

# Whose Place is this? Places, Publicness and Authoritarian Power in Cairo during the 25<sup>th</sup> of January Revolution

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**Abstract** - On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, protestors stormed Cairo and other Egyptian cities practising their right to the City on a full scale for the first time since the 1919 revolution of Saad Zaghlul.

*This study investigates the impact of the socio-cultural attributes of authoritarian power on public political contestation in Cairo during the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution 2011. Four significant contestation places in Cairo are physically and non-physically described, analysed according to the collective socio-cultural memory.*

*The collective memory concerning the authoritarian right to assert the order of the urban setting played a significant role in ending the protestors' governance of Cairo's streets.*

**Key Words:** Urban studies, Urban Design, The Right to the City, Placemaking, The 25<sup>th</sup> of January Revolution, Cairo, Public Place

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A sound system of central government rules Egypt with the impression of owning the country. Urban spaces in Egypt are called "state-owned spaces," not public! During the Mubarak presidency (1981-2011), Egypt's government comprised technocrats and wealthy businesspeople using the built environment as a vehicle for generating and accumulating wealth [1]. For about two centuries, building and planning legislation was introduced to impose 'control over the built environment in both the short and long terms' [2, p. 188], and imposing control over the built environment should be the result of either Foucault's panoptic or Mathiesen's synoptic powers [3]-[5]. Synoptic power is the 'powerful state networks concerned with generating urban imaginaries created to be viewed as widely as possible.' [5, p. 2]

The political arena in Cairo is plagued with corruption. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1979, Egypt's autonomy and pride have diminished. The political officials use the state's revenues to benefit, neglecting traditional state responsibilities such as developing schools, health care facilities, infrastructure, roadways and preserving security [6, p. 11]. Since the City is considered a functional element of the nation [2, p. 182], Egyptian rulers since Mohammed Ali (1805) showed significant interest in controlling the urban setting in Cairo [7].

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered in Egypt's central Cairo and other cities. Their fundamental demands were: freedom, dissent living, and social justice. Their first confrontations with the police brutality ended up with 846 dead and 6467 wounded. Nevertheless, their unity became their sound point against the police forces, which withdraw from the street of Cairo [8, p. 74].

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) deployed the army in the streets to protect the 'public institutions' and the 'public properties,' as proclaimed. However, the revolution gained momentum against Mubarak's regime thanks to the brutality of the security forces. On the 08<sup>th</sup> of February, Mubarak resigned from office, appointing the SCAF in charge of ruling Egypt [8, p. 75].

In time, demonstrators raised their demands; they demonstrated against austerity measures, privatisations, and state violence. After Mubarak's resignation, the deep-state resumed its media campaign against the protestors on a massive scale to 'divide and conquer' the revolutionary forces. While the deep-state mobilised its forces, the protestors mobilised more activists. These mobilisations' struggle between the protestors and the deep-state forces did not present class struggles but political and cultural. Few weeks after Mubarak's resignation, a territorial dispute took place between the revolutionists and each other. Midan el-Tahrir became a protest and striking ground, replacing its original traffic and transportation functions [9]. A shift in the revolution took place towered occupying the very place, more than protesting against the deep-state's inherited political, cultural, and economic networks.

## 2. AIM AND METHODS

This article investigates the impact of socio-cultural values -as attributes of the panoptic and the synoptic powers- on public places in Cairo and raising a discussion regarding who controls and governs Cairo's public space during the public political contestations. The 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution was chosen since it is the event in which the public fully practised their 'right to the city' [10].

The author will describe and analyse four commonplaces of contestation in Cairo to show controlling versus governing over the revolution's events and activities. Those four places witnessed the start, the transformation, and the end of the revolution. Midan el-Tahrir was the place in which the

revolution started. Mohammed Mahmoud street, in which the revolution developed itself from a defensive to offensive mode. Maspero area in which the contestation took sectarian form. Raba'a el-Adaweya, in which the political contestation against the 2013 military coup took place, and the revolution ended. Other places in Cairo can be seen as typical cases of contestation to the chosen ones.

### 3. PLACE CONTESTATION IN CAIRO

Leaving the political scene to the urban one, Castells [11, p. 378] argued that urban power lies in the streets, public political struggles are expected to find a place in the public spaces. Meanwhile, the state promotes its panoptic power: 'surveillance' [3] or its 'synoptic power': creating a common point of view [4], [5] between the citizen to ensure their obedience. Cairo's young protestors occupied several significant places such as Maspero, Mohammed Mahmoud Street, and the cherry on top: Midan el-Tahrir.

The four places presented different urban contexts, but they all shared the same urban function. Midan el-Tahrir is a significant traffic node. Mohamad Mahmoud is a minor arterial road, and Maspero is a significant road alongside the river Nile. Those three places are within the Cairo centre. Raba'a el-Adaweya is a cross intersection of two major roads in Nasr City, eastern Cairo. None of these places was a public square, suggesting that political contestations can occur in street space. Cairo suffers an absence in Public Squares; all urban places of contestation during the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution were traffic nodes, intersections, or roads, no matter what they are officially called. Differentiating between both cases should shed light on their publicness in the collective memory.

Midan el-Tahrir (meaning: 'liberation place'): Nasser's regime gave it the name after evacuating the British troops from Egypt in 1956. Midan el-Tahrir was not planned as a central place in the City; it grows out of the accumulation of unused spaces that merged over time to form its vast area and shape, 'an urban-planning failure of sorts' [12, p. 184]. In his article 'Circling the Square,' Nasser Rabbat [12] presented Midan el-Tahrir's architectural context's symbolic meanings. Different architectural elements such as the American University in Cairo (the AUC), the Mogamma, the Arab League headquarter, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, and the Nile Hilton hotel presented a summation of Egypt's modern history.

The American University old campus followed the neo-Mamluk style, as Rabbat [13] described it. It overlooks Midan el-Tahrir with its local style and intimate visual impact [14]. The Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, commonly known as the Egyptian Museum, was designed by a French architect and constructed in 1902, representing a French colonial style [12, pp. 184–188]. Tahrir's eastern side is surrounded by residential apartment buildings varying from 11 to 12 stories; they were built following the European architecture colonial style (Cairo downtown's dominant architectural style). Few days after the revolution's start, Midan el-Tahrir

could be described as a destitute power place that deactivates the state mechanism [15]. Midan el-Tahrir became de facto the space for public political contestation. It triggered a new visual culture in Egypt. Creating additional symbolic meanings and turning the space into a place of matter, contestation, and communication [16, pp. 9–10]. However, after occupying the place and successfully facing brutal confrontations, the protestors governed the place.

Mohammed Mahmoud Street: The protestors shifted their activities from the defensive to the offensive mode in the street. Mohammed Mahmoud street is loaded with authoritarian buildings such as the Ministry of Interior Affairs headquarters and the Parliament. By attacking iconic authoritarian buildings such as the Ministry of Interior Affairs headquarters in Mohammed Mahmoud street, the governmental Radio and Television central building in Maspero, and the Defence Ministry headquarters in Abasseyah, demonstrators expressed their vision about the civic authoritarian order. Such an act created the impression that the revolution became about imposing control and occupying places attached to authoritarian power representation. Attacking the Ministry of Interior Affairs headquarters might be seen from the protestors' point of view as contestation against the state's symbol of brutality and 'hegemonic vision of order and control' [17, p. 28]. In a few days, Mohammed Mahmoud street's boundaries became overwhelmed with graffiti memorising the dead and insulting the state's authoritarian symbols and figures. 'During the entire year of 2011, the wall of the old campus of the AUC witnessed fantastic mutations and transformations on weekly bases, epitomised in a constant war that entailed the painting of walls' [18].

Maspero presented an ideal place for short term sectarian contestation in Cairo. The Egyptian army's brutality ended it within a day. Demonstrating in front of the Radio and Television main building challenged the SCAF authoritarian power. The confrontation was the beginning of several sectarian protests and successes of the deep-state's divide and conquered policy.

Raba'a el-Adaweya: After ousting Mohammed Morsi, anti-coup demonstrators occupied several places, Rabaa'a el-Adaweya cross intersection in Medinet Nassr was among them. Medinat Nasr modern architecture, the traffic nature of the place, and the Azhar University campus created the intersection's identity. The area is relatively new compared to Downtown; its planning and construction began in the 1960s; it can be seen in a political relationship to Nasser's attempts to modernise Cairo and strengthen the middle-income classes. One of the two roads forming the cross intersection is called 'Tariq el-Nasr' (meaning: Victory Road), and during Sadat's reign (1970-1981), it was used for military parades celebrating the October 1973 War. Tariq el-Nasr symbolises a high authoritarian power representational place: the Sadat mausoleum, the monument of the unknown soldier, and the presidential observation pavilion. The place

witnessed one of the early brutal confrontations between anti-coup demonstrators and the state's security forces.

#### 4. PUBLICNESS AND AUTHORITARIANISM

It is impossible and misguided to pinpoint any single cause for the failure of the January revolution. Many cumulative and complex factors, including the local historic cultural legacy and its relationship to the built environment, took part. Kumar [27, p. 1032] argued that the City's social spaces are where local people gather and create the City's intangible feeling and attitude, which the community will long remember. The socio-cultural construction of collective memory was a crucial element in creating synoptic power in Cairo. Because the representation of place meaning is 'shaped by the perspective, values and position of those who produce it' [17, pp. 116–117]. In the last two centuries and except for informal housing, the state and its technocrats produced public spaces in Cairo. Hence they might have shaped the collective meanings by their viewing or by synoptic power.

Despite the end of Egypt's British occupation in 1956, the 'discursive practice of colonialism continued' [17, p. 112]. David Spurr (1993, 7) explained colonial discourse's roles as the need to produce and construct cultural, behavioural, and moral differences. Proving one's moral and civilisational superiority was widely used by colonial forces and public media against the local population. It was a vital means to differentiate themselves from the 'other.' Constructing the 'other'; the other as disordered or savages; the other as irresponsible, and the other as an anarchist, are slogans still used by Egyptian elites and media against the poor [28] and were used against the January activists.

In nearly two centuries, layers upon layer of colonial culture embraced an 'inexplicable complexity of collective urban meanings [27, p. 1034]—restructuring communities' thoughts about local urban symbols and meanings ended by creating a synoptic viewing. When local intellectuals look at the European civilisation, they see its spectacular urbanisation and authoritarian power as representational urban symbols. [29] Since Nasser's presidency (1956), most of the cultural activities are directly or indirectly sponsored and controlled by the state 'whether informal or in folk settings' [30, p. 43]. The period of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were periods of great political and cultural movements and urban deformations [31], which imprinted the Egyptians' social life with its new imported political, cultural [32], authoritarian and disciplinary powers [3], [29].

Egyptian corporations have long been experts in the gatekeeping of their viewing, projecting the place branding and 'developing urban imagery conversant with business interests' [5, p. 8]. Such viewing embedded the authoritarian meaning of order and publicness deep in the collective memories. The public space represents and reflects the local culture changes [33], and people are bounded to its historical values [34, p. 141]. As the only producers of the urban space, the authorities drive the collective memory by

practising synoptic viewing. In the last two centuries, the state played various roles in disempowering, narrowing, and constraining the Egyptians. Education, mass media, and sponsored cultural activities created the required synoptic power [7].

Midan el-Tahrir's new symbolic identity of freedom might have been responsible for the protestors' struggle to occupy and re-occupy the place even among each other. Occupying Midan el-Tahrir became a revolutionary objective from different political groups. Rather than challenging the socio-cultural forces enframing the protestors' ideas and concepts, which the deep state rely on, they were trapped within the state's synoptic infrastructure. The protestors' right to occupy and govern the Midan el-Tahrir challenged the state power. Injected with new meanings and symbols, mental and physical, Midan el-Tahrir became a necessary spatial experience of revolution and freedom. Thus 'many lost their lives defending it' [12, p. 184], and occupying the place became the protestors' primary objective. The revolution produced a place where state power was 'matter out of place', as Mary Douglas [35] referred to as symbols out of the established order. The contextual symbols in Midan el-Tahrir brought historic collective memories of national struggles for freedom alive after being dormant for a lengthy period. From 2011 to 2012, struggling for Midan el-Tahrir's conquest continued. Midan el-Tahrir was then increasingly turning into a contested symbolic space 'of a still-unresolved battle' [16, p. 10].

Nevertheless, the idea of state ownership dominated Egyptian collective memory and challenged the demonstrations. The historical authoritarian meanings of Midan el-Tahrir might have been accountable for the denial process during the revolution. After ousting Mubarak, the inherited socio-cultural attributes regained their domination on the protestors' activities.

Spaces support the political vision, a moral re-engineering of social life [21, p. 212] and cultural restructuring of the collective memories. Structuring the collective memory requires recognition that freedom of action in public space should be 'responsible' freedom [23, p. 583]. However, freedom 'that comes without the capacity and power to assert the order of things ought to be understood as the illusion of freedom' [36, p. 184]. Such freedom is related to the urban governance network shaped by different forces or players in a network [37]. During the January revolution, the protestors could not restructure the local governance network by tackling those forces, especially the inherited socio-cultural embedded in their collective memory.

Since 1952, Cairo's administrative framework remained controlled by the army [38, p. 203], creating a synoptic infrastructure for the state's right to control the built environment. The media was intensively used to strengthen the deep state's synoptic power. Demonstrators suffered a cultural dilemma; they had to choose between two ideas: their newly practised right to the City and the authoritarian

inherited right. Uitermark [19] argued that citizens who strive for their urban space would attempt to reacquire the right to the City and everyday life, but in the face of a brutal dictatorship, such a notion is just a dream because it is out of order. Egyptian's mass media and intellectuals widely used the term 'order' during the revolution and after ousting Morsi. While public contestation is not legal in Egypt because of its disorder nature, the traditional disordered festivals of Sufis or Mulids are always welcome [39, p. 89]. However, such a paradox could be understood considering the threats the public contestation creates to state power.

## 5. THE SYNOPTIC ORDER

Imposing the 'appearance of order' [29] resulted from the 'imported state' as Badie [32] described different countries such as Egypt. Creating new political and cultural elites during the 19<sup>th</sup> century changed the Egyptians' perspective of an order [31]. Till the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, el-Azhar, for example, was the heart of many major public contestations. It presented an independent institution from the state, expressing the local public perspective of order. However, such an attitude found a definite shift in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zeghal [40, p. 63] made an interesting remark about her first visit to el-Azhar Mosque in 1992; she was shocked by 'its emptiness'; a friend of hers explained: 'It is a pawn of the state.'

During the January revolution, Egyptian mass media stressed the state's role in establishing and normalising 'the order of things' [41]. They launched an aggressive campaign claiming that the continuous revolutionary activities will bring the country into complete chaos and failure. Nevertheless, their definition of order and normalisation was linked to the state authoritarian perspective. In 'Seeing like a city' by Glass [42, p. 236], he argued that urban planning galleries are interpretive spaces that promote the state's synoptic viewing to convince the public, tourists, and investors that their cities are aspiring a higher and more optimistic future. Colonial forces have used such a tool during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to impress provincial rulers about colonial superiority [29], [43]. The state representatives and army generals made similar claims in Egypt. The claim of developing urban and regional roads to 'bring Egypt in tided order' [44] was a famous electro promise from the presidential candidate in 2014. The New Administrative Capital's marketing gallery and campaign in 2016 aimed at introducing an optimistic and spectacle future under military rule.

Even on the regional scale, the term order was used to attack the revolution. Despite the degraded position in Egypt's political and economic status within the Arab countries, Cairo still presents a strong cultural influence among Arab citizens [45, p. 112]. Thus the impact of the January revolution upon other Arabic courtiers especially, the Gulf states were expected. Regional forces interfered against the revolution to prevent any potential dominos effect. Saudi Arabia even went a step further by considering

the Egyptian revolution *fitan* (religious disorders), 'are worse than assassinations' [12, p. 185].

## 6. PLACE CONTESTATION AND THE SYNOPTIC POWER

Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city' has sparked considerable debate to empower the public [10]. It is viewed as a 'cry and a demand,' a mobilising frame that helps unite urban activists in different cities [46]. The 'right to the city' movement's principal goal is to enhance citizens' power in cities. In some 'right to the city' narratives, citizens' rights are conceived as the movement's focus and not a tactical move to achieve broader political goals [47, p. 453]. If the 'right to the city' is applied to the January revolution, it can be said that the protestors experienced it during their public contestations.

Nevertheless, the SCAF regained complete control of all places of public contestations by the year 2013. The 'right to the city' did not provide the demonstrators' insights on how the built environment works within its governance network. The urban governance network, mainly its socio-cultural forces, played a vital role beyond its physical and symbolic meanings. However, the demonstrators are not to be blamed, because as a political slogan, the concept of the 'right to the city' might inspire at least some urban intellectual activists, but it diverts 'attention away from understanding the role of cities in social movements within and beyond the city' [19].

The 'right to the city' perspective sees the Arab Spring as a relatively homogenous response to urban oppression's shared experience [48]. However, the call for occupying Midan el-Tahrir can be seen as similar to Wall Street's occupation in July 2011. They both represent public contestations in the traffic nodes and streets. Even in a democratic system -like the New Yorker enjoy-demonstrations were considered out of place or event that disturbs the order of things [49]. Practising 'the right to the city' is related to challenging the authoritarian and the synoptic power.

As a contestation place, a significant attribute of its flexible borders became the delicate balance between permit and control. Generating the place flexible borders demonised the state power even further. During their political contestation, the protestors showed evidence of their ability to exercise freedom, cultural and political activities and govern the place. Midan el-Tahrir became a significant symbolic urban icon for the public ability to manage the urban setting. The role lasted through the revolution's duration between the 25<sup>th</sup> of January and the presidential elections of 2012, but it might have triggered the deep-state aggressiveness even further. Demonstrator shifted their action in Midan el-Tahrir from occupation to governance within a few weeks. Groups of young activists took responsibility for public duties and security. Security checkpoints controlled the place entrances for arms and personal identities, cleaning and rubbish disposal groups, and others for cultural and political events. A field hospital

was established in the middle. Street vendors were allowed to participate in the gathering.

The place embedded meaning exceeds its form [28]. Those meanings can alter or redirect people to behave and respond to space as their producer aims. Embedded meanings are produced via the governance network consisting of players, institutions, and forces. The counterrevolutionary forces used the embedded authoritarian meanings in the contestation places to resume Cairo's control. Since 1952, contestation has occurred from time to time.

Nevertheless, during the January revolution, Cairo witnessed an unprecedented conquest of the streets and traffic nodes. Asserting control over the 'urban' was conceived primarily as challenging the state power and creating a paradoxical condition between approaches that could recognise and accept the occupation, recognise but limit the occupation on sectarian groups, and not recognise nor accept the place occupation. The right to the City ends, 'at the boundary of Worldview and the order of things established [36, p. 188]. Pierce, Martin, and Murphy [24, pp. 59, 62] argued that the concept of the right to the City is not adequate for creating social justice in the City.

Demonstrators were practising their right to control the built environment created confrontations with the state. The confrontation was building up because the state power is disturbed [50, p. 263]. While the demonstrators -after Mubarak's resignation- were labelled as 'anarchists,' they presented themselves as freedom activists. Nevertheless, freedom is related to socio-cultural values and the disciplinary power practised by the authorities. To resume authoritarian power and 'order,' the deep-state developed strategies and techniques to re-occupy public places. A strategy like 'divide and conquer' between the demonstrators was widely practised. Sectarian demonstrations helped to divide the revolutionary activists into groups with different interests. Meanwhile, social justice and freedom's struggle took a new shift: it became a struggle over Midan el-Tahrir itself. By ousting Mohammed Morsi in 2013, the Raba'a el-Adaweya cross intersection was considered by some political groups a place for pro-Morsi, not anti-coup protesters.

After ousting Morsi, the aggressive attack on the revolution aimed at polluting its urban symbols. Military tanks, checkpoints, and counterrevolutionary forces surrounded Midan el-Tahrir and used it for their celebration. The place was redesigned in 2020 to eliminate what was left of its revolutionary identity. The brutality of authoritarian security forces, violence, and exclusion against the protesters in Raba'a e-Adaweya created a new place identity, which the SCAF wanted to eliminate. The place was immediately closed after the massacres for renewal to reestablish the order of things as the state defines. All traces of contestation and massacres were removed, and the cross intersection was redefined. A sculpture memorising the police and military power was quickly constructed. In 2020 a

fly-over the cross intersection is constructed, stressing the place's original function as a traffic node. The place became a 'state-owned' traffic node again.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution's failure can be related to many interweaved reasons, including the built environment relationship with the collective socio-cultural memory. The revolution's failure teaches us that Cairo's socio-political justice could not be attained without the public right to assert the order of their urban setting and tackling the synoptic power.

The cumulative socio-cultural forces accomplished what the security forces' brutality could not do in the last decade. Even if the public right to assert the order of their built environment (or ontological freedom) is considered, the synoptic power should not be neglected. Protestors were labeled as 'out of place,' 'other,' and 'anarchists' because their movement was not coherent with the state's and its elites' synoptic viewing.

The protestors' challenging predicament was the inherited collective memory and synoptic power. Cairene were removed from the equation of the urban governing networks two centuries ago. Engaging them once again required restructuring the inherited power network.

Place identity production can cause public political contestation real damage if authoritarian power figurative symbolic meanings invade the place.

The historic cumulative socio-cultural attributes and the deep-state governance network in Midan el-Tahrir and other places strengthened the public acceptance of the urban elites in viewing the authoritarian meaning of order.

Protestors failed to realise that their primary aim was not controlling the public space but should have been focused on de-assembling the authoritarian power's socio-cultural attributes, the old political and economic systems, and negotiating the historical and symbolic meanings of the place.

Young middle-class protestors unconsciously ignored the power networks that dominate Cairo. Unchallenging the Egyptian cumulative cultural legacy was as crucial to the revolution's failure as other factors.

Two centuries of living with the state's disciplinary power, cultural and social restructuring disempowered the public.

While the January revolution presented the people's ability to clamming their 'right to the city,' the revolution's failure showed the authority's ability to reclaim that right again, presenting a weak side of 'the right to the city' as a slogan.

After the military coup, the deep state re-created the physical identity of significant contestation places, showing its disciplinary power again.

The January revolution taught us that without having the right to govern and assert the order of the public place, collective political and social movements will face enormous difficulties.

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