

Virtual Roundtable of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences:

Who Are the People? A Conversation on the Assemblages and the Archives of the People

The ‘Participation’ Working Group of the IDRC-funded project “Producing the Public” of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS) held a Virtual Roundtable in which the group discussed the embodiments of the ‘people’ across the Middle East and the different dynamics that define the histories, experiences, representations, and potentialities of collective action and their relationship to shaping and experiencing various sorts of publics. The Roundtable was composed of Sherene Seikaly, the coordinator of the Working Group, Laila Shereen Sakr, Hoda El-Sadda, Pascale Ghazaleh, Lina Attalah and Dina Mansour, the ACSS’ Fellowships and Research Grants Manager.

Scholars of the Middle East have grappled for several decades with what seemed to be the death of “formal” or “official” politics in their attempt to explain the seemingly impenetrable force of authoritarianism and the pacification of Arab politics. Some work reified older understandings of the idea of agency and the centrality of state institutions. Others broke new ground on the idea of the individual, critically deconstructing the seemingly self-evident meaning and universal values of “freedom” and “agency.” In some ways, both conventional and cutting edge approaches worked to obscure the possibility of politics that could effectively challenge authoritarian structures. What emerged was a lachrymose epistemology of despair. The Arab uprisings seemed to offer a way out of this thinking. But epistemologies of despair continue to hold ground in many academic approaches, which insist on ringing the death knell of participatory politics. At the same time, an epistemology of hope has taken new force. Activists, journalists, practitioners, filmmakers, visual artists, techies, and performers have honed strategies and visions for the present and the future, centered on collective action.

As part of the Arab Council of Social Science’s inaugural research project, “Producing the Public,” the working group on “Who are the People?” seeks to bridge the gaps between hope and despair by understanding actors outside academia as social theorists and by placing various kinds of social theorists in conversation. The basis for this conversation will be a focus on the histories, experiences, representations, and potentialities of collective action and their relationship to shaping and experiencing various sorts of publics. Such a focus challenges the confines of “civil society,” and its purported lack in the Arab world, to more rigorously engage how collective action shapes and envisions the public. In critically engaging the very idea of the people, both through and against state power, intellectual hierarchies, and national movements, this project will rethink notions and practices of popular sovereignty.

The working group met in a productive all-day brainstorming session on 2 November 2013. The group together articulated shared goals, perspectives, and visions. Since that meeting, two of our members were unable to continue with the project. One of them, Alaa Abd El Fattah, a prominent activist, has been in and out of solitary confinement for

most of the last year. Another, Ahmad Gharbeia, had to take on more tasks in his work at the Arab Digital Expression Foundation due to the untimely death of the organization's director. While neither Alaa nor Ahmad will continue with the working group, the spirit of their insights and work continues to inform our work and appears in the framing of our visions and perspectives.

On 19 and 20 December 2014, our working group, which now includes **Lina Attalah, Hoda Elsadda, Pascale Ghazaleh, Laila Shereen Sakr, and Sherene Seikaly**, met over a two-day period to discuss the basic questions that our research and our working conditions have raised over the last two years:

1. **What are the different assemblages of the people?**
2. **What would an archive of the people look like?**
3. **How do we navigate hope and hopelessness in times of political upheaval?**

1. What are the different assemblages of the people?

Hoda: My research is on the neoliberal assault on universities, student bodies, and academic communities as assemblages of the people. The last few years have put the spotlight on the role of universities as sites of social engineering and the production of publics, and at the same time, as key sites of resistance, containment, and manipulation. I am interested in exploring new formations of the public and the people in universities as sites of contestation and political struggles vis-à-vis global neoliberal policies and discourses. Universities are gradually being diverted from their traditional role as key loci for the production of knowledge as a public good and the education of the ideal democratic citizen, and moving towards a more corporate logic, in which knowledge is a commodity and students are clients to be trained for employment that meets the demands of the market. Critics of the neoliberal impact on universities have noted the managerial turn in universities, where emphasis is laid on managing students expectations and desires, creating a culture that venerates meeting deadlines, efficient time management, and entrepreneurial skills over the academic pursuit of knowledge and engagement with social and political issues. The other side of the coin of this managerial turn is that in times of turmoil, unrest and student resistance to policies, they are represented as a threat that must be contained and controlled.

Sherene: This question of repulsion/romanticization as a continuum in relation to the idea of the people is key. During the eighteen days in Tahrir, experiencing the festival that was the revolution was a source of inspiration, a way to celebrate the people. But it was some of those same people that were on the streets celebrating Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on election day. So we went from asking with admiration, "Who are the people who could orchestrate such a tremendous shift?" to asking, "Who are these people who are so different from what we thought they were?" This is why, in my work, I am returning to the bread intifada of 1977, to explore how the people work as an object of both celebration and disgust. The illiterate and the hungry as subjects to be shepherded to the next developmental stage are primary characters in narratives of 1977. In the government's official announcements as well as in the texts of various intellectuals, including Naguib Mahfouz, Tharwat Abaza, and Yusef Idris, the poor are objects of sympathy and containment. The Left similarly understood the urban poor, or the lumpen proletariat, as agents of potential danger and irrationality. Violence is also a crucial site of material and conceptual contest in the 1977 uprising. The targeting and burning of railway lines, police stations, officials' rest houses, the Arab Socialist Union headquarters, casinos, and high-end restaurants was a strategy that many participants and commentators sought to disavow. In the face of these violent forms of resistance, which targeted the symbols of a broadening disparity between the wealthy and the poor, Sadat used the very language that Hosni Mubarak would employ thirty-four years later: The Egyptian people must choose between stability and anarchy. Across political divides, the agents of violence appear as "minors" or *sibya*, what Sadat famously called "the children of the thieves' intifada." Even in the measured words of the renowned literati Tawfiq al-Hakim, we find a unifying patriotism and an investment in defining Egyptians as a refined people whose nature is kind, patient, and above all constructive. This last adjective is in direct opposition to what commentators condemned as the destructive, apolitical, and irrational "sabotage" that rocked the country.

Lina: For me, in an attempt to address an assemblage of the people, I look at a community of active agents, who, alongside the traditional modes of activism, became active online in the early 2000s as pioneers of the digital activism

movement in Egypt. Through online practices, I examine how they practice politics of contention in the temporary autonomous zone that is the Internet, which I also consider a laboratory for dissident politics. Here, people have been trying things out that they have not done in the offline world. From creating Arabization tools to make the Internet more accessible, and from blogging and expressing themselves freely and in a personal fashion in a way that doesn't happen in more formal contexts of politics to hacking government websites as a more aggressive form of opposition against the state. I am interested in seeing how these practices and the agents behind them have changed the ways in which we think about politics and participation.

Laila: The scope of my research is in fact one level removed from individuals and communities themselves. I examine various assemblages in the virtual world of people's words, their sharing, and their posts online. By examining traces that people leave online through posts, tweets, and retweets, I formulate and study various assemblages of ideas. I am not trying to identify "who" the people are ontologically, but how they form networks of solidarity around production of knowledge on the Internet. I study these flows of cultural production and consumption in real-time, so that the assemblages are in constant flow and flux. Visualizations of Internet data are not about claims on material bodies or the intentions of communicators. They are traces of an embodied moment of the intentional use of digital media. Every data point has an embodied analogue at some moment. And tweets, as a particular category of digital data, have a very particular (historically specific) moment of origin that is exceedingly tangled with material bodies. My project is to figure out what the emerging patterns tell us about the virtual body politic. A difference between the body politic and the virtual body politic is that the former is an abstraction of a group of people governed by one authority. More importantly, the latter is that abstraction of people who exchange ideas publicly online about the governance of an authority. I come back to the question about the impact of social media on revolutionary praxis. More than the accumulation of data, in this discussion I am concerned with public sharing among global witnesses — a virtual body politic. The notion of witnessing culture alongside the means to speak about its implications is powerful. In some respect and not incidental to the virtual body politic, the sharing of tweets has really broadened who can be a witness, who can be counted as a witness. Yet, how do we analyze the negotiation between the materiality (the analogue) and information patterns (the data points)? Virtuality itself is a friction point between material bodies in political operation and information patterns.

Pascale: To me, using the term assemblage rather than, say, assembly, suggests that someone is doing the assembling—the people are being pushed together by an external force. What place does this leave for agency? Is this a way of describing the process as partly coercive? If so, my work seeks to approach this question of an assemblage not as an externally defined entity, nor even as a conscious gathering of like-minded individuals. Instead, my focus is on stakeholders who act in accordance with their sense of ownership. They created that ownership not out of law or state rights, but through possession. This is one formulation of the people — those who established their ownership rights according to their sense of justice and legitimacy, not according to whether or not the state incorporated them into its recognized property lineages. This is important, because the category is not an obvious one; it is excluded from many histories. I don't think that focusing on these ownership practices is romanticizing the people, because said practices can take a coercive and violent form. This is not the state's monopoly. But the way official institutions define ownership and access rights usually differs radically from the way people do so regardless of, or in spite of, the state. If you think of Hoda's work and the student body as a collective, let's think about how the university is expelling these students from the community.

Lina: But students also embody a mode of collectivity to form an alternative power base to that of the authority of the university, mainly because the authority's ownership of power or decision-making is contested. There is a natural sense of agency here that can be perhaps traced back to the traditional tensions in any dynamic of authority, in any given institution, including that of the state. In this sense, the conscious act of assembling is always somewhat laden with agency, since it is engendered to another act—that of eviction from power, from ownership. In this way, articulations of assembly mainly happen through means of exclusion and modes of solidarity.

Pascale: This raises the question of who is entitled to resources. In other words, what is a public good? What kinds of ownership claims do people make? Students, for example, own nothing at the university, although as a public

institution it belongs, in theory, to the people. Yet these students, like other groups that are excluded from ownership of certain assets, behave as if they were in fact entitled to resources, and thus forge their rights through practice.

Hoda: Public universities are a microcosm of the macrocosm, which is the state. The relationship between the student-body reflects the relationship between citizens and the state. The question of ownership of the university, the entitlement or lack of entitlement of students to the resources of universities, their attempts to participate in the decision making processes, their struggles to enact their agency vis-à-vis power structures mirror and enact the aims of the revolutionary wave that swept the Arab world in 2011. Knowledge as a public good rather than a commodity, education as a right before it is an economic requirement, are issues at the heart of the ongoing battle over the relation between people and states in the twenty-first century.

Lina: The segue to this question would obviously be, who demarcates ownership and authority over bodies, knowledge, borders, and other forms of public good? These questions will continue to be contested and the histories of mediation and conflict associated with them mainly show how the public good is always going to be a site of contestation. This is the case because of the unresolved inquisitions around how a public can have ownership, and if a public cannot own, how this ownership can be mediated through representation, and how representation has become a whole other site of contestation itself. The gaps in these histories and the fact that the modern nation-state model holds no definitive answers to these questions are where parallel imaginations of entitlement have emerged. To go back to your question, who decided that people have no rights in the first place? Is it not just a matter of divergent imaginations of entitlement?

But I want to go back and reflect on how the notion of the people has developed in the Egyptian context; how the word *al-sha'b* had a poetic resonance in 2011 that was not present in a similar fashion later, and how this word was subtly constructed. For me, part of analyzing this moment would entail a certain consciousness of the multitude as an alternative power arrangement to that of the state that is able to confront it. This confrontation did not take place for example on 30 June 2013. Hence, the concept of *al-sha'b* has become less relevant, although 30 June involved a great deal of popular unrest. The idea of the multitude as a powerhouse that is not easily breakable and that is able to make change is an interesting reinvigoration of the idea of the public as an assembly conscious of its agency. It is equally interesting to see moments where this assembly can be hijacked and at times devoid of its agency, while acting under the same performance or spectacle. Again, 30 June comes to mind here.

Pascale: I feel like we need to come to terms with our contempt for 30 June.

Lina: The politics of 30 June aside, it's interesting to see how the word *al-sha'b* has changed in the conversation. Objectively speaking, we talked about *al-sha'b* in a different way before and after 30 June. The word was not that present on 30 June. The buzzword that day was the state, *al-dawla*. This leaves me with the question of what a multitude is useful for if it doesn't imagine its own sense of entitlement and own alternative power arrangements. We can argue that, for the purpose of 30 June, the assembly was imagining a right to the state and a responsibility over salvaging the state from a regime it opposed. It is as though the people mirrored the state and the two collapsed together in that instance. The multitude as an assemblage of state defenders is an interesting construction that we haven't thought about much, especially when compared to the instance of January 25 and the ensuing events, where, in general, my sense is that the people didn't care that much for the state. In other words, Hosni Mubarak steps down and we just go home. We take over the area around the presidential palace and when the police retreat, we just sit around drawing on the walls and smoking shisha in the street, rather than storming the palace.

Pascale: But who were "we" on 30 June?

Lina: The "we" was a very abstract notion of "Egypt."

Hoda: It is noteworthy that after 30 June, media discourses shifted from referring to the achievements of the "people" to the achievements of "Egyptians."

Sherene: Lets remember the broader context. It was Tunisians who first resonated that call: the people demand the fall of the regime. It was the broader Arab people that constituted the *sha'b*. I always remember a friend telling me that the chant, the people want the fall of the regime, sounded formal and stuffy to her at first, because it was not Egyptian colloquial. But this was the power of that moment. We were suddenly faced with the possibility of a transnational people who could confront the state. On 30 June, it was not that moment, it was not a multitude. It was

a shrinking of the potential of a multitude to an exclusionary national framework, a national framework premised on the intentional exclusion of many, both internally and externally.

Laila: This transnational call was in Arabic, though. I think this is an important point to address. The chant, “*al sha’ab yurid...*” is in Arabic. So at once, you are assembling a public of Arabic speakers online in Diaspora and across the Arab world. This point is reminding me that one of the prime motivations behind my current research is to participate in the development and use of Arabic language tools online, for Arabic speakers by Arabic speakers. That was the public I addressed. I even went so far as to adopt a moniker, VJ Um Amel, to represent an Arabic speaking cyborg.

Lina: Ali al-Raggal has taken on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s idea of a multitude in relation to the Arab uprisings in a very powerful way, referring to popular movements across the region and the world as empowered by their interconnectedness and cross-consciousness.

Hoda: To what extent is the “people” a reification?

Pascale: It can easily be one. Those who called for literacy as a prerequisite for voting rights were reifying the people (in its “bad” incarnation, as ignorant and politically dangerous, or its “good” incarnation, as an obedient underclass). Those who supported al-Sisi because “these people only understand the whip” were reifying it too. And so were the activists who, after the eighteen days had ended, said they would just call the “twenty-five million” back to Tahrir if the politicians did anything they didn’t like. I feel like all three examples make suffocating presumptions about political participation and take the category of “the people” as shorthand for all that is radical, or, on the contrary, all that is reprehensible.

2. What would an archive of the people look like? What is the relationship between the archive and the state?

How do the individuals and collectivities that they shape leave traces of this process?

How in turn can we make sense of making meaning and making the people? In other words, how do we read “the people”? What are the archives that we can use?

Laila: There have been a plethora of projects and attempts to compile archives of the last four years of political revolution and counterrevolution. My project, R-Shief, a unique big data repository is one of these efforts. What makes contemporary archival practices distinct from the traditional practices is, in fact, the materiality of what is archived — the digital nature of contemporary culture. Many of the archives of the last few years of political mobilization are collected in digital form and in very large quantities. These archives no longer require physical space. Rather, they are requiring a whole new set of criteria for storing and accessibility. Archives are great, but what do we do with them? How can we make them publicly accessible? One approach I have recently been thinking through with fellow archivists is bringing together a federation of archives that would compile these various attempts. The Egyptian state archive is regionally exceptional, but as Khaled Fahmy has pointed out, it is an archive of the state and not the nation.

Sherene: But all archives are state archives. For us to think about critical archival practices we have to do more than make the shift from state to nation. We have to think about how archives create absences, foreclose histories, and endorse invisibility. For me, as both a Palestinian and a scholar of Palestine, the archive and its absence in state form are both a burden and a blessing. I think we have to be critical in approaching both the possibility and the desirability of an archive of the nation, especially one that is housed in a state institution.

Hoda: The lessons of feminist theory, which critique the myth of objectivity, are crucial to thinking through the archive. There is no such thing as a neutral archive. Postmodern approaches to archives and archival knowledge have moved away from the view of archives as neutral repositories of documents and manuscripts that enable objective research in search of historical truth, to a view of archives as powerhouses, where struggles over memory and history are integral to the *raison d’être* of archival work. Consequently, archives have become key sites of political and social contestation, as marginalized groups in diverse contexts challenge the authority of the archive and construct their own archives that tell stories previously excluded, undermined or distorted in official archival narratives. Each archival act is a decision, a process of inclusion and exclusion, from the very mundane practices of indexing and organizing, to the broader visibility and invisibility of historical traces, to the demands of context and the historical moment.

Lina: It was in the moments of revolutionary hope that we as activists began to be anxious about archiving our own practices. We thought we owned the present moment and wanted to extend this to the past and future. In other words, we wanted to control the narrative through creating and mastering the record.

Hoda: The archive is itself historically contingent. In South Africa, several archives were established to document apartheid and the process of transitional justice initiated by Mandela. There was a national consensus then on the key direction of the national story. In our case here in Egypt, there is no such consensus, as the narrative of what happened is still a site of contestation. Archives of the practices and events post-January 25 will inevitably engage with and reflect this absence of consensus.

Lina: The Egyptian case, in particular the battle over the archive, or the Freedom of Information Act, was not a struggle for consensus with state officials. It was rather an attempt to take over the process entirely. We didn't think of negotiation as a political practice.

Hoda: I think that all of us, or rather some of us, suffered from a temporary blind spot when we imagined that the ousting of Mubarak meant that the main battle was won and that state institutions would become compliant with revolutionary demands and aspirations.

Pascale: I have a problem with the revolutionary euphoria that activists and witnesses took part in. This euphoria began to look like willful innocence. At various moments, taking over the state would have been possible, and was necessary, but activists did not embrace these opportunities. Instead, they returned time and again to the conviction that the people had revealed their strength and would be called back to Tahrir if required. The beliefs expressed in this regard were certainly marked by instrumentalization—the people were seen as an effective tool that could be deployed if those brought to power by the January 25 uprising proved to be corrupt or insincere. There was also an element of delighted hopefulness: activists seemed to awaken to the possibility that, after years of tightly policed demonstrations where the cry “*inzi!*” sounded out in vain, and sympathizers watched from their windows, the people were in fact (and had always been) on “our” side, on the side of revolutionary and redistributive justice. Finally, there was an element of arrogance, which was revealed in the most surreal moments of the uprising, for example, when activists entered state security offices and exposed what they believed to be some of the darkest secrets of a repressive and vicious state apparatus. That these traces were all that remained of an experienced, entrenched bureaucracy with a quotidian practice of corruption and a desperate desire to survive was barely called into question. Many activists apparently believed they had simply pushed at an open door and the force of their legitimacy had caused the giant's clay feet to crumble. Yet to believe this was to exonerate themselves of the duty to take over, violently if necessary, the mechanisms and practices of the administration, to transform the state at every level rather than expect that such a transformation would be easy or would follow automatically from Mubarak's fall. Perhaps active engagement of this sort was dirty politics, and had to be left to the bureaucrats and politicians. How, then, did the activists expect to prevail? This strange euphoric passivity, this inability to take real decisive action, was the reason why even grassroots organizations like the popular committees were quickly coopted by the state, and why, after a brief hiatus, even during Morsi's presidency, the activities that had been suspended (provision of services like garbage collection or traffic regulation, police presence on the streets, and so on) resumed without hesitation. The state, and particularly its intelligence services, was present when it needed to be. This was also true when it came to the archives: it would have been difficult to overcome the fact that the gatekeepers of archival institutions can easily restrict access to documents or entire archival series, claiming that they do not exist when such claims suit their political convictions. To my knowledge, little effort was made to win over lower- or mid-level civil servants, who control the actual workings of the state and can restrict access to its records. At the same time, efforts to create a parallel archive, to document January 25 and its aftermath, were sporadic and abbreviated.

Hoda: While I acknowledge the main argument made, it is important to point out that the pace of events over the last few years has been super fast, and that this pace was also reflected in the dramatic shifts in positions and relative power bases of different political actors and institutions. There were moments when the balance of power in the last four years was upended. The demands of the street were immediately reflected in various constituencies, at the negotiating table, with varying results depending on the immediate moment and events taking place.

Lina: Lets bring back the state and the consciousness of its presence in relation to the archive: Can we not imagine the archive as a record other than that bearing the legitimacy of being the state archive, even if it is not the national archive? Can we not think of other possibilities, where the archive would emerge from somewhere other than the state? Can the archive become less of an object, a resource around which negotiations and battlefields emerge, and more of an everyday sensibility? Can this sensibility help reshape the way we think and (un)think the state? I can't help but feel that freedom, in many ways, lies in un-thinking the state, managing not to think about it, rather than confronting it.

Laila: I really like the way you articulated the notion of unthinking the state, Lina. In the contemporary world, I think there is an archival impulse at work that represents something palpable—an opportunity to provide a counter-collection, standing against the monumental history of the state. Such an impulse has resulted in new public archives, individual projects, digital archives (including digitization of old manuscripts, as well as collecting digitally-born information), fictitious archival projects, and collections of urban histories. I like the idea of framing all of these various public media projects and public interactions as unthinking the state. This framework can shed light on alternative appropriations of “the archive” as a transformative site of knowledge production.

What do we make of the online/offline binary? How do we understand the virtual world as a space of freedom and/or surveillance?

Lina: Digital activists and people who are active online in general see the Internet as an autonomous zone where freedom unravels in a way that it doesn't in the offline world. There is something attractive in the virtuality of the Internet, creating a space of possibility out of it. And then, of course, we have to confront the reality that this space is less virtual and more owned and controlled. The home of the Internet is nothing but a very physical infrastructure of submarine cables, and these present another site of state power. And then you have the more known battle of the Internet as a perceived democratic space by netizens and the quest of the state to control it through a plethora of means. What I think is interesting is how we make use of the virtuality of the Internet, and the possibilities that emerge from it, even if we are conscious that this virtuality is not so real. So rather than thinking innocently that the Internet is a free space, and rather than being utterly delusional about it, we can embrace the temporary virtuality of the Internet to hack political language and imaginations, for example. That's why I coin the term “temporary” for the promise of freedom the Internet projects. Now, it becomes a question of how temporariness can be a productive instance as opposed to one of void.

Laila: The assemblage of techies online, as Lina said earlier, redefine the types of collectivity that are possible.

Lina: Yes, this is an example of how the Internet as a temporary autonomous zone can be ripe with possibility. For example, the techies of the open source movement, who have in many places aligned themselves with dissident politics and defined themselves against corporate models of technological production, have something to show us about organizational politics through their online engagement. They redefine the terms of collaboration from teamwork and division of labor in the neoliberal sense to an individuality-based collective, where the individual is a core node in the network. I feel this mindset is key to political organizing, which even when deployed for progressive causes, can be so limited when utilizing corporate modes of cooperation. I think the value of the individual in the collective is something that the Internet has showcased in a far better way than the traditional modes of organizing.

Laila: The reason why this type of individual-based collective happens online among open source techies, is because the software is not owned, that is what open source means. But what you get out of it is authorship. So you are an individual but you are not an owner. This non-owner individuality is part of the creative commons movement and is a new type of scholarship.

Lina: This connects to Hoda's point about knowledge as a public good. This same open source tech community is behind the movement around open licensing and resisting copyrights. Rigid copyright regimes should be resisted because they are linked to imaginary notions of ownership over knowledge production and goods. Again, this is an instance where the Internet helps us address a deep-seated political dilemma in productive ways.

Sherene: But people make their livelihoods from this stuff. So what does it mean for authors or artists to put things online? How do we think through open source in that sense?

Dina: The question of ownership does indeed take us back to the question of the livelihoods of academics. I am the editor of a journal (*Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*) and currently we are trying to explore the pros and cons of becoming an open source journal. One of the central questions here is why throw the financial burden on authors who will then be asked to pay around 200 GBP to make their work accessible to all.

Laila: There is a difference between artists and producers. Musicians in Motown did not own their products. Kal'a is an open source tool but you need expertise to implement it.

Hoda: What happens to agency online? Is it a space of freedom or is it a prison, an isolated island? While the web and new technologies have facilitated communication, archiving, knowledge production, and networking, it has also made it easier for surveillance regimes to monitor and censor. I think we, the netizens, are still grappling with the potential and constraints of cyberspace as a public sphere.

Lina: I think agency online is there the moment we are conscious of the limits of the grand promises of the Internet and the moment it is used tactically. Agency online is there the moment the offline and the online worlds are not perceived as a binary, but rather an interlaced world, where one informs the other. This is when the Internet ceases to be a prison with invisible bars. It is interesting to see this agency in the act of opting out of the Internet today. More recently, many people who have pioneered political engagement online have talked about being pushed offline because they are inhibited from the direct bullying, the crowdedness and the resulting estrangement. This is an expression of agency online. Going offline is a manifestation of agency online.

Laila: There is still a critical gap in understanding social media. There are dangers here, when this space is used to make decisions regarding people's lives. Steven Salaita is one example. People online can be vigilantly watched, yet identity online is not easily identifiable. The Internet is a space for security and insecurity, because of the inability to identify who people are. The inability to identify the body online has created hyper insecurities.

Sherene: In a sense, the online/offline binary mirrors the critical gap between academics and activists as knowledge producers, a gap that this project intended to address, and which still haunts our efforts.

Laila: This is an important point for my work, which maps how netizens forge collectivities, publics, and "people," online.

Lina: My project of rewriting a history of digital activism also speaks to this gap. Notably, many of my interlocutors said that they were interviewed many times but never had access to the output, the product of these long interviews. Thus, digital activists were shut out of the process of theorizing knowledge. The priority of providing digital activists, as knowledge producers, a medium with which to speak back is an entry point to rewriting the history of digital activism. This rewriting begins to make sense of a rich and cumulative experience and challenges the hierarchies of knowledge production.

Sherene: The crucial question is then, who gets to practice and who gets to theorize? How do these hierarchies limit what we can know? How do we challenge and undo these hierarchies?

3. How do we navigate hope and hopelessness in times of political upheaval?

Sherene: There was a moment of unprecedented hope in 2011. I personally never thought I would live this kind of hope, this kind of possibility.

Hoda: Yes. During the eighteen magical/mythical days in 2011, for the first time in my adult life, I was really annoyed when asked by journalists about the role of women in the revolution. It was a rare moment when I, many of us, felt that we were beyond categorization, beyond identity politics. Women were marching shoulder to shoulder with their fellow citizens. Gender tensions receded into the background. It was a short-lived moment as reality kicked in soon enough. However, the fact that it happened, told us that it was possible to think of better futures. The fact that we were able to achieve this moment of camaraderie, of control over our fates, of a sense of agency and ability to change the course of history, was life changing. These memories are and continue to be a source of hope.

Pascale: I remember on 28 January 2011, I was in the march leaving from Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque in Mohandiseen. The atmosphere was electric. Chants rang out in unison, deafening. There seemed to be friends everywhere. One of them turned and said to me, we are not as alone as we thought. But it turns out we were alone. That is what 30 June showed us. Now I feel we need to move beyond that shock, and also beyond the facility of

slogans like “despair is betrayal.” Despair, like blind hope, is a kind of complacency that exempts us from the work of living.

Laila: I think in navigating between hope and despair in times of political upheaval, we determined that power and agency are at the thrust of the discussion. But I think that particularly powerful feeling/affect of hope in 2011 was about empowerment. I think people will continue to navigate through this power struggle.

Hoda: From 2011 onward, we have been involved in a battle over hope and morale. To me, most of the battles waged against the revolution since then have not only been over the control of the public space, but also over the morale of protesters and the pro-revolution constituency. There was, and is, an assault on the politics of hope that emerged in 2011. We can characterize events now as a war of attrition against hope and the feeling of empowerment and agency. Archives and archival work that documents the moments of resistance, of power, of agency, of joy, as well as moments of defeat, of disillusionment, of frustration, of reflection and self-criticism, are crucial to the politics of hope in the battle with despair.

Lina: 2011 taught me to think of hope as an exceptional euphoric emotion, and to rejoice when it's there. It needs to stop there, as it is not productive for it to become the sentiment that defines its opposite, namely all the negative sentiments of demoralization, disorientation, and despair. In some way, there is something dysfunctional about hope, just as there is something clearly dysfunctional about hopelessness. Think of when hope is not there as an exceptional euphoric sentiment, it becomes merely enshrined in the quotidian negotiation of everyday life where there is a spectrum of hope and despair in which we constantly fluctuate. I like how Lauren Berlant warns us against using our reactions to exceptional events as a reference, because she sees the suspension of time in these reactions as something that prevents a real understanding of how we manage crisis in the long run. Accordingly, I think the whole discourse of despair is borne out of thinking that the hope of 2011, in fact of those eighteen days in the case of Egypt, is the reference. But what about the resistance that is part and parcel of our everyday lives? Is there not an intricate web of hope and hopelessness there? We should think of crisis as embedded in our everyday lives. It is in the day-to-day management of crisis that amalgams of hope and despair emerge.

*This conversation is published jointly with **Mada Masr**.*