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TAHRIR SQUARE

A Space Extended to the People Watching it

Permanence is folded into waves of change. The cityscape is no longer [...] an open space framed by buildings, but a constantly morphing place shaped by people doing, hoping, building, destroying and being.¹






My main focus in this essay revolves around the more general question of whether our sense of *participation* to contemporary historical events is effectively being facilitated or not by the media we are using. In particular, the question is here whether *the use of the body through technology* within the space of the Tahrir Square uprising, where offline and online actions contributed in the same amount in the shaping of the constitutional space of the communication exchange, and its subsequent *strategy of representation*, can be considered crucial factors in the shaping a specific kind of *agency*.



The space of Tahrir Square is here used as an example of the 'communicating vessels' dynamic between online and offline spaces which took place there, where the process of formation of a new collective subject through the *feedback system* between physical bodies in physical places and displaced subjects involved in actions that are spatially deferred in relation to their position,

¹ May Al-Ibrashy, 'Days of the Midan', *Magaz*, 401 (2011), p. 627. Available at http://www.magazmagazine.com/magaz2012/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id.700%3Adays-of-the-midan&catid.157%3Aissue-401&Itemid.123&task.view. See also Judith Butler, 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street' (EIPCP, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2011), p. 627. Available at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>, cited in Derek Gregory, 'Tahrir: Politics, Publics and Performances of Space', *Middle East Critique*, 22, 3 (2013), 235–246, p. 243.



became a way of becoming of the space itself. This participation took shape there in the form of a *space of foundation in-process of the ideals promoted by the square*. This space was created, as a form of in-between, by the presence of the physical bodies in the space and their presence online at the same time. The merging of the many bodies of the protest into one collective body and with the architectural space of the square – as a result of the relationship between presence and projection of the presence – shapes a new body configurations where new identities, political and community-oriented, are created in this hybrid space. The contemporary public sphere depends ‘on brave bodies-in-alliance installing newspaces through the conjuncture of what Butler calls ‘street and media’.²

Some of the images that circulated widely across global news sites and the Internet during the days of the Egyptian revolutions can set an interesting example for the *new communication space*³ Tahrir Square represented. Most images coming from Egypt in January/February 2011, depicted the Midan al-Tahrir, the main square in Cairo city, full of people day and night, a crowd occupying the space in the most intense and mobilized way and, at the same time, continuing to lead their collective everyday life. At same time, this crowd was connected with a much bigger crowd in the global space, which was following the events through a number of different of social and traditional media.

Ordinary people who were following the events from afar – such as I followed them from London, as the students began the university occupation around the same time, and probably inspired by the events in Cairo – perceived the life of Tahrir Square as if it were a living organism. It is was a universe with its own internal system: food distribution, sanitation, media, control service, ‘a utopian community formed in the square and occupied its centre and peripheries for several days, with tents dedicated to internet bloggers, a medical clinic, food services, and a large peripheral area guarded by protesters’.⁴

2 Derek Gregory, ‘Tahrir: Politics, Publics and Performances of Space’, *Middle East Critique*, 22, 3 (2013), 235-246 (p. 246).

3 Roger Odin, *Les Espaces de communication. Introduction à la sémiopragmatique* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaire de Grenoble, 2011).

4 May Telmissany, ‘The utopian and dystopian functions of Tahrir Square’,

The people were seen moving inside the square, running, escaping from police charges, rescuing protesters who had been wounded by police, taking pictures of the events, filming the episodes of violence, gathering information, making demands. but also sitting, standing, eating together, chanting, watching films at 'Tahrir Cinema', chatting and sleeping in the square. Some people were even getting married or giving birth to children. Despite its temporary character, Tahrir Square reproduced the space of a city in a state of mobilization, but it was also expressing, in its internal organization, the character of a *specific* community. 'A wedding was celebrated', and a baby was born in Tahrir Square.⁵

These scenes were in some ways a positive mirroring of that other form of the encampment that has become so ubiquitous on the world stage, the shanty towns and improvised refugee camps that 'spring up wherever a population finds itself displaced, homeless, or thrust into a state of emergency'.⁶ Tahrir Square was thus both a space hosting an intensified positive social life, its internal gatherings and a place where brutality was constantly entering from outside and that required constant reconfiguration in order to keep incursions from the police away from it and to find its organizing structure within.

A whole repertoire of actions pertaining to protests, sit-ins, expressions of dissent and reactions to violence was displayed in the square during the 18 days from end of January to mid-February 2011. But the square was also theatre to everyday civic life, where private behaviors were moved from private households into the square for a certain period of time and common behaviors were shared amongst previously unknown companions. Being an inclusive space where Egyptians from different walks of life and social classes were merging all at once, Tahrir Square was *reconfiguring itself, in the means of gathering, as a 'space-in process'*.⁷

I have never been to Tahrir Square in Cairo and I actually realize, now, that I have no real concept of its physical dimensions, beside

Postcolonial Studies, 17, 1 (2014), 36–46 (p. 37).

5 Francesca Caferri, 'Amori di Primavera', *D di Repubblica*, 13 July 2012.

6 William J. T. Michell, 'Image, Space, Revolution: the Arts of Occupation', *Critical Inquiry*, 39, 1 (2012), The University of Chicago Press, p. 8.

7 Gregory, p. 243.

the one that I gathered from the images seen on the web. It is a place that I know, though, in a mediated sense, for the images that I have seen of it. I am the perfect example of the supportive participative observer who followed the news during that time and who felt she was becoming more and more part of a space she had no previous knowledge about. This *sense of participative supporting/observing process* was legitimized by the means the information was purveying – interactive, social, transitional, networked media – which were used by the occupiers to organize and send information out of the country, counting on an enlarged, expanded, global network which they themselves were keeping involved through their media performances.

Many images circulated during those days across the networks – from social media and the global news sites. One famous image was of a man holding up a sign that read ‘I want my Facebook’. Another one showed a man holding up a sign where the word Egypt was composed with letters reproducing by means of internationally recognizable logos, the Google, theYahoo!, the Twitter, and so on.⁸ Images that are now part of a collective heritage within a mediascape that is encompassing us all.

In the mind of the audience receiving these images *outside of the square*, the physical space and the social media space were progressively becoming part of the same universe, both on an iconic and on a functional level. They were becoming part of a *hybrid* space where a certain level of participation was rendered possible for the rest of the world as well. Due to the amount of images circulating on the web – coming both from the occupiers and from official media – and thanks to the sense of mobilization experienced at different sides of the globe – *the sense of engagement with that space was extended also to the audience watching the event*.

On one level, there was a first-degree of site-specificity, immediate, kind of participation, based of bodily presence and physical proximity. On a second level, there was a second degree kind of supportive participation made possible by the extended space of social media information, though which footage and

8 Helga Tawil-Souri, ‘It’s Still about the Power of Place’, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5, 2012, p. 164.

images were disseminated and shared. On a third level, there was a third-degree of mediated kind of participation that was amplifying both the 'immediate and socially mediated space' through the means of broadcast global media.⁹ Was that a new kind of *spectatorship*? Was that a new kind of *communication space* protesters and engaged audience were in the process of sharing?

Even In July 2011 – six months after the uprising – revolutionary souvenirs were being sold just outside the green fence which went around Tahrir Square, while protesters were holding a sit-in against the military rule. Among the souvenirs of the protest, there was a T-shirt being sold with the words '25 January Revolution' written on it, accompanied by the words 'freedom' and 'Facebook'. The signs related to the global internet networks where the information was circulating, like Twitter for example, featured also on the walls around the space of protest or, for example, on the façade of a shop not far from Tahrir Square.¹⁰ The names of the networks where the footage and images of the uprising had been circulating (and were still circulating) had come back to the physical space of the protest, in a full circle.

It is interesting to notice that all these images, the ones featuring resistance actions, and the everyday life of the square's temporary inhabitants, and those featuring corporate logos and enouncing the relationship between collective freedom and social media, were performed, captured, incorporated and reproduced around, across and in reference to the – presently or formerly – occupied physical space of Tahrir Square. They were creating a link between the physical space and the space of the networks that was living beyond the actual temporality of the protest.

Much has been written on the importance of social media for the organization of the protests and on the sharing dynamics that were characterizing social media usage within that first protest, but it is also important to remember that the primary channels of mobilization were not mass-mediated or hitech at

⁹ W. J. T. Michell, p. 12.

¹⁰ Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 48.

all, but they relied on means like 'face-to-face meetings, graffiti, posters and landline calls'.¹¹ The survey underscored the fact that almost '50 percent of people (in its sample) first heard about the demonstrations in Tahrir through face-to-face communication, 28 percent via Facebook and 13 percent via their mobile phone'.¹² Actually, if we talk about internet access in Egypt, we will discover that in 2011 'only 25 percent of Egyptian homes were connected to the internet, only 4 percent of Egyptians adults were members of Facebook and only 0.11 percent had a Twitter account'.¹³

So, despite the proven function played by the *Kullena Khaled Said* Facebook page opened by Wael Ghonim after the 6 of June 2010 murder,¹⁴ with 36.000 users joining the page on the first day only, we should not overestimate the role of social media in mobilizing people. We should also not underestimate the role of physical presence in the inner dynamics of the uprising. Actually, my hypothesis, following Gregory and Gerbaudo, is that the relationship between physical and social media space was actually much more complex and that there was an element of *space-foundation-in-process* which was taking place between the two.

Let's go back for a moment to how the events were displayed. On the 6 of June 2010, 28-year-old middle class blogger Khaled Said was beaten to death by two police officers in Alexandria. In the days after the event, shocking pictures of the disfigured face of the dead young man started circulating on Facebook among Egyptian youngsters.¹⁵ At least two Facebook pages were opened in the following days to protest against the death of the young boy, one of which is the famous *Kullena Khaled Said – We Are All Khaled*

11 Helga Tawil-Souri, 'It's Still about the Power of Place', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5, 2012, pp. 86–95, p. 92, cited in D. Gregory, p. 240

12 Zeynep Tufekci, Christopher Wilson, 'Observations from Tahrir Square', 2012, pp. 363–379, cited in Gregory, *Ibidem*.

13 Dubai School of Government, 'Facebook usage, Factors and Analysis', *Arab Social Media Report*, 1, 1 (2011), cit. in Paolo Gerbaudo, cit., p. 49.

14 Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), pp. 58–65.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 58.

Said created by Google Middle East and North Africa marketing expert Wael Ghonim.¹⁶

In the words of Ghonim himself, the message of outrage and sadness launched through the web, resonated in the space of 2 minutes with the discontent of at least 300 hundred members who immediately joined the page.¹⁷ Within one hour from the opening of the page, the members were already 3000. Wael Ghonim decided to turn the page into a first-person speech. It would be Khaled Said himself who would be speaking through the page 'as if he was speaking from his grave'.¹⁸

The choice of a colloquial Egyptian dialect, the first person testimony techniques and the proliferation of pictures made the page extremely popular already in the first day after its opening. By the end of day 1, 1.800 were the comments and 36.000 the members who had subscribed. With 70.000 members who had joined the other page on the same cause, it seemed obvious for the two pages to merge. *Kullena Khaled Said – We Are All Khaled Said* linked itself to *My Name is Khaled Mohamed Said*.

The funeral of Khaled Said took place on the 11 of June 2011 and a thousand people participated to the event. At the same time, a protest was organized in Cairo encountering a strong political crackdown from the side of the police. What was bubbling up online, also in response to the violent reaction by the Egyptian police, which kept perpetuating political crimes of torture and violence towards protesters, spilled into the streets. It started with a series of 'Silent stands' in Cairo in the months following Khaled Kullena's death and it culminated in the historical protest of the 25 of January 2011.

'Reaching working-class Egyptians was not going to happen through the Internet and Facebook', notes Wael Ghonim in his

¹⁶ Ibidem, but see also Gerbaudo, p. 48. Some authors also consider other sources to be crucial in the beginning of the online mobilization around Khaled Said's death. On Wikipedia there is mention on an article written by Said's neighbour Amro Ali and poster on the 9 of July 2010 'Egypt's collision course with history' as being one of the important sparks of the online mobilization. The article is available on < www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=10663&page=0 >.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 60.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 61

memoir.¹⁹ The organization of the 25 of January protest required a combination of internet mobilization together with techniques which would reach out to a part of the Egyptian people which had limited access to information technologies. Printed flyers, mass text messaging and the organization of a demonstration starting from four different sides of Cairo and crossing four different neighborhoods, was the option protesters chose, so as to mobilize wider masses. 'We needed to have everyone join forces: workers, human rights activists, government employees and others who had grown tired of the regime's policies', he writes. 'If the invitation to take to the streets had been based solely on human rights, then only a certain segment of Egyptian society would have participated'.²⁰ The 25 of January was Police Day and the protesters were initially mobilizing against police violence and repression, but in order to make the cause wider and more widespread, they changed the name of the protest into 'January 25: Revolution Against Torture, Poverty, Corruption and Unemployment'. The protesters started walking across the city of Cairo pointing to Tahrir Square and calling everyone to join forces with them.

Millions of people coming from different socio-economic backgrounds ended up gathering in Tahrir Square demanding the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. Violent clashes took place between the police and protesters and the internet also seemed to help in bypassing the curfew imposed by authorities.

The irony of the curfew is that it might succeed in getting people out in the streets and out of downtown, but in doing so it delivers them back to the Internet [...] Many of my friends are on Facebook through the night, as are those I follow on Twitter, a steady stream of tweets and links. Active public discussions and debates about the meanings of what is taking place during the day carry on in cyberspace long after curfew.²¹

19 Ibidem.

20 Jose Antonio Vargas, 'Spring Awakening, New York Times', 17 of February 2012 available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

21 Brian T. Edwards, 'Tahrir: Ends of Circulation, Public Culture', 23, 3 (2011), pp. 493- 504 (p. 498).

Mubarak dissolved his government, appointing former head of the Egyptian Intelligence Directorate as vice-president in an attempt to quell dissent. Mubarak asked the aviation minister and former chief of Egypt's air force to form a new government. In response to mounting popular pressure, Mubarak announced that he did not intend to seek re-election in September. On 11 February 2011 Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that Mubarak would resign as president.

As Gregory notes, 'the urban space where "newness" might enter the world does not pre-exist its performance'.²² Judith Butler emphasizes the *performativity of the physical space of Tahrir Square*, as a space where 'the collective actions [of the crowd] collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture' Judith Butler goes further by stating that what took place in Tahrir was a 'wresting of an existing power' and in doing that 'a new space' was created, 'a new "between" of bodies, as it were, that lays claim to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies' were 'seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings'²³. Gregory builds further on Butler's considerations by defining the space of Tahrir Square as both a 'formation of a new collective subject-in-space-process' and a space where 'collecting the space' was *a way of becoming of the space itself*.²⁴

22 Gregory, p. 241.

23 Butler, p. 627.

24 Gregory, *Ibidem*. For a wider discussion of the idea of 'becoming-square' process as a mirroring of what was happening in the physical space into the role played by the internet, see also Telmissany, p. 40. According to Telmissany in the first phase of the revolution (the 18 days Tahrir Square revolution which led to Hosni Mubarak's fall, there were four 'utopian' modes of 'becoming-square' in operation. The first function is related to radical and pacific contestation (embracing the totality of the population and seeking reconciliation as part of the revolutionary vision), the second one is the communal/communicational one (achieving a communal space were the demands were pursued), the third one is the educational function (changing stigmas of society, educating about new moral codes), the secularizing function (call for national unity and the much needed separation between political activism and religious institutions).

This *becoming of the space* at the time of the 25 of January Revolution is deeply rooted, in my opinion, in Appadurai's concept of 'community of feelings'.²⁵ This concept, which is not disjointed from the relationship to material bodies, describes a *mode of connecting* physical bodies in the global space through common feelings and common representations that are enabled by a sense-of-belonging-in-progress which is constantly reconfigured and mediated through means of communication. This mode of connecting, and the *interconnectedness* that comes with it, it is rather rooted in a 'global sense of place, as a mobile constellation of the global and the local'²⁶ and it involves a constant *feedback system between physical people in physical places and displaced subjects involved in actions that are spatially deferred in relation to their position*. In Butler's terms spatiality becomes, then, 'transposable'²⁷ and the performativity of the space finds its meaning in this feedback dynamic involving the protesting actions in the square, its representation in images, the sharing process through social and traditional media and the dynamic of feeding back these comments into the protesting action.

Various analyses of the role of the internet during the Egyptian revolution often underestimate the strict street policing of public space under Mubarak, which would explain why the internet was so popular as a vehicle for protest organization. Gerbaudo testifies that during Mubarak's regime the average demonstration would gather hardly more than a hundred of people.²⁸ The presence of secret police (*mukhabarat*) during demonstrations acted as a powerful deterrent to prevent big gatherings²⁹ and the use of violence, torture and dissemination of mistrust among

25 A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

26 Gregory, *Ibidem*. See on this Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', in Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, and University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 146-156.

27 Butler, *Ibidem*.

28 Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 51.

29 John R. Bradley, *Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillian, 2008), cit. in Gerbaudo, *Ibidem*.

acquaintances and friends were all techniques used to discourage dissent and public protests.

Nasser Rabbat argues more generally that 'public life in Arab cities retreated from the open spaces to the private ones', as authoritarian rule was consolidated in the second half of the twentieth century. Salama suggests that for many Egyptians during those decades, 'public space' had become only 'the space that is owned by the government'.³⁰ On the other hand, Bayat notices that the thick social life of Egyptian streets and the hundreds of coffee shops in big major cities (Alexandria, Cairo etc.), all provided some kind of space for dissent to grow and counter-information to be disseminated.³¹

The *soon-to-be-square* of the revolution became, therefore, a site for liberation, 'simultaneously represented, contested and inverted', because, in Foucauldian terms, '[the] heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'.³² The ideals of the movement, explains Telmissany, were developed around three ideas. One was the application of the pacifist (*silmiyah*) rule asking for almost no or very little violence in response to police brutality. The second one, was the idea of promoting freedom of movement inside and outside of the square and the call to other squares of Egypt to take part in the revolution. The third one, was the 'migration' of the struggle in the space of the web, through the help of different tools of communication: mobile phones, internet, cameras, etc.³³

The communal living in the square was co-participated and sustained by a larger virtual, national and international community active on the internet and by the production of alternative and international media coverage. The internet also played a role in mobilizing larger groups across the country—students, workers,

30 Nasser Rabat 'The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space', *Critical Inquiry*, 39, 1 (2012), pp. 198– 208 (p. 205); and H. H. Salama , 'Tahrir Square: A Narrative of Public Space', *Archnet-IJAR*, 7, 1, pp. 128-138 (p. 128), cited in D. Gregory, *ibidem*.

31 Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 2007), cit. in Gerbaudo, *ibidem*.

32 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', 1967/1984, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>, cit. in Telmissany, *cit.*

33 M. Telmissany, p. 40.

professionals, etc.; and in sustaining the uprising by constantly providing public opinion with different information sources – from pictures, to video clips, cartoons, posters, graphics of the events etc.

In response to physical repression and media misrepresentation on Egyptian public media, the square based its existence, on the one hand, on the free virtual space that was ongoing on the web which highlighted the creativity of many unknown artists and designers.³⁴ On the other, it lived a parallel social life, with sit-ins, gatherings, cinema showings and cultural proposals made during the period of the events. The Internet offered an opportunity to measure the level of success of mobilized groups, the positive and the negative outcomes of the uprising as it unfolded, the ebb and flow of hope and enthusiasm among supporters and opponents – it acted as a *real-time mirror of the functioning/dysfunctional communication dynamics* that were happening inside the square. Further, the internet brought about the value of solidarity and it acted as an educational tool within the project – it worked as a *space of foundation in-process of the ideals promoted by the square*.³⁵

The specific configuration of ‘communication space’ offered by Tahrir Square in Cairo in the context of the Arab spring in year 2011, for the way it shows the evolving dynamic around subjectivity, new media spectatorship and spatiality on a trans-local level, needs to be analysed in relationship to three factors. The first one, is a) the unprecedented level of co-participation to the protest and imaginative investment displayed by de-territorialised spectators across the globe, the second one, b) the articulation between proximity and non-proximity in the space of political interaction among protesters internally and externally, locally and globally, the third one, c) the continuity between online and offline spaces in relation to the trans-local space of the protest and dissent. Whether such extraordinary and unbounded feedback may lead to an enlargement of democratic reflexes, reactions and movements is anybody’s guess. It is definitely true that the answer is not left to individual, but it must met collectively as collectively was generated.

34 Collective initiatives and anonymity were also very important and gave birth to long-lasting groups like Mosireen.

35 Telmissany, *Ibidem*.