioned and straightened up.[75] Such liminal states are characterised by their generic reversal of normative social order, the levelling, melting or flexibility of social hierarchies, the toppling of normative structures of authority, and the momentous enactment of a kind of alternative social order. In classic forms of carnival, a marginal character—a fool, a slave or a child—gets kinged for the night; poor people enjoy luxurious treats such as pork and wine (whether real or through their symbolical representations) while rotten sardines cost a fortune; men dress as women and vice versa.[76] In this time-out-of-time, we are likely to encounter sacred objects and persons desecrated; a goat may get baptised. Bakhtin called this 'grotesque realism,' where all that was 'high' became lowered to the sphere of earth and body; the ideal, the abstract and the sacred became demystified and reduced to material reality.[77]

The key difference is that carnival is scripted, acting out an alternative social order from a repertoire of symbolic codes valid in given time and place, while riots tend to be spontaneous, avenging wrongs or enacting forms of popular justice. Yet

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[74] Riots belong to 'social history,' while carnivals fall under 'popular culture.' Notable exceptions include Peter Burke, 'The Virgin of the Carmine and the revolt of Masaniello' *Past & Present* 99 (May 1983); William Beik, 'The Violence of the French Crowd from Charivari to Revolution,' *Past & Present* 197 (Nov 2007); Bob Scribner, 'Reformation, carnival and the world turned upside down,' *Social History* 3/3 (1978); Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,' *Past & Present* 59 (May 1973); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladourie's *Carnival in Romans: Mayhem and Massacre in a French City* (New York, 1979), though here the carnival-time killing was premeditated. All these authors draw inspiration from the same conceptual perspective I use, as mentioned in note 9. The recent publication of the Davis-Thompson letters (*Past & Present*, 2018) also revisits this legacy; importantly, Davis acknowledges having been also inspired by her own experience of student protests of the late 1960s—precisely the kind of resonance I develop in this final section.
[75] Victor Turner *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1987), 25 and passim.
[76] Such as in Le Roy Ladourie's *Carnival in Romains* (New York, 1979). In Muhammad Mahmoud Street, hashish sold for pennies.
[77] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 1984), especially 19-21.

they often revert to the same symbolic codes.[78] Carnivals, however, used to have a clear social function of allowing the kind of unbridled behaviours that would be unthinkable in normal times, while simultaneously containing them within clearly delimited boundaries.[79] The whole point of Bakhtinian crude realism is to ultimately contain discontent, and to make sure hierarchy and order returns when time is up.[80] That is why the journeymen in Robert Darnton's French 'cat massacre' story killed the cats and not the master: this was symbolic justice, which, once carried out, allowed everything to return to its place. This is indeed what classic carnivals mostly did, with a few notable exceptions.

All of these aspects were strongly present in my contemporary Egyptian example. Everyday police brutality and humiliation was avenged through the police getting fucked in Muhammad Mahmoud Street, where the people 'married' the police and 'deflowered' them. In this iteration of grotesque realism, the most feared and powerful element of governance and authority in contemporary Egypt was laid bare and desecrated, its relationship to 'the people' reversed, and its everyday injustice avenged. The frontline action was reminiscent of ritual action on other levels as well. Having been part of the frontline where death and injury were omnipresent was akin to the 'trial by fire' part of some classic rituals; it created an ever-lasting bond of friendship among those present, a sacred bond connecting all the 'initiands' that have passed through the trial together: those comrades who burned police vehicles together and dodged bullets side by side.[81] At the same time, all of this violence was carefully

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[78] The line between violence and comedy was often thin in Early Modern Europe, observes Davis in 'Rites,' p. 90. Riots drew on the popular imagery of ritual purification and desecration, repertory borrowed from notions of folk justice; 'religious violence had a connection in time, place and form with the life of worship;' but it equally drew on the carnivalesque repertoire of symbolic action known from carnivals and charivaris (84). Similar in Burke, 'Virgin,' p. 3 and Beik 'Violence' p. 75. A classic example of an impromptu, joyful, and symbolic half-riot half-carnival is Robert Darnton's Cat Massacre story. Current anti-globalization protests or anti-austerity riots in Greece are consciously staged as carnivals.

[79] In a nutshell, carnivals are scripted, symbolic riots. As also observed by Bob Scribner, 'Reformation,' p. 319: if enacted in the real world (i.e. outside of their time and place), carnivals would become rebellions.

[80] 'One possessed no word which could have characterised a transformation in which subjects themselves became the rulers,' writes Arendt in her *On Revolution*, cited in Kosseleck (p.48) in the midst of his discussion on the specific future-oriented temporality of modern revolutions. But they are wrong: one did indeed posses the 'words:' this is what the whole rich carnivalesque repertoire was about. What was lacking, in a world ordered hierarchically where everybody had their place according to God's will, was the political imaginary whereby the poorest could become a ruler or pork would be available to everyone *at all times*; until Enlightenment brought ideas of equality and citizenship, or, as Beik ('Violence,' p. 109) observes, until people realised they could change the whole system.

[81] This sacred bond comes very strongly in my interviews. The bonds forged by fire transcended class boundaries: the working class youths on motorcycles that were carrying the wounded to field hospitals

measured and understood in symbolic terms, remaining at all times governed by a strong moral code: our weapons are our bodies; we use bricks, stones and Molotovs, but there will be no firing of guns. Wielding a weapon even remotely comparable to those used by the regime would have deprived this action of its legitimacy and rightfulness.[82] It would make 'us' like 'them.' Everything here was predicated on maintaining an absolute distinction between 'us' and 'them' and their respective association with right and wrong, black and white, justice and its nemesis. Wielding a weapon, becoming 'like them,' would also cease to be symbolic, and it would cease to have the meaning it needs to have: the social bandit—deploying violence on certain targets in certain contexts—would become mere criminal; in the more gendered idiom, instead of proving ourselves as 'men,' we would become mere thugs.

All such social dramas past or present are always delimited within clear temporal and spatial boundaries, and they share a very strong experiential character: they are experienced as euphoric moments of fun, often accentuated through staged performative excess.[83] They are at once staged and emancipatory. Crucially, they are deeply embodied and non-verbal,[84] and any attempt to translate them into language already entails a loss of meaning. This experience has its roots in the liminal character of these events: as 'order' breaks and social distinction melt, the self ceases to be restrained and contained by categories that normally define it; it is this freeing from structure that lies at the core of the experience of full agency, or full autonomy: a heightened sense of self imbued with complete control over one's life and body. This is where subjects redress everyday injustice and subjugation; by restoring 'justice' and correcting wrongs through their own hands, they also restore themselves temporarily as fully autonomous beings in a world where autonomy is hard to come

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at the rear could at the same time rob their pockets; this was always remembered fondly and endearingly (Interviews with 'Ammo and 'Abdo).

[82] In the staged protest at the Gaza border in the Spring 2018 (the Great March of Return), protestors dance on the frontline and attack Israel with balloons flown over the border. Many get killed and maimed, but they remain unarmed. In other instances of contemporary riots, the burning of police vehicles represents the most common form of enacting what William Beik calls 'restorative justice.' Structural police violence and/or racism is at the core of most such protests; though in some instances (Greece, G8 protests) the police is understood politically as the agent of global corporate capitalism. Such injustice or structural subjugation is here avenged symbolically, as no policeperson is harmed (or not intentionally).

[83] Though this aspect is often less evident in sources, or under-reported or dismissed in contemporary accounts. For fun and euphoria in the 2011 London riots, see *Reading the Riots* (The Guardian & LSE report), p. 20, 23, 28. For anti-globalization riots see Jeffrey S. Juris, 'Violence Performed and Imagined: Militant Action, the Black Block, and the Mass Media in Genoa' *Critique of Anthropology* 25:4 (2015). Recent Greek riot videos show protestors having sex as police cars burn.

[84] As Peter Burke observed in *Popular Culture, in Early Modern Europe* (1978), 180.

by. Here, on the threshold, time slows down; there is only the present here, or some kind of eternally meandering temporality. This momentous state of full autonomy—or certainly a degree of autonomy otherwise unthinkable in normative times—tends to be worth life itself.[85] But these moments also have a strong communal dimension: the same state of de-individuation produces a community of equals bound together by a shared bond of experience.[86]

Youth, and specifically adolescent men, usually play a prominent role in these events. [87] As *men*, they need to assert their independence (which is what defines the category of manhood in most cultures), while as *young* men, they remain subservient to their social seniors; their low-income or precarious economic position (or as apprentices or journeymen in an older idiom) also makes them obedient to, or dependent on, their masters or bosses. Hence the greater (almost existential) need to assert autonomy contingently in specific times is especially imperative for young men. This was most obvious in the ritualised mock-battles in carnival time or in charivaris; in modern times this need tends to be contained through commercialised leisure and sports. Except, when a riot or a revolution erupts.

Riots and carnivals were the tools of contentious politics in a context when time was not conceived as rectilinear, and when 'change' was not understood as a slow gradual progression, but rather as momentous reversal.[88] In both riots and carnivals, disruption—a momentous arrest[89]—was the whole point; either because the status quo (say, injustice or economic hardship) could be born no longer and needed to be rectified or avenged, or as highly performative and scripted symbolic letting off of steam during carnivals, which worked to reboot time by providing a momentous counterbalance to the ways of the world. But neither carnivals nor riots included any expectation to change the world, as people did not believe they had any control over

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[85] In many instances, like the Hamburg anti-capitalist riots of July 2017, people actively search for this kind of experiences. Social media may have brought a further dimension here whereby the aesthetic aspect of protest (riot as an art form) becomes paramount. For the globally mediated aesthetic dimension of contemporary protest, see Pnina Werbner et al, *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest* (Edinburgh, 2014).

[86] As observed by Beik, 'Violence,' p. 91, and Burke, 'Virgin,' p. 18-19 for early modern riots or revolts. This was strongly present during each revolutionary situation, from the Paris Commune to the Occupy movement. For the Tahrir *communitas*, see footnote 4 and Armbrust, *Martyrs*.

[87] Youth remains the most 'dangerous' (or active) social group in history, observes Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France,' *Past & Present* 50 (February 1971); also Scribner, 'Reformation,' p. 316.

[88] Burke, *Popular Culture,* 189; Kosseleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 47-57.

[89] For the notion of 'arrest' and 'disruption' as political strategy of modern social movements see Mehmet Dosemeci, 'Don't Move, Occupy! Social Movement vs Social Arrest,' ROAR Magazine 5 November 2013.

the world, or over the lives of others. Modernity brought about a historically novel experience of rectilinear progress and the idea of a Future over which humans have control. This control then materialized through the concept and practice of politics.[90] Popular politics is itself rooted in older practices of ritualised communal action recoded as political claims.[91] Revolutions did not really replace riots and carnivals, as much as they sublimated them into the revolutionary cause, a forward-looking political project.[92] This is what happened in Egypt on the 28th January and in Muhammad Mahmoud Street: these were euphoric moments of enacting a form of popular justice, when the momentous restoration of dignity was all there was to be had. The torching of police stations may have had a long history in Egypt as a form of political agency of subaltern groups, but here it became a crucial episode of the Revolution, and its perpetrators ('primitive rebels') became recoded as 'protesters' and 'revolutionaries.'

Middle class revolutionaries had at first acted upon a temporal logic predicated on a progressive linear history oriented towards a hopeful future. Their purpose was originally very different from rightful working class violence as most among the more articulate youths were drawn into the revolutionary process expecting a democratic transition ushering into the rule of law and social justice, whether for themselves or for others. The unexpected (because previously unknown) violence of the state was read as the betrayal of a Revolution. They soon realised that they had been fooled. No amount of peacefulness, no amount of sacrifice and death, was enough to bring about a 'better tomorrow.' This is where the organic circular temporality of the precarious proletarian youths for whom the storming of a police station or an upscale mall represented all the 'revolution' there was to be had met the

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[90] I am simplifying here a complex historical process in which older forms of protest were adapted and recoded to new purposes, a new revolutionary political language, through the 18th century and forcefully during the French Revolution; but also new rituals emerged; discussed in Beik, 'Violence;' William H. Sewell, 'Historical events as transformations of structures: inventing revolution at the Bastille,' *Theory and Society* 25 (1996); Baker and Edelstein, *Scripting Revolution*; and many others.
[91] Robert Poole, 'The march to Peterloo: politics and festivity in late Georgian England,' *Past & Present* 192 (August 2006); Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998); James Epstein, 'Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth Century England,' *Past & Present* 122 (February 1989); Garry Owens, '"A Moral Insurrection": Faction Fighters, Public Demonstrations and the O'Connellite Campaign, 1828' *Irish Historical Studies xxx* (1997).
[92] Though the euphoric experience of *communitas* (an alternative utopian community of equals, a term that shares its origin with the Paris Commune) became the bread and butter of modern revolutionary experiences. See Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015); 1968 is a case familiar to many readers; for 1989 see Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton, 2003). For Egypt, see note 4.

recent reality of the educated formerly-peaceful middle-class revolutionaries. Their enemies were also different; whereas the low-income youths in Muhammad Mahmoud Street saw their adversary traditionally as the police, the more articulate revolutionary youth saw the security forces *politically*, as the agents of the SCAF. Though few on the frontline dwelled on such nuances. On the frontline, their embodied experiences met, and class momentarily melted in the face of experience. At the end of this journey, both worlds were marked by the rejection of 'politics' and both shared an understanding of revolution not as an enactment of a collective political project but rather as a momentary, and often personal, enactment of autonomy or emancipation. For the middle-class youth, their loss of innocence was the symptom of their loss of dreams of a progressive Future—a Future that can be brought about by peaceful political action if only there is enough will. A similar experience marks the recent trajectory of Greece, where a democratic process was defeated by global corporate will. Deprived of a collective forward-looking project, we are left with performative violence as both the means and the end of contentious politics.[93] In this respect, the battle of Muhammad Mahmud Street was more akin to what contentious politics may increasingly look like in neoliberal times. This is emphatically not a return to earlier times, but rather a new template, or new repertoire: seen from this perspective, riot emerges as a transhistorical protest form that contentious politics logically tends to take when democratic future-oriented projects become unattainable.

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[93] As evident in the ritualised mock-battles between police and protestors in Greece, or during G8 summits. While often dismissed as purposeless and senseless, such events are as rational and purposeful as any riot in history was: while knowing they cannot change the system, protestors nevertheless make injustice *visible* (as Bob Scribner observed), enacting symbolic punishment (as William Beik has it), and, as I add, these protests also work as euphoric moments of achieving full autonomy and enacting a utopian community of equals.