

# ‘When will we be ready for democracy?’

## The mobilisation of deviance as counterrevolutionary technology in Egypt<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

*In a 2011 interview, then-Vice President Omar Suleiman declared that Egyptians are not ready for democracy, in response to mass anti-regime protests around Egypt. More peculiarly, protesters have been accused of trying to implement foreign (western) agendas, being perverts and homosexuals, and disrupting domestic cohesion. Discourses that attach deviance—ascribed as a western attribute—to open resistance have since prevailed. This article argues that the historical imagination of the evils of westernisation, delegitimises the revolution and its revolutionaries, while at the same time reproduces the figure of the monolithic normative (Honourable) Egyptian citizen, as docile and counterrevolutionary. In employing figuration as a method, I examine the emergence of the figure of the Egyptian Male Homosexual through the 2001 Queen Boat incident and argue that the mobilisation of figures of deviance acts as a counterrevolutionary technology that long preceded revolution. I suggest that rather than designate failure to the revolution, we should look elsewhere for the new potential for a resistance that disrupts these figurations and their effects. Through a counter-conduct analytic, the article posits that local human rights work is undertheorized as an important space to contest the power that conducts and encourages resistance.*

### **Introduction**

By early February 2011 when then-President Mubarak was ousted as a result of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution, protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square had been accused, ample times, of being foreign agents, a threat to national security,

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and obstructing the wheel of production, both in the media and in official discourses. Protesters were also disparagingly accused of being homosexuals, paid in dollars and Kentucky Fried Chicken meals.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, in an ABC interview (2011), then-Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that ‘Egyptians are not ready for democracy’, Egypt simply does not have ‘the culture of democracy’,<sup>3</sup> evoking an age-old trope that Egyptians are just *not there yet*, and perhaps will never be on a par with ‘the West’. More recently, prominent pro-regime TV host Ahmed Moussa proclaimed that the waving of a Rainbow Flag (for the first time) in 2017 at a Mashrou’ Leila<sup>4</sup> concert in Cairo ‘only took place after [because of] the events of the January 2011’. Seven people were arrested as a result<sup>5</sup> and Moussa demanded that such a case be treated as a national security case ‘because Egypt is a Muslim country’.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, another journalist, Dandarawy al-Hawary, wrote, ‘the Mashrou Leila queers are part of the April 6 Organisation<sup>7</sup> and have participated in the January 25 events. They also support a homosexual organisation in Egypt’.<sup>8</sup>

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2 Abdulrahim, Raja. “KFC gets a bad rap in Egypt”. *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-feb-07-la-fg-egypt-kentucky-20110208-story.html>.

3 Sussman, Anna Louie. “Laugh, O Revolution: Humor in the Egyptian Uprising”. *The Atlantic*, February 23, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/laugh-o-revolution-humor-in-the-egyptian-uprising/71530/>.

4 Mashrou’ Leila is an internationally renowned Lebanese band whose lead singer, Hamed Sinno, is openly gay.

5 N.a. “Seven arrested in Egypt after raising rainbow flag at concert”. *BBC News*, September 26, 2017. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41398193>.

6 Sada ElBalad. “Ahmed Moussa uncovers new information about the Mashrou’ Leila concert,” trans. Author. September 25, 2017. Video, 4:28. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ld3D\\_qjN7WI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ld3D_qjN7WI).

7 The April 6 Youth Movement is a dissident organisation that is often cited as central to the 2011 Revolution and has been deemed by the regime as foreign and conspiratorial. The movement was banned by an Egyptian court on 28 April 2014.

8 Dandarawy al-Hawary. “Mashrou’ Leila queers belong to the April 6 Youth Movement, participated in January 25, and support a homosexual organisation

Such narratives also resonated outside of media and official discourses and I have encountered them first-hand during my participation in protests from January 2011 onwards. One particular incident frequently comes to mind when on a very hot July day in 2011, I marched from Cairo’s Tahrir Square towards the Ministry of Defence, to protest against the ubiquitous military trials of civilians under the power of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF – Mubarak’s interim successor).<sup>9</sup> Upon greeting a friend in the crowd, a man on the sidewalk shouted at us: ‘Is this the freedom you are calling for? You start a revolution so you can smoke hash on the streets like in the West?’ Only to realise that my friend had tobacco in his hand and was rolling a cigarette. Before we were able to reach the Ministry’s quarters, army tanks and barbed wire blocked us and a vicious yet expected attack by locals in the neighbourhood ensued. People in civilian clothes (sometimes referred to as thugs by protesters, and as ‘honourable citizens’ by the regime) charged at us with kitchen knives and other ‘light’ weapons. Army men watched as dozens of us were attacked while others scrambled to escape a very tight cordon. On the train back home, surrounded by protesters who were injured and shocked, the words from the man on the sidewalk started to resonate. I became increasingly angry because his words reduced our struggle to a narrative of welcoming ‘westernisation’. Our march to stop arbitrary arrests, to demand and imagine a different future, were understood as a mere demand for *selfish* and *licentious* personal rights. *Freedom* was fixed at the West. Freedom does not suit us; we are not ready for democracy.

Discourses of dissidents aspiring to be (an)*Other* and threatening national security, resonate in other locales too. However, the Egyptian case in particular exposes the prevalence and intelligibility of conspiratorial discourses and their ‘paralysing impact’: ‘The widespread belief in conspiracies and plots as driving forces behind political developments and social conflicts, is increasingly identified as a major obstacle to the management of change and transformation in contemporary Egyptian political culture’ (Nordbruch, 2007: 71). Indeed, I depart from this assessment; the belief in conspiracies, in ‘foreign agendas’ continues to obstruct transformational change. But

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in Egypt,” trans. Author. Youm 7, September 26. 2017. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2FsUvIO>.

9 “Egypt: Retry or Free 12,000 After Unfair Military Trials”. Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/egypt-retry-or-free-12000-after-unfair-military-trials>.

*where* do these beliefs come from? *What* does this have to do with (homo) sexuality? *Why* do these conspiratorial discourses reverberate powerfully within our communities over revolutionary demands of ‘bread, freedom, and social justice’? And, what are the implications of this on understanding and practicing resistance in Egypt?

Thus, I am curious about the tropes and accusations of *westernisation, perversion, and duplicitousness* that are attached to the figure of the revolutionary, and the deviance attached to revolution in Egypt today. The main question I engage is: *How have postcolonial and contemporary Egyptian discourses on deviance produced a counterrevolutionary impetus; and what implications does this have on practices of resistance and transformational change?*

This article suggests that the mobilisation of figures of deviance, particularly the figure of the Egyptian Male Homosexual, is a counterrevolutionary technology. I depart from the year 2001 and take the case of the Queen Boat—where 52 allegedly gay men were arrested aboard a discotheque moored in the Nile and tried in an emergency state security court—as the beginning of a specific kind of national identity construction, particular to the intensification of Egypt’s internationalisation after the end of the Cold War. This is to highlight the ways in which (homo)sexuality politics—located within a moral panic over the ‘evils of westernisation’—plays a significant role in enacting closures and displacing resistances in Egypt, as well as to explore the potential to open up different and more profound spaces for resistance. I deploy the method of figuration in order to understand the meanings attached to deviance (through the figure of the Male Homosexual) and normalcy (through the figure of the Honourable Citizen) and what kind of world these meanings create. In looking at how both these figures act as ordering and ‘straightening devices’ (Ahmed, 2006), and departing from the notion that discourse is productive, I analyse official statements and statements in popular media that show how gay subjectivities in Egypt are figured since 2001 and mobilised in opposition to normative Egyptian citizenship to create strict binary distinctions between East and West. I also use semi-structured interviews I conducted in Cairo in January 2019 with self-identified gay men and local human rights defenders, in order to go beyond articulations of homosexuality in discourse and examine the lived experiences of this figure. The aim here is to show that the lived and embodied experiences of gay men and human rights actors opens up new spaces for resistance, this is further illustrated by the concomitant use of counter-conduct analysis to examine how subjects exceed their figuration

and choose their own conduct. Due to the sensitivity of the research, as crackdowns on homosexuality and human rights defenders continue today, the identities of the interviewees are hidden and pseudonyms are used instead.

The first part of the article explores the figure of the Honourable (model Egyptian) Citizen in relation to counterrevolution literature in International Relations (IR) and makes the argument that such literature eschews an analysis of the role of discursive constructions of Egyptianness (as anti-Western) in reproducing a counterrevolutionary subjectivity. Such constructions can and do limit the possibilities of being together with others—who imagine and live Egyptianness differently—and limits the possibility to imagine and build something new. Drawing from various Queer Studies scholars (Puar, 2007; Rao, 2010; Amar, 2013; Weber, 2016), the second part of the article suggests a methodological approach that reclaims sexuality outside of its conventional 'private' and domestic realm and positions it within the logics of national identity (Pratt, 2005), sovereignty (Weber, 2016), and of central importance to this article, resistance. Here, I draw upon the concept of figuration to highlight the way nationalist repertoires are employed in order to demobilise dissent and reproduce autocratic rule (Naguib, 2020:52). Moral panics (Cohen, 1972) around figures of deviance, such as the Male Homosexual and the prosecution of same-sex desire, have allowed for the construction of a counterrevolutionary vigilante, a quintessential hero, the figure of the Honourable Citizen, the model Egyptian citizen who is male, heterosexual, and docile. Put somewhat differently, the figuration of deviance onto the homosexual body not only represses but also generates counterrevolutionary subjects who 'loyally repeat the nation' (Haritaworn, 2008) and in doing so, reproduce less visible—though powerful—limitations and challenges to change and socio-political transformation. The third part applies the framework of figuration to the case study of the Queen Boat to illustrate the constitutive relationship between figurations of homosexuality and the cultural and moral construction of Egyptian subjectivity. The fourth part briefly engages the implications of reading counterrevolution as such on practices of resistance. This is an attempt to encourage us to look beyond notions of failure or success of revolution, as 'resistance stretches far beyond various, more obvious articulations such as revolutions and demonstrations, and includes a much wider scope than is immediately visible' (Baaz, Lilja, & Vinthagen, 2017: 191). Here I use a counter-conduct analytic to foreground less visible resistances. Finally, I draw together the main arguments and

conclude that certain discursive ‘truths’ and power configurations need to be uncovered, deconstructed, and recontextualised in order to be able to escape them and build anew.

## **The Counterrevolutionary Vigilante: Egypt’s Honourable Citizens**

The honourable citizen has important qualities that we should all have [...] the level of patriotism in their blood is very high. This is why you see them suddenly appearing on the balconies in their homes, carrying pots of boiling water, dumping them on the heads of the dishonest citizens who are walking the back streets, shouting and screaming in the name of social and political justice [...] These voices [of protesters] cause sound pollution that has to be combated and eliminated. You may find gas bombs that they have kept in their homes, as a precaution, to ward off any strife that the rioters may cause, when their [‘rioters’] foreign masters give them orders to start implementing their plots and agendas on our beautiful homelands. Honourable citizens also suddenly appear in the squares and the streets where dishonest citizens may pass, fighting these evil forces, armed with simple honest tools, such as sticks and knives [...] The honourable citizens are convinced that freedom, if it settles here, will only cause chaos in our orderly homeland.<sup>10</sup>

Rasha Omran, a poet and writer, tells us—sarcastically—a succinct story about figure of the *honourable* citizen, which emerged in Egypt in the early days of the 2011 Uprising. ‘I love you Egypt’, says Karim Badawy enthusiastically to BBC cameras.<sup>11</sup> Karim, a local print house owner, describes himself as an honourable citizen, loyal to his country and staunchly anti-opposition, ‘me, my neighbourhood, and my family, anyone who says anything about him [Sisi] in bad faith or anyone who opposes him, will find us on their tail, now is not the time for opposition’, says Karim. And of course, President

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10 Omran, Rasha. “The Honourable Citizens,” trans. Author. *The New Arab*, April 30, 2016. Accessed March 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3ady6JR>.

11 Gamal Eddine, Ali. “Who are the honourable citizens in Egypt?,” trans. Author. *BBC Arabic*, June 20, 2016. Accessed March 23, 2020. [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/06/160618\\_egypt\\_honorable\\_citizens](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/06/160618_egypt_honorable_citizens).

Sisi himself has called upon ‘the honest honourable citizens’ to protest on the 26th of July 2013 in order to provide him with the mandate to ‘fight violence and terrorism’ against the backdrop of the military coup that had ousted previous Muslim Brotherhood president, Morsi’.<sup>12</sup>

These pronouncements clearly show that even in authoritarian and/or militaristic regimes, power is never solely concentrated in the state apparatus but circulates among the body politic. More generally, nationalist discourses on citizenship reproduce ‘good’ or ‘honourable’ citizens to be the markers of normalcy and to ‘exude’ a specific national sovereignty. Thus, the view here is that ‘Citizenship is, inherently, a normativizing project—a project that regulates and disciplines the social body in order to produce model identities and hegemonic knowledge claims’ (Brandzel, 2016: 5). The good Egyptian citizen is figured as a moderate and pious Muslim, *he* puts nation above the self, and *he* positions *himself* against western conduct and morality. In Omran’s quote, the honourable citizen can only exist in contrast to the anti-regime protesters. They are pure and unadulterated by foreign agendas or foreign masters, for them freedom is not a goal, *stability* is. Often found in protests supporting the regime, or simply attacking anti-regime protesters, honourable citizens have been an important figure in the past decade. Walter Armbrust (2013) argues that counterrevolutionary demonstrations by ‘honourable citizens’ have played a pivotal role in defeating revolutionary momentum. These demonstrations were further mobilised by various media presenters, inciting hatred and violence against revolutionaries and calling upon the honourable citizens to protect their country.

In participating in this counterrevolutionary discourse and practice, these demonstrators do not simply want to restore the pre-2011 situation. Armbrust argues that power is not static in the contestation between revolution and counterrevolution. In this contestation, power is reconfigured and is ‘particularly prone to generating perverted forms of social knowledge’ (Armbrust, 2013: 838). Perverted knowledges—such as those that fix freedom in a western and perverse register, undesirable for Egypt and Egyptians—justify violence against those who call for social justice. Violence against anti-regime activists and protesters, encouraged and carried out by these honourable citizens, is thus narrated as a desired vigilantism against

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12 *BBC News*. “Egypt’s Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short.” BBC News, June 17, 2019. Accessed March 23, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18371427>.

perverse conduct. Correspondingly, 'revolutionaries' who are concerned with the legitimacy and tenability of their claims, enact a politics of closure to demonstrate their authenticity and are themselves implicated in the same perverted forms of social knowledge. When asked about her experience in the revolution, one interlocuter recounted:

There was always this overarching notion that we are girls who behave and look a certain way [read westernised] so there was always this negotiation of whether or not to go to protests. Male organisers would argue that we need to focus on the bigger picture and bring people to our side, basically by hiding us, and on the other side of it, there were also security concerns as security forces would sometimes target us.<sup>13</sup>

In his fiction novel about a young gay man in WANA (Western Asia and North Africa), Saleem Haddad highlights this tension between the euphoria of collective resistance, and certain identities within the revolutionary camp who are framed as problematic in furthering resistance:

The protests had felt like the most authentic thing I had done in my life. Now they felt like a martyrdom operation to help a new generation of dictators come to power [...] How could I share my political dreams with those in the squares when I couldn't even share my personal ones? I joined the protests so that I would no longer have to wear a mask. What's the point of risking your life to remove a mask only to have to wear a different one? (Haddad, 2016: 86)

The figuration of the Honourable Citizen points us towards hidden spaces where normativity is produced. This provides an analytical opening to trouble linear and binary distinctions between revolution and counterrevolution. In this next section, I read revolution, counterrevolution, and all that is in between, through the metaphor of the pendulum, where certain openings and closures are constantly taking place. Thus, revolution does not necessarily precede counter-revolution; they are both in constant motion, constant tension. I find that using this metaphor better captures how 'power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them' (Foucault, 2003 [1975-6]: 29). To expand, there is no one locus of power that moves the pendulum towards closure while a force on the other end is pushing back in response.

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12 Confidential interview with Hind, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.



Instead of putting the state in a position of power against less powerful actors of resistance, my contention here is that the different actors moving the pendulum do so in a number of ways and not always in the same direction. Put more explicitly, those deemed agents of resistance are *not* ‘always already’ pushing the pendulum in the direction of an opening, and vice versa. What moves the pendulum I argue, are discourses and practices along an axis that, on the one end incites the *forsaking of multiplicity*, and on the other end, inspires the recognition of difference and practice of solidarity.

## **Problematising the Linear Temporality of Revolution/Counterrevolution**

Within IR theory, there is a tendency to polarise revolution and counterrevolution as binary opposites, therefore viewing counterrevolution as merely a reaction to revolution. This view also implies that resistance is only a response to the coercive state apparatus, particularly in authoritarian contexts and ignores the complex power relations that clearly show that ‘subjects become entangled in and performative of complex forms of governance’ (Rossdale & Stierl, 2016: 158). Moreover, IR’s dominant focus on the outcomes of revolution rather than its processual elements, automatically assigns failure to most, if not all, WANA revolutions that have taken place in the past decade, perhaps with the exception of Tunisia (Allinson, 2019). Crucially, this focus on outcomes carries an implicit understanding of revolutionary success along a western developmental axis, which reinforces a linear temporality of social change where moving towards building liberal democratic state institutions is the ultimate goal. If applied to the specific case of Egypt, the revolution failed the moment the July 2013 coup succeeded, which instated a direct military dictatorship. Egyptians are yet again ‘lagging behind’.

For Bisley (2004), however, counterrevolution ‘should be understood as part of a broader political process deriving from internationalised social conflict’ (54). In this way, the intensification of the internationalisation of Egypt under a new post-Cold War regime of globalisation has necessitated an intensification in counterrevolutionary measures. Nicola Pratt makes the argument that ‘cultural processes associated with globalisation [are] perceived to be threatening Egyptian national sovereignty’ (2005: 80). However, this does not entail that the Egyptian state is only reactive to or external to the processes of globalisation. Paul Amar (2013) identifies

new modes of governance emanating from countries in the global South like Egypt and Brazil particularly at the end of the millennium. Amar explains how the South has generated its own governance model, what he coins the 'human-security regime'. In Egypt, this model established a new logic to security; by imagining and perpetuating new threats to the public and to culture, and positing the state as the protector of a fixed Egyptian identity, 'certain subjects were rendered responsible for urban insecurities associated with globalisation, while creating immunity for other powerful groups and processes' (68). Through mobilising new logics to sexuality within governance, 'homosexuals' bore the responsibility of the supposed moral and economic slump that Egypt was facing at the time. Preventing what policymakers termed 'the perversions of globalisation' (71) had become the foundation of nationalist rhetoric. This has profound implications on local capacities for resistance, as Pratt argues, maintaining and reproducing a particular postcolonial understanding of Egyptian national identity 'in the context of globalisation and ever-increasing transnational linkages acts to undermine attempts to promote civil and political freedoms' (Pratt, 2005: 69-70) and produces a political consensus, even among civil society actors, that 'excludes the possibility of fluidity and heterogeneity, thereby contributing to creating a climate in which civil and political freedoms may be *legitimately* sacrificed in the name of national unity and security' (70, my emphasis).

The figuration of normative citizenship has relied on centring an ideal masculine, impenetrable, normalised and heteronormative male body and has been central to the survival of the postcolonial Egyptian state. The counterrevolution has tapped into a much longer history of anti-colonialism and political homophobia and this has long stood against progressive change. Counterrevolution (through a technology of citizenship) uses gendered, sexualised, and classed bodies as proxy for the nation and (dis)locates threats to the nation in 'westernised', corrupted bodies. Thus, through tapping into colonial and neoliberal anxieties, counterrevolutionary politics work through many ways, most notably through figurations of deviance and perversion.

Here citizenship is always in a state of becoming, a continuously unfolding set of exclusionary practices and discourses. This is why discourses around westernised and perverse protesters, once mobilised, act as an immediate counterrevolutionary technology. Therefore, counterrevolution is not an event that suddenly appears and takes place after revolution, it is rather a process that fails or succeeds in its own right, its success can be

determined by the extent to which its discourses are taken up and practiced. In the next section I engage with the concept of Counterrevolutionary Discourse (CRD) in order to highlight a partial history of counterrevolution that goes back to the constitution of the Egyptian subject under colonialism.

## Counterrevolutionary Discourse

Anti-western sentiment and political homophobia are existential and foundational to the postcolonial Egyptian state, they are engrained into the logics of nationalism since before Independence. David Scott advances the notion that colonial political rationalities have been ‘inserted into *subject-constituting* social practices’ (1999: 28, emphasis in original). Scott continues:

With the formation of the political rationality of the *modern* colonial state, not only the rules of the political game but *the political game itself* changed – not only did the relation of forces between coloniser and colonised change, but so did *the terrain* of the political struggle itself [...] resistance [...] would have to articulate itself in relation to this comprehensively altered situation (29, emphasis in original).

To expand, colonial discourses have grossly misrepresented the colonised subject, and yet, their power lies in how they have been internalised and continue to inform subaltern identities, especially in their ability to interact with, and be detrimental to contemporary uprisings and revolutions. Colonialism has particularly constructed gendered and sexualised figures of perversion to justify intervention and exploitation. For example, the legacy of colonialism in the contemporary prosecution and persecution of same-sex love in Egypt and the wider region has been well studied (Massad, 2007; El-Rouayheb, 2009). Many scholars have also demonstrated how sex is a tool of statecraft, as Katherine Franke argues:

State efforts to eradicate the traces of empire and to resurrect an authentic postcolonial nation have produced sexual subjects that serve as a kind of existential residue and reminder of a demonised colonial past and absence [...] the management of sex becomes a tool of governance that produces individual unfreedom in the name of expanding national freedom or independence (2004: 68).

Franke argues that the Egyptian state has attempted to ‘secure the symbolic purity of Egyptian culture’ (80). These ‘sexual subjects’ that serve as a reminder

of a demonised colonial past, facilitate the reproduction of different meanings and figures in registers outside of sexuality, i.e. in the register of nationalism. But colonial legacies did not only result in internalising homophobia, they also play a central role in limiting resistance. In his work on CRD, Govand Azeez notes that colonial power ascribes the colonised subject with regimes of truth that 'impose permanent restrictions and techniques of surveillance on the processes of subjectivity and resistance' (2015, 119). It is in this vein that revolution in the WANA region is fixed at an orientalist understanding that limits its potential. For Azeez, counterrevolutionary discourse functions as a:

Psychological, socio-cultural discursive amalgam and a tautological performative creed that Middle Eastern revolutions, due to occult and solidified Eurocentric-Orientalist truths, are Islamic, impulsive, conservative, irrational, anarchic, violent, tribal or ethnic. At best, the revolutions are mere attempted failures at capitalist modernity and nationalism by a few hopeful westernized or Western-supported Orientals importing foreign philosophies, ideals and concepts (122).

These discourses inform the dominant western developmental temporality of revolution. Such enduring discourses are also what informs these anti-revolutionary honourable citizens, in their portrayal of the protesters in 2011 as westernised agents and dupes of empire. Egyptian resistance then becomes lost, silenced and misrepresented within this dominant discourse. But this is not to imply that the outcome of revolution is predetermined, or that counterrevolution is unchallenged. On the contrary, if we recognise that the discourse of counterrevolution is 'functional and generative; it does things, brings about durable effects, regulates practices and behaviour rather than merely misrepresents the state of affairs' (122), then disrupting these discourses might have more desired generative effects. Azeez's CRD connects with Scott's work that aims to destabilise 'the normalised *telos* of a developmental process' (Scott, 1999: 35) that which modernity is built on, in how it uncovers the impact of discursive lineages from the past on contemporary resistance.

Other recent work that highlights how counterrevolution functions at the level of the subject is carried out by Boon and Head (2018). They have studied trauma in the Egyptian context, before, during, and after the revolution and argue that 'trauma is inherently *political*' (262, emphasis in

original). Trauma is not just an individual experience but collective and constitutes a counterrevolutionary colonisation (Habermas, 2015 [1981]), where ‘counterrevolutionary actors destroyed [revolutionary] hopes through extreme physical violence, harsh social polarisation, repressive laws and exclusionary backhand deals [...] and closed public space and the potential for a transformed public sphere’ (Boon & Head, 2018: 264). While true that such repressive articulations of power have impeded the ‘potential for a transformed public sphere’, counterrevolutionary actors here are seen as separate from the revolutionaries (as binary opposites), neglecting the ways in which counterrevolutionary discourses and practices circulate within the revolution itself. As well, this emphasis on coercion falls into the same trap that views authoritarian power articulations as only coercive and leaves other forms of power unrecognised. This, I argue, obscures less visible forms of resistance to *other* forms of power. Comparably, El Hady, an Egyptian LGBTQ activist notes:

The state was very quick to adopt this as a counterrevolutionary tool. ‘This is what the revolution brought onto us,’ they would argue. January 25 almost immediately came into the narrative [...] the state was always talking about what happened at Tahrir Square in terms of sexual deviance, perversion, et cetera. This ‘sexuality’ dimension has always complimented the counterrevolutionary rhetoric that Sisi adopted.<sup>14</sup>

In the next section I will highlight the framework of figuration in order to show the ‘persistence of the past in the present’ (Ahmed, 2004: 187) and to expand on the workings of the non-coercive and indirect articulations of counterrevolution.

## **Figuration: The Forsaking of Multiplicity as Counterrevolutionary Technology**

With the aim of developing a Queer IR method, Cynthia Weber (2016) illustrates how ‘specific meanings of sexualities and sexual subjectivities are produced through specific – even repressive – discursive formulations

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14 El Hady, Ahmed. “The Crisis of LGBTQ Communities in Egypt: Questions for Ahmed El Hady”. The Century Foundation. May 2, 2019. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/crisis-lgbtq-communities-egypt-questions-ahmed-el-hady/>

that bring [...] sexual subjectivities like the “homosexual” into being’ (6-7). Through analysing how ‘sex is put into discourse’ (6) and the effects of such discourse (understood here as productive power), Weber shows how certain sexualised figures participate in the ‘construction of sexualised orders in international relations’ (22) and that sovereignty(ies) (understood as a construct) is called upon to construct identities that authorise and perpetuate domestic and international orders. Queer here is mobilised to indicate non-heterosexual subjectivities and practices, but also to denote ambivalence and instability of meaning and of figures. Queer methodology opens up the space to disrupt normalcy and otherness, it illuminates how dichotomies do not allow certain things to exist, queer ‘resists definition, uniformity and cohesion. It examines how normal is made specifically with regards to sexuality’ (Manning, 2009: 2). Queer figurations examine how lines of normalcy are drawn and provides an understanding of the production of normalcy, which collapses binaries such as ‘straight’/perverse and allows us to see them for what they are, a construct with productive consequences that might not be related to sexuality at all.

The main theoretical argument is somewhat tiered; on a broad level I argue that rather than conventional linear readings of revolution followed by counterrevolution, it is important to think of counterrevolution as a process that fails or succeeds in its own right, a process that can ‘pre-empt’ revolution (Bisley, 2004). Counterrevolutionary measures can and have been pre-emptive in order to sustain certain configurations of power and privilege certain international and social norms over others. Central to our discussion are the sexualised logics of the contemporary international order, especially what Momin Rahman calls ‘homocolonialism’ (2014), where queer rights are understood as a marker of progress and modernity and are ‘positioned at the apex of Western exceptionalism’ (279). Relatedly, some postcolonial states have attempted, with relative success, to normalise political (specifically Muslim) homophobia as a marker of authenticity and a type of resistance against the immorality of modernity and the dangers of globalisation. These different figurations of homosexuality point to how sovereignty and ‘sovereign man’—embodied in the figure of the Honourable Citizen in the Egyptian case—is produced against the backdrop of, among other things, homophobia and colonialism (Weber, 2016). In this vein, when for example, protesters in 2011 in Tahrir Square were accused of being dupes, foreign conspirators and un-Egyptian, they are immediately read as perverse and

inauthentic, marking revolution as deviant. Which brings us to the more specific argument and concern of this article: the mobilisation of tropes of westernisation within discourse to effect a counterrevolutionary closure.

As previously discussed, I read revolution and counterrevolution through the metaphor of the pendulum in order to highlight the continued production of counterrevolution through figures of deviance, and in order to disrupt such figures and swing the pendulum towards an opening. Counterrevolutionary closures, I argue, are enacted through forsaking multiplicity and heterogeneity. Here, I engage with the concept of multiplicity on two levels, on the one hand and despite the dominance of this discourse, Egyptians are not homogenous. ‘Human beings do not create unitary societies but a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction’ (Mann, 2012: 16) that inform how we understand ourselves and others around us. These networks are always relational and grow larger with globalisation, yet, multiplicity is replaced by the overriding notion of social unity. This produces ‘an essentialised and homogenous national identity in contradistinction to the West [which] necessarily entail[s] the suppression of internal difference within the nation’ (Pratt, 2005: 77). This has made possible claims that homosexuality is a western import. Discourses of homogeneity solve a problem for Egyptian sovereignty, that which Foucault had identified, as the problem ‘to discover how a multiplicity of individuals and wills can be shaped into a single will or even a single body that is supposedly animated by a soul known as sovereignty’ (Foucault, 2003 [1975-6]: 29). However, my aim here is not just to show how certain *deviant* figures are regulated to impose a uniform conduct on the nation, it is also to understand the productive impact of such regulation on *normal* subjectivities and subjectification.

Subjectification (Foucault, 1982) aims at inciting subjects who enable and extend the governing of conduct. However, inciting new forms of subjectivity—deviant or normal—does not only facilitate ‘governing conduct [...] but also the governing of dissent [...] processes of subjectification [...] remain central to, and enable, the production of resisting subjects and their practice of dissent’ (Odysseos, 2011: 447). Put somewhat differently and bringing us to the second level of engagement with multiplicity, the construction of the western Other in Egypt, and the Egyptian (Arab/Muslim) Other in ‘western’ discourses fixes Egyptian identity in time. The notion that ‘we are not ready for democracy’ emanating from within and from without

Egypt, figures Egypt and Egyptians not as having different and valid cultural mores and experiences of being in the world, but instead implies that we are the *same* but *behind*. This western temporality so dominant in domestic as well as international discourses reinforces counterrevolutionary closures through the following three steps: 1) social transformation is fixed in one direction, the western developmental ethos and (liberal) democratisation, 2) but the West is evil and deviant and so, Egyptians should not aspire to be on the same developmental trajectory, 3) all the while Egyptians are simply not ready for democracy, but *do they really want to be?* will they ever be ready to accept a western ethos?

What makes these discourses of homogeneity and otherness tenable in Egypt? As formerly alluded to, one of the main discursive tools that turn the pendulum towards closure is the mobilisation of tropes of westernisation; the reproduction of these tropes takes place through the historical construction of *figures of deviance and others of respectability*. Figurations here broadly refer to 'performative images that can be inhabited' (Haraway, 1997: 11), they emerge out of 'discursive and material semiotic assemblages that condense diffuse imaginaries about the world into specific forms or images that bring specific worlds into being' (Weber, 2016: 29). What happens when these figures are (re)produced? What worlds do they bring into being? I use the concept of figuration as developed by Donna Haraway (1997) and its later employment by Queer IR scholar Cynthia Weber (2016). Figurations are 'condensed maps of contestable worlds' (Haraway, 1997: 11), but they 'have to be tropic; that is, they cannot be literal and self-identical' (Haraway, 1997: 11). Put somewhat differently, figuration is 'the employment of semiotic tropes that combine knowledges, practices, and power to (in)form how we map our worlds and understand the actual things in those worlds' (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 84). I am tracing the figuration of the homosexual as it is articulated in contemporary Egyptian discourse around westernisation and its evils, my contention is that such figure of *deviance* acts as an ordering device that serves a counterrevolutionary agenda and displaces resistances. How then do these figures 'organise, limit, and open up our thinking'? (Vint, 2008: 289) How do 'epistemic cultures' produce specific subjects?

## Figurations as World Configurations

Ordering devices produce shared meanings and values. Both the Male Homosexual and the Honourable Citizen act as ordering devices that



connect the personal and the subjective to the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution. Weber identifies four key elements in Haraway’s figurations: ‘tropes, temporalities, performativities, and worldlings’ (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 84). For example, tropes that narrate the Egyptian homosexual as a western product imagines ‘authentic’ Egyptianness as grounded in hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality. This gendered and sexualised understanding of ‘Egyptian Sovereign Man’ and sovereignty is embodied in the (imagined) figure of the Honourable Citizen, a citizen who is patriotic, economically productive, and is staunchly willing to defend the nation against *others*. As for the second element, the prevalence of western developmental temporalities (i.e. Egyptians are *behind*) is a crucial component in reproducing Egyptian sovereignty as such. For example, calls for social justice are understood within the limits of liberal democracy. Again, we find the Egyptian subject stuck in time, lagging behind and should wait (indeterminately) before demanding change, since as Mubarak had repeatedly claimed, it is either him or chaos.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, figuration of westernisation through figures of deviance pits anti-regime resistance against sovereignty, delegitimising the revolution and its subjects. The repetition of acts, behaviours and rituals, what Butler (1999) refers to as performativity, allows figures to come to life, figures become inhabitable and embodied. In this way, ‘performing’ belonging to Egypt (Kuntsman, 2009) in the case of the Honourable Citizen, is in big part an act of denouncing homosexuality and reproducing the figure of the Male Homosexual as deviant and un-Egyptian. Performativities, however, are never identical and therefore have the potential to expose how hegemonic understandings of identity are obscure and fictitious.

These three sexualised (as well as gendered, classed, and racialised) elements, tropes, temporalities, and performativities, produce a sexualised worlding. Worlding refers to ‘the ways we imagine and try to represent the world through the figurations we have conjured up’ (Leigh & Weber, 2018: 85). Not only is the global world order sexualised in how it marks progress through measuring whether and how a state upholds the rights of its LGBTQ individuals, but more significantly and on a national level, this sexualised

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15 Salem, Suhaib. “If I resign today, there will be chaos:’ Mubarak”. The Globe and Mail. February 2, 2011. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/if-i-resign-today-there-will-be-chaos-mubarak/article564870/>

worlding emphasises the ‘inherent’ homophobia in the ‘post colony’ to signal sovereignty. This configuration of the world justifies contemporary international hierarchies and structures of national identity that obscure alterity and swings the pendulum towards closure.

In the next section I turn to the case study of the Queen Boat in order to ground the above theoretical and methodological engagements.

## **The Queen Boat**

On the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2001, the Queen Boat was raided by State Security police and the Vice Squad,<sup>16</sup> who arrested 35 Egyptian men aboard the moored boat. Another 17 arrests were made in the following days and added to the same case. Today, the Cairo 52 Trials, or the Queen Boat affair, continue to be one of the most highly publicised crackdowns on homosexuality in WANA (Awwad, 2010; Pratt, 2007). In November of the same year, and after months of torture in prison, the publicising of the defendants’ identities in newspapers, and subjecting their families to verbal abuse and stigmatisation, an emergency state security court found 21 men guilty of ‘habitual debauchery’,<sup>17</sup> while the two key defendants—alleged ringleaders of ‘a group of Satan worshippers’—were guilty of contempt of religion (Long, 2004; ‘In A Time of Torture’, 2004; Pratt, 2007).<sup>18</sup>

The Queen Boat was a floating discotheque on the Nile River in Egypt’s affluent Zamalek neighbourhood and is only a couple of kilometres away from the infamous Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. Since the early 1990s, this entire space of downtown and its surrounding neighbourhoods had been clandestine cruising areas for queer men, Egyptian and foreign, to love, converse, and find friendships. In a detailed report by Human Rights

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16 Cairo’s Vice Squad or morality police was established in 1937 as part of Egypt’s police force with the aim of upholding public morals.

17 The Egyptian legal code itself does not criminalize homosexuality; courts use other laws to justify its criminalisation, such as Law 10/1961 on combating prostitution.

18 President Mubarak revoked the verdicts in May 2002, except for the two men convicted with contempt of religion. The case was referred to the state prosecution for review, and there was a re-trial at the Court of Misdemeanours in July of the same year. The men were found guilty of debauchery, but sentences were reduced by one year.

Watch on the violations that took place during the Queen Boat affair, it is mentioned that those who were seized were ‘doctors and teachers, but also truck-drivers and electrical repairmen [...] the idea of a “gay” identity was widely disseminated, even among working-class men in towns outside Cairo’ (‘In a Time of Torture’, 2004: 16). In a sense, these men were transcending—at times very intimately—class boundaries in a highly classed society. Tangentially, Tahrir Square has been narrated as a space that has also transcended class boundaries, ‘as individuals together embraced new, simplified “anti-regime” identities, which became the only identities that mattered: no one cared about religion, regional affiliation, or even class’ (Rashed and El Azzazi, 2011: 27) .

The Queen Boat is interesting in a number of ways: 1) the Cairo 52 were tried in a state security court, an exceptional court that predominantly works—with no due process guarantees—to punish political dissent and activism, whether secular or Islamist;<sup>19</sup> 2) the Queen Boat arrests not only punished homosexuality but also made it intelligible, for the first time, to the Egyptian public, the homosexual man is no longer a man who only lives in the West, *the homosexuals are among us now*, the Queen Boat *put* homosexuality into discourse. This is demonstrated in a recent article in an independent national newspaper recounting the incident: ‘the homosexuals appeared in Egypt for the first time under President Hosni Mubarak, and particularly in 2001’.<sup>20</sup> This ‘appearance’ of homosexuality was certainly presented as a discovery of a deviant species that needed to be excised for sovereignty to function. Couched in a long-standing history of anti-Semitic tropes around homosexuality, the defendants were presented in the media as part of a Jewish conspiracy emanating from Israel to threaten Egyptian national security. Israel here has to be understood as part of the ‘West’. Such anti-Semitic tropes are only intelligible because they have a long history. For example, during the 1990s, a famous Egyptian author, Mustafa Mahmoud, wrote about the Jewish invention of satanic worship rituals and their

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19 Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Repeal Emergency Law, Abolish Emergency State Security Court”, August 27, 2003. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2003/08/27/egypt-repeal-emergency-law-abolish-emergency-state-security-court>

20 Al Masry Al Youm, “The ‘Homosexuality Flag’ flutters in the Cairo sky, Laila is to blame”. Al Masry Al Youm. September 23, 2017, <https://lite.almasryalyoum.com/extra/163133/> (original in Arabic).

concomitant perverted sexual practices:

The Jews were those who invented the rituals of this worship [...] they are those who invented methods to approach the devil, by group-sex parties and urinating on the divine books, by shredding the gospels, by nakedness and obscenity, by practising *perversions*, by insulting god and vilifying the prophets, by mocking religious laws and slaughtering children as a sacrifice for the devil (Mahmoud in Nordbruch, 2007: 76 [emphasis added]).

More recently, Heba Kotb, a famous Egyptian sexologist and media personality, claimed that Jewish people ‘have had the highest rate of sexual perversions in history’.<sup>21</sup>

Reading about the Queen Boat has helped me understand one of my initial questions; *what does this [revolution] have to do with homosexuality?* Since the Queen Boat affair, homosexuality has been figured as a phenomenon that is purely imported from the West and the defendants as ‘un-Egyptian’ (Pratt, 2007). There are two immediate problems with this statement: the first is that it erases the rich history of same-sex love in the region and invalidates self-identified gay Egyptian men’s experiences. The second being this idea that although western culture is seen as an enemy to the tenets of Islam and Arab culture, it is still omnipresent, dominant, and powerful enough to deny any agency to ‘queer’ Arabs. In other words, [some] Egyptians are passive recipients of western culture taken at face value without interacting with it, without transforming it, and without rejecting it as only entirely western. Therefore, Egyptians are not ready for democracy, because if they were, there would be no risk of them falling into the ‘cult of homosexuality’ (El Menyawi, 2006:32).

Some countries in the West have criticised the Queen Boat arrests, for example, then French President Jacques Chirac raised concerns about the prosecution of gay men in Egypt. ‘The European Parliament [also] condemned the attacks on these men [...] and in the US, a group of Democratic members of Congress sent a letter to Congress asking to “withhold any support for a US-Egypt Free Trade Agreement” due to Egypt’s

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21 Gancman, Lee, “Egyptian therapist: Jews most sexually perverse ever”. Times of Israel, January 24, 2016. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-therapist-jews-most-sexual-perverse-ever/#gs.fjuv4i>.

persecution of gays’ (El Menyawi, 2006: 41). This furthered the impression that homosexuality and gay rights are a western product. Mostafa Bakry, then Editor in Chief of Al-Osbou’ newspaper wrote, ‘after Iraq and Syria, Egypt would be next in line [...] I do not find it far-fetched to suppose that armies will one day be positioned, and warships proceed, armed with UN Security Council resolutions, against an Egypt that “persecutes homosexuals”’.<sup>22</sup> This, of course, generated enough proof that Egyptian sovereignty was at risk.

## Mobilising ‘the Homosexual’

Sexuality within IR is located in the realm of the ‘private’ and the ‘domestic’, which in the mainstream, acts as a distinct space from that of the ‘public sphere’ and especially outside of the political (Weber, 2016). Unsurprisingly, a number of Egyptian queers, as well as Arab scholars have advocated invisible and ‘private’ queer existence. In *Desiring Arabs* (2007) for example, Joseph Massad reads ‘Arab homosexuality’ through the Queen Boat affair. Massad insists:

Western accounts since the nineteenth century have invested sexual subjectivities and practices with cultural and civilizational value along an evolutionary schema within larger colonial and imperialist contexts that constitute the West as advanced and modernised and the East as backward and undeveloped (472).

Colonial discourse has split native subjects into good versus bad, as either obedient ‘authorised agents of mimicry’, or bad, dangerous and insubordinate (Rao, 2014: 201). Massad illustrates how the re-telling of ‘pre-colonial’ and ‘colonial’ histories subjected Arab past to the scrutiny of western morality and argues that globalisation had resulted in producing ‘homosexuals where they don’t exist’ (Massad, 2007: 363), and that the universalisation of gay rights has imposed colonial constructions of identity. He claims that the discourses that produce these ‘missionary-like’ human rights activities in the global South, and the ‘organisations that represent them constitute the Gay International’ (361). Massad therefore concludes that the Egyptian police were not repressing same-sex practices when they raided the Queen Boat, but rather ‘the socio-political identification of these practices with the western identity of gayness and the publicness of that these gay-identified

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22 Sami, A., “By our own hands,” trans. Author. Al-Ahram, April 24, 2002.

men seek' (183).

This monolithic reading of the 'gay' and/or 'activist' ignores the complex and relational circumstances of the emergence of these figures elsewhere. His argument that LGBTQ+ activism is just another form of cultural imperialism, and a method to obliterate 'authentic' sexual subjectivities encourages the prosecution and persecution of homosexuality. He also fails to address the role of the Egyptian state and civil society in the reconfiguration of the nexus between sexual identity and imperialism. If we consider Southern states and citizens as active actors in our analysis, we can observe the varying ways countries of the global South are capable of traversing globalisation in their local contexts (Amar: 2013). Implying that the state only reacts to an imported identity, or that 'Arab gay subjects' are passive recipients of western hegemonic agendas, as Massad does, is inaccurate, reductive, and reinforces imperialistic power dynamics. The Cairo 52 trials represent a far more complicated governing technology, the events of the Queen Boat mark the first official acknowledgment of the Egyptian male homosexual, he was 'discovered', stylised, prosecuted, and fixed as un-Egyptian, and mobilised to this day as part of a counterrevolutionary technology.

## **Moral Panics: The Making of 'the Homosexual'**

*Governing through panic* in Egypt has constituted a constant evasion and fear of responsibility, any internal error or flaw is displaced onto the *Other*, all crises—real or imagined—are almost always read through a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which results in civilians policing and surveilling the conduct of one another. Sean Hier (2016) theorises moral panic as a technique of government within an everyday regime of moral regulation. Hier specifies and locates moral panics outside of the realm of exception and characterises them as 'volatile expressions of long-term moral regulation processes' (417). Moral regulation is a project of 'normalizing, rendering natural, taken for granted, in a word "obvious", what are in fact ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order [...] state forms are always animated and legitimated by a particular moral ethos' (Corrigan & Sayer, 1985: 4). More explicitly, moral regulation entails long-term processes that call upon individuals to regulate their conduct based on a set of established (but changing) moral codes, while moral panic discourses call upon the same individuals to control the actions of others. This is specifically important in the context of Foucauldian ethical self-

formation, where Foucault recognises that identity, or defining oneself, arises from how the individual is socially situated (Foucault, 2000). In this view, one’s agency is enacted in everyday practices but within social limitations delineated by moral regulation. Ethical self-formation ‘concerns practices, techniques, and discourses of the government of the self by the self, by means of which individuals seek to know, decipher, and act on themselves’ (Dean, 1994: 156).

The intersection between Foucault’s work and moral panics literature highlights how moral regulation projects stimulate modes of self-governance that involve acting upon the conduct of one’s self and others and problematizes forms of identity (and figurations) that are taken for granted. This theoretical lens allows us to do two things. First, it locates the construction and reproduction of the normative Egyptian subject—the Honourable Citizen—within a long-term process of moral regulation, which involves techniques of responsabilisation and governing one’s own conduct. Second, it facilitates the study of the emergence and governing of figures of deviance, such as the male homosexual, which always appears in episodes of moral panic over religiosity and cultural authenticity and constructed as a figure to be acted upon. The exemplarity of the normative Egyptian citizen, as opposed to the deplorable conduct of the male homosexual, not only provides insight into how and why certain subjects align themselves with the counterrevolution, but also elucidates the production of political homophobia, not as native to Egypt but as a process that involves *orientating* work (Ahmed, 2006). The tropes associated with the figure of the Male Homosexual act as an example of how *not* to be Egyptian, essentially reproducing the Honourable Citizen. The presence of this figure in space (i.e. in the West) has significant temporal implications, as it acts to fix Egyptians in a past that only moves linearly along a western developmental axis. The performativity of nationalism and citizenship, through the figure of the Honourable Citizen, repeatedly forsakes multiplicity and produces a ‘political consensus that excludes the possibility of fluidity and heterogeneity’ (Pratt, 2005: 70). In the end, we are left with a world that has a very specific and narrow form in relation to national identity, freedom, and resistance.

Moral regulation processes construct specific identities and nationalisms that are reinforced by episodes of moral panics, such as the moral panics over the Queen Boat affair. This political strategy constitutes figurations that stir

already existing anxieties and reproduce the normative Egyptian subject and their conduct, not only through inciting action upon certain bodies, but also through orienting one's own conduct if one is to be an 'honourable' Egyptian citizen.

## **Implications for Resistance: Counter-Conduct as an Opening**

When you start thinking of gender and sexual orientation as things that are not stable, the world collapses and you see things as constructed, you realise that there is a new world that needs a commitment from you, a commitment that you can simply live without. Progressive people and revolutionaries claim acceptance, but this is different, this needs us to accept that the world is far more complex. This is sometimes the case with feminism; when you talk about unpaid affective and domestic labour as a form of discrimination, you destroy everything. This is not love, love is something else, love is a choice. Queerness is about critiquing our grandparents, our generation, love, not to believe in love the conventional way ... it is a very personal thing.<sup>23</sup>

The starting quote of this section is by Laila, a feminist activist and human rights defender. In 2011, Laila decided to discontinue her postgraduate education abroad and travel back to join the revolution in Egypt. While reflecting on the trajectory of the revolution, Laila pointed out the need for a queer politics in order to 'move the revolution forward'. Laila understood that queer politics is a politics of not just refusal, but of conducting one's self otherwise and she identified opportunities for a new kind of self-formation. Echoing Foucault's counter-conduct approach, a queer politics for Laila is about emphasising the importance of the personal to the political. This is particularly significant in the current moment where visible resistance has disappeared under Sisi. I want to suggest that this absence of visible resistance does not mean an absence of *all* resistance.

The dominant claim that there is such a thing as real resistance, that:

'Real resistance' is organised, principled, and has revolutionary implications [...] overlook entirely the vital role of power relations in

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23 Confidential interview with Laila, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.



constraining forms of resistance [...] if all we heed and study is ‘real resistance’ then all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options (Scott 1989: 51).

Hence, I am looking at resistance elsewhere, in a different register. There is a ‘tight interrelationship between power and freedom’ that Foucault has captured through governmentality, which ‘regulate[s] the “conduct of conduct”’ (Death, 2010: 238). The conduct of conduct shapes and guides possible actions and norms ‘by a diverse range of actors and institutions’ (238). Resistance is also ‘bound up within networks of governmentality’ (239) as it operates within the same networks as power. In this reading, resistance is not a complete rejection of being governed, rather, it is ‘how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them’ (Foucault, 2007: 44), which Foucault identifies as counter-conduct. Counter-conduct ‘politicises the everyday and locates politics “everywhere”’ (Demetriou, 2016: 218) not just at moments of mass upheaval, and it allows for one to re-imagine themselves and their relationship to others.

Counter-conduct is thus a “positive” and “productive” form of resistance, and not a “negative” or “reactive” one, as it uses the same means of governing to forge a different form of conduction with different objectives’ (Asl, 2018: 198). Similar to how the figure of the deviant male homosexual generates and reproduces the figure of the normal (Honourable) Egyptian citizen, counter-conduct not only disrupts the assigning of normalcy onto certain subjects and not others, it also redefines and generates *another* normal. The story of revolution is incomplete without a recognition and exploration of the ways this normalcy has been disrupted, and how this disruption contributes to changing power relations that allow for a re-constitution of the self.

The Egyptian revolution disrupted the normal and opened up opportunities and possibilities for resistance that were once thought to be impossible. My contention is that ‘resistance encourages resistance’ (Baaz, Lilja, and Vinthagen, 2017), and that ‘Individuals’ [frustrated] experiences of organised and public forms of resistance might inspire themselves or others to develop new resistance forms of identities or everyday behaviour’ (29). Contemporary counter-conduct in Egypt ‘involves practices of the self working to challenge, redirect or modify techniques of power that

govern our conduct, without the requirement of intentional rejection or explicitly political expression' (Odysseos, 2016: 189). The figure of the male homosexual is not only simply an instrument of the Egyptian state, gay men in Egypt embody a counter-conduct in relation to how they are figured. The kind of resistance here is not necessarily intentional but embodied, as one interviewee tells me:

I was never political and I never participated in any protests but after the revolution I was surrounded by many queers and political activists, my circle of friends started changing drastically and I found out that there are [human rights] organisations that defend us ... why didn't I know about this from before! I had been out to my mother and only a couple of friends, I remember when I first told her she said not to tell anyone else and that once I graduate, I should find work abroad, in Canada or something. But now, I am staying, and I am not afraid, I have a right to be here.<sup>24</sup>

My interviewee's surprise that there are human rights organisations that defend queer rights is not because these organisations started doing so only after the revolution, it is rather due to human rights activists' increased appearances in the media between 2011 and 2015. As one interlocuter explains, 'human rights organisations gained more reputation and credibility after the revolution and there was faith that these organisations are working for the people'.<sup>25</sup> I want to encourage us to read human rights work in Egypt as a space that provides the opportunity and the language to challenge the power that conducts and to reflect on what kind of potential human rights opens up for counter-conduct (Odysseos, 2016: 182). This is premised on the claim that 'ethical discourses and claiming practices of human rights invoke new forms of self-formation that interrupt [...] modes of subjectification' (182).

## **Human Rights: A New Generation**

In 2001, Hafez Abu Saada, the secretary general of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) 'commented in the Egyptian press that he won't defend the 52 men arrested on the Queen Boat because he 'doesn't like the

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24 Confidential interview with Sami, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

25 Confidential interview with Eissa, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

subject of homosexuality’.<sup>26</sup> Although a very sensitive task, to defend those arrested on board the Queen Boat, a number of younger human rights defenders (HRDs) distanced themselves from EOHR, started working on the case of these men, and established their new human rights organisations. Hossam Bahgat, a prominent figure within the human rights community, both nationally and internationally, founded the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in 2002 after being dismayed at the lack of support that the 52 men so desperately needed from already existing human rights organisations. For Bahgat, ‘the Queen Boat trial was indicative of a systemic failure to protect the rights of the individual in Egyptian society’.<sup>27</sup> The Queen Boat ushered in a new generation of human rights defenders that fundamentally challenged the binary of East/West; however, engaging with such a case has meant that human rights was now solidly attached to perversion:

Movements for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people [... are] the most vulnerable edge of the human rights movement [...] they are easy to defame and discredit. But the attack on them also opens space for attacking human rights principles themselves—as not universal but ‘foreign’, as not protectors of diversity but threats to sovereignty, and as carriers of cultural perversion (Long, 2005: 71).

I would like to propose a reading of this challenge of the East/West binary as an important opening that disrupted normative meaning-making and conduct, and eventually allowed for a different imagination of the future, more inclusive and multiple.

When Hussein Derar, deputy-assistant foreign minister for human rights at the time, emphasised this East/West binary and said that ‘they have their western culture and we have our Islamic culture’,<sup>28</sup> Hossam Bahgat

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26 Hossam Bahgat, “Explaining Egypt’s Targeting of Gays,” Middle East Report Online, 2001. Accessed, March 23, 2020. <https://merip.org/2001/07/explaining-egypts-targeting-of-gays/>

27 Soussi, Alasdair. Interview with Egyptian human rights activist. *The New Internationalist*, July 1, 2009.

28 N.a. “Egyptian rights group ‘cannot protect gays.’” BBC News, February 11, 2002. Accessed March 20, 2020. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1813926.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1813926.stm)

said, ‘people have the right to reject homosexuality, but we believe that any moral conviction shouldn’t be the basis and shouldn’t take the form of discrimination or persecution’.<sup>29</sup> In court, lawyers’ defence mostly emphasised procedural errors in the arrest of the defendants, falsified evidence, and the torture of the detainees as basis to dismiss the case:

We couldn’t plan our defence strategy on the basis of personal freedom, our priority was to free these men, this is why we called out procedural issues and emphasised the unlawful nature of the arrests. It simply wasn’t the moment to defend sexuality politics as such, but our strategy still confronted the discourse of ‘we don’t have homosexuals here’ and challenged the state’s attempts to nationalise human rights in Egypt’.<sup>30</sup>

The enduring struggle of the Queen Boat case and the multiple crackdowns that have come after it, informs the kind of resistance human rights work carries out today. Critical scholarship has pointed out that human rights has governing and normalising effects (Brown, 1995; Cruikshank, 1999); their work has focused on ‘how rights create new categories of, and engender, rights-holder subjectivities that enable the furtherance of (neo)liberal rationalities and mentalities of directing and governing socio-economic and political life [...] and structures their political possibilities for resistance’ (Odysseos, 2016: 180). However, Louiza Odysseos cautions us from failing ‘to see beyond the governing effects of rights’ (181) and their destabilising effects on conduct as they render ‘the governing of our conduct unstable and reversible’ (181) and illuminate important sites for resistance. Moreover, human rights offers (marginalised) subjects “authoritative” and internationally coherent accounts of themselves as rights-holders of equal moral worth’ (192). As one of my interlocutors pointed out:

I had this impression that all those who work in the human rights field are elitists. I felt that they were advocating liberal rights that were not representative of our real struggles. Bit by bit, I started to see things differently. I understood that even if the overall human rights agenda is not radical enough, it is something that compliments grassroots movements. It provides us with recognition, it reports on violations, and it provides the moral and legal support needed. In any case, now

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29 Ibid.

30 Confidential interview with Amgad, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

there is no space for mass mobilisation and the human rights field and community are the most important thing available.<sup>31</sup>

Disrupting state discourses about ‘truth’ and identity has been an important strategy for the human rights community in Egypt. Transforming oneself through these acts of disruption is key. One interviewee emphasised this:

This is a very important struggle; I am always afraid things will get lost and forgotten. I think there is an important first step, to document events to make sure that in 10 or 15 years we can work on the events of the past. You give the next generation the main keys, you have to show them that there were people before them who did the homework and complicated the struggle. It’s true, things are complicated! This is a struggle for the future. There is no one truth but there are personal narratives and there are multiple persons! For me, the revolution was about thinking differently, it was very influential on a personal level not just on a political level. For me, my work on human rights is about the people not the state. It is about showing them, everyone, how things can be different.<sup>32</sup>

The potential of human rights for counter-conduct lies in how it brings about a whole new way of relating and belonging to Egypt and to the world. It transgresses this narrative of homogeneity, it writes counter-histories, and opens up spaces for recognising multiplicity. The conducting of Egyptians as *lacking* or lagging behind involved specific discursive and material reforms that need to be addressed. Counter-conduct is useful precisely because it ‘is not so much a refusal but a critically informed demand to co-govern, to redirect or change processes and objectives of governing’ (Odysseos, 2016: 186), it demands and insists on shared governance. The real threat and potential of human rights in Egypt is that it disrupts the discourse on our unreadiness for democracy. The real danger for the Egyptian state is that practices of local human rights have proven that Egyptians can be the subjects of human rights and not only the objects of Western human rights intervention. It is not the people; it is the state that is *not* ready for democracy.

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31 Confidential interview with Samar, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

32 Confidential interview with Amr, trans. Author. Cairo, January 2019.

## Conclusion

During the two decades preceding the 2011 Egyptian revolution, notions of homogeneity, unity, and sameness of the 'Egyptian character' have underscored how Egyptians—in the mainstream—have been understood, and how they understand themselves in the world. In this context, the revolution came about and brought with it new potential understandings of what Egypt and Egyptians are: a multitude of different things and people who are capable of resistance. While coercion and violence have been extensively employed in the counterrevolutionary process (torture, imprisonment, killings, rape, etc.), a set of rationales and tactics for governing conduct and discouraging resistance have also been employed more tactfully and less visibly. I have argued that there is a need to look into that power that conducts and the resistances to it. Through figurations, I have located one example of such conducting power, the historical mobilisation of tropes of westernisation as deviant, in parallel with the mobilisation of resistance as an attempt to be like the West. Both figures under discussion, the Male Homosexual and the Honourable Citizen, are part of a 'technology of citizenship' (Cruikshank, 1999) that reproduces subjects of government who are politically illiterate and 'not ready for democracy', while the state is figured as the only source of power and moral authority. The infantilization of the Egyptian citizenry as such, paves the way for claims not only about the inability of Egyptians to demand justice and freedom because they do not have a sense of what that really means, but also fortifies the notion that those who are actively protesting on the streets are either a) agents of foreign powers (particularly the West) with a clear intent to destroy the social fabric and spread perversion, or b) unaware Egyptians with good intentions who have been tricked; in a sense, they are easily *penetrable*.

While there have been multiple counterrevolutionary discourses, including that of the 'Islamist threat', this paper has focused on the discourse of the evils of westernisation as counterrevolutionary with the hope to show that homophobia does not have a 'natural' presence in Egypt, to contest essentialist voices that view homophobia as an innate subaltern characteristic and strongly assert that it is a politically constructed technology of government. Through counter-conduct analytics, I have shown that the local human rights community in Egypt is capable of recognising the power that conducts and acts to change it. Any agenda that wants to effect change must develop narratives and practices that encourage contestations of the

future and recognises the systematic forsaking of multiplicity, as well as the fluidity of resistance. Only through accepting different modes of being and questioning (hetero)normative hierarchies, will we be able to effect change and realise this revolutionary potential, and keep the pendulum moving towards openings for as long as possible.

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The Initiative seeks to Develop “resistance studies,” and support the efforts of activists worldwide that are employing direct action, civil disobedience, everyday resistance, digital activism, mass protest, and other kinds of nonviolent resistance. Its essential goals are to help create a more humane world by fostering social change and human liberation in its fullest sense. It will study how resistance can undermine repression, injustices, and domination of all kinds, and how it can nurture such creative responses as constructive work, alternative communities, and oppositional ways of thinking.

The Initiative hopes to do all of this by:

- Working closely with the other members of the international Resistance Studies Network to encourage worldwide scholarly, pro-liberation collaboration
- Maintaining strong ties with activists worldwide, documenting their activities, and providing critical analysis upon request
- Offering academic courses in Resistance Studies at UMass Amherst
- Offering resistance-themed workshops, lecture series, and symposiums
- Publishing the international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed **Journal of Resistance Studies**.