The Organization of Tahrir

In the previous chapter I investigated the transformation of the leading activity of Tahrir from demonstration into occupation. The next chapter continues the analysis of the developmental dynamic of the square, focusing on questions of organization, instruction, and consciousness.

Spontaneous Organization

One of the features of the budding revolutionary activity-system most celebrated by activists, journalists, and political scientists alike, was its ‘spontaneity’. As Rosa Luxemburg posited with regard to the Russian Revolution of 1905, the notion of spontaneity is crucial to an understanding of the revolutionary process “[...] because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them” (Luxemburg 1970, 188). It is from the masses themselves that springs, in Trotsky’s words, “[...] that leaping movement of ideas and passions which seems to the police mind a mere result of the activities of ‘demagogues’” (Trotsky 2001, 18). A popular revolution is not engineered by demagogues, parties or activists, but it is the activity of the people itself.

However, when spontaneity is opposed to organization, the concept acquires a mystical character. There was nothing unorganized about the committees that defended, cleaned,1 entertained, and governed Tahrir. If anything, they represented “spontaneous order out of chaos” (Bamyeh 2011). The notion of spontaneity does not exclude organization or centralization; it denotes the organic, bottom-up origins of the cohesion, coherence, and systematicity of a project. Leadership and organizational centralization are not antithetical to the spontaneous self-organization of the masses, but they constitute a higher, more elaborate phase in the development of its systemic activity.

Moreover, there is no mystical emergence of ‘order out of chaos’: the socio-genetic logic behind ‘spontaneous organization’ is that of a collective learning process: performance produces competence.2 The ‘outward’-oriented activity of occupation turned ‘inward’, transforming structures that had been developed

1 “Garbage is continuously collected at the demonstration and on the main streets by volunteers in a country that until now has been full of garbage anywhere you turn” (Schielke 2011).

2 Cf. Chapter 4.
as external weapons against the state into internal means of self-governance. Revolutionary collaboration created, on the one hand, its own division of labor, organic intellectuals, rules, relations, material tools, and signs; and, on the other, it appropriated the traditions of existing systems such as the Ultras’ movement and the religious *mulid* as organizational means for political protest (cf. Keraitim and Mehrez 2012).

The interiorization of the revolution also entailed a psychological struggle, which represented an attempt to correct the disturbed organic relation between everyday and scientific modes of thinking. The good sense that constituted a reflection of the activity of protesting and occupation in thought, came increasingly into contradiction with the dominant ideologies, which had denied the national-popular subject any real subjectness. Salah Abd al-Azim poetically referred to this process as “tearing down the idols in ourselves.” Harriet Sherwood narrated that: “People are eloquent about the reasons for their uprising. [...] One of the most memorable comments in a day, a week, of memorable conversations comes from a guy who tells me he has come ‘to fight the fear inside me’” (Guardian News Blog 6/2, 2011). Bamyeh (2011) explained that:

More than one participant mentioned to me how the revolution was psychologically liberating, because all the repression that they had internalized as self-criticism and perception of inborn weakness, was in the revolutionary climate turned outwards as positive energy and a discovery of self-worth, real rather than superficial connectedness to others, and limitless power to change frozen reality.

**BAMYEH 2011**

**Technical Assistance**

Tahrir became a project of life in almost all its facets and as such it required some form of governance. As the state was forcefully driven away, practices of self-governing emerged from the developed collaboration of occupation: “Daily struggles to hold the space and feed its inhabitants, without the disciplined mechanisms of an organized state, were exercises in democratic process. It was through these everyday practices that Tahrir became a truly radical space” (Shokr 2012, 44). British actor Khaled Abdallah, who was among the protesters in Tahrir, declared that: “Midan Tahrir [...] has now become like a mini state that works and will function as long as it needs to in order to get what this

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3 Cf. Chapter 7.
4 Interview with Salah Abd al-Azim, Cairo, 22 March 2011.