CHAPTER 25

The Activity of Tahrir

Whereas the previous two chapters offered a detailed description of the 18 Days, the next two chapters investigate the developmental dynamic of the Republic of Tahrir, paying attention to the transformation of demonstration into occupation, the instructive role of the counterrevolution, spontaneity, division of labor, forms of instruction, the formation of new goals and activities, and the projection of the square.

Extended Reproduction

The 25 January uprising marked the transition from the ‘original accumulation’ to the ‘extended reproduction’ of the revolutionary process. Although the sudden eruption of popular protests created the impression that “Before the revolution nothing happens and then during the revolution everything happens all the time,” the activity of the insurrection drew heavily on the projects of revolt that came before. Civil democratic and working class movements, organizations, networks, and individual actors were able to inject the knowledge and practice of revolt that they had acquired during the previous decade into the mass protests. Without this ‘original accumulation’, the uprising would not have been possible. However, this does not mean that the insurrectionary phase was but a quantitative – bigger and louder – continuation of earlier protests. Quite the contrary: as soon as the masses entered the political field, the activity of revolt acquired a qualitatively novel and autonomous dynamic. The formation of national-popular and proletarian subjects was accelerated in this war of movement mode of struggle. Revolution constituted a new social situation of development for these subjects, but also an activity and collaboration in its own right, entailing different phases of development. Previous projects of revolt were ‘nested’ in the new revolutionary collaboration. The emerging project of revolution was, at the same time, a revolution of projects.

Conceiving of the complex and non-linear sequence of events the 25 January uprising as a single project calls forth the problem of an ‘entry point’

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1 Interview with Sabry Zaky, Cairo, 10 March 2011.
2 Cf. Chapter 4.
that allows for an understanding of the amorphous whole as a coherent and cohesive process. I suggest ‘Tahrir’ as a unit of analysis\(^3\) of the insurrection (cf. De Smet 2014b). Tahrir became almost synonymous with the 25 January Revolution, although it constituted a discrete collaboration within the wider process, pushing forward the development of the entire struggle. After the defeat of the police on Friday 28 January: “[…] Tahrir […] became the epicenter of a revolution. Protesters not only transformed it, they were themselves transformed by their presence in it. Tahrir became a revolutionary organism unto itself […]” (Khalil 2012, 5). There were various reasons why Tahrir was able to play such a role. Firstly, from a spatial perspective, Midan Tahrir was a center of Cairo, and in turn of the whole of Egypt, as it represented: “[…] a major transport hub surrounded by vital elements of the state apparatus: the parliament, several ministerial buildings, and the imposing Mogamma’ […]” (Rashed 2011, 23). Secondly, its name, ‘Liberation Square’ referred to the 1919 revolutionary uprising against the British. Thus it became a favorite gathering place for national events: “Egyptians have poured into Tahrir to celebrate soccer victories, to mourn the passing of national icons, and to protest injustice” (Shokr 2012, 41). In 2003 Tahrir had become already the symbolic locale of political mobilization, when demonstrators occupied the square for ten hours in protest against the war in Iraq (Khalil 2012, 39). Thirdly, the project of Tahrir developed much faster than the revolution as a whole, constituting its collaborative vanguard, and proleptically projecting a potential line of development for the whole process: “When protesters arrived at Tahrir on January 29, they did not come with the intention of creating a radical utopia […]. As the revolution unfolded, Tahrir was elevated from a rally site to a model for an alternative society” (Shokr 2012, 42). From a mere space of protest, Tahrir developed into a project in its own right.

**Demonstration**

There were two central activities that pushed forward the development of Tahrir as a project, and so, in turn, the whole revolution: demonstration and occupation. ‘Demonstration’ was the first form of collaboration that emerged in the square on Tuesday 25 January. As I discussed in Chapter 6 in abstract terms, the demonstration is the cell-form of the national-popular subject, initiating the political line of development. The 25 January uprising started as a demonstration, a showing of discontent: a clear message directed at those in

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3 Cf. Chapter 4.