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Taking Back the Village
Rural Youth in a Moral Revolution

Lila Abu-Lughod

On January 25, 2011, like most of the rest of the world, I watched the uprisings in Egypt on television. I was struck by the consistent vantage point: a reporter speaking from a balcony or rooftop overlooking the masses in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. There was an occasional interview with a member of the crowd. Sporadic reports appeared from the streets of other cities—Alexandria, Suez or Port Said—where people were demonstrating.

But something was missing. What was happening elsewhere in the country? What was happening in the village in Upper Egypt where I had been working for the last 20 years? Those who gathered in Tahrir came from all walks of life. They made history. Whatever the eventual outcome, and it remains uncertain almost four years on, the protesters lifted for everyone that enervating sense of helplessness that had pervaded society for the preceding decades, with political stagnation and poverty for so many.

Even though Tahrir Square was symbolically important and Cairo is Egypt’s biggest city, a significant proportion of the 80 million or so Egyptians neither live in nor identify with Cairo. The distance my friends in the village—call it Village X—felt from Cairo was vast, even if many men were familiar with the capital from their period of army conscription or migrant work to seek relief from poverty, landlessness and unemployment. More and more women and children had been making the trip in the 2000s. The most talented children in local Qur’anic schools go for annual recitation competitions, bringing back certificates, prize money and memories of Cairo’s sights and sounds, from the Citadel to the zoo. Most of the women who go are seeking specialist medical treatment.
Cairo also came to their village. It came directly in the form of the people who pulled up in fancy cars or air-conditioned buses to visit the Pharaonic sites that were their “heritage.” In the more indirect form of government policy, Cairo had come to the village in devastating ways. If, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, policy had arrived as land reform that benefited many, in the Mubarak era it came in the form of structural adjustment and privatization, demanded by international financial institutions and enforced by the government. Structural adjustment led to the return of old landowners, the removal of subsidies and reductions in public funds for health care and education. Local clinics were eerily empty and public hospitals places of last resort. Schools were overcrowded, teachers underpaid and standards abysmal. Parents were convinced that, if not for informal after-school lessons and Qur’anic school during summer holidays, their children would never have learned to read.

Like the majority of Egyptians, urban and rural, the villagers lived with the fallout of neoliberal policies of the post-Nasser regimes that made a small elite fabulously wealthy and left the rest of the population barely able to survive—insecure in tenancy of both land and housing, losing out to big landlords or developers, struggling with unemployment as the public sector shrank and unable to deal with rising prices. In the village, people had been valiantly trying to compensate. They had been creating informal charitable societies to help the most destitute—widows who could not afford the clothes, pencils and notebooks their sons and daughters needed for school.

Some of the villagers’ experiences were unique, since they live in a tourist area that came under special security after 1997, when an Islamist group massacred tourists and guards at a nearby Pharaonic temple. But they shared with subalterns across Egypt face-to-face encounters with the repressive and arbitrary power of the state, whether security forces, police or army officers (during military service). If the youth who filled Tahrir Square were galvanized by police brutality against one young man in Alexandria, Khalid Sa’id, many more could connect this “martyrdom” to personal experience. As one young man explained, “I came into this world 23 years ago and have never known anything but Husni Mubarak as president of Egypt and the specter of the police who strike fear in people because of their power and the way they fabricate charges against innocent people.”

The Good Youth

The events in Cairo emboldened the village youth to take new responsibility for their local situation. As they told me the story, it all began on January 28, 2011, when police and prison guards abandoned their posts and jailed criminals escaped. The young men immediately formed popular committees to guard all entrances to their hamlet. They went to the Coptic hamlet nearby to protect the people there, too. Thank God, they told me, everyone was kept safe.

The popular committees began to meet to discuss the overall wellbeing of the village. They started a Facebook page. These are not cosmopolitan youth writing in English and demanding democracy or human rights. The Good Youth of Village X, as they call themselves, write in colloquial Arabic about how to undertake and achieve local improvements. A better translation for the name of their group, in Arabic, shabab al-khayr, might be the Youth of Good Works. Their first initiative was to distribute state-subsidized bread more equitably. Then, they tackled the shortage of bottled cooking gas; next, the high price of meat; and, finally, the neglect of garbage collection in public spaces. They even tried to start a more conveniently located weekly market. Four months after the revolution, they had turned their attention to the needs of a set of families newly displaced from the Theban Hills by the antiquities and tourist authorities.

One young man turned around the question I had posed in our first e-mail exchange: “What was your reaction to what happened in Tahrir Square?” He wrote, “I cannot describe my joy… We were waiting for some change to happen but never expected that it would be a revolution of this sort. It surprised us as much as it surprised the world. And it was not just what happened in Tahrir Square; in every village and every hamlet of every village was another square like Tahrir.” He added, “This was a revolution of all Egyptians and it had to happen.”

I was struck by the moral language—rich with themes of responsibility, selflessness and community welfare—that the young people spoke. If, as one young man explained, the regime had “ruined people’s lives politically and materially, morally and socially,” the people responded at each of these levels. They saw their struggle as one against corruption and self-interest. They used a strong language of social morality, not of rights. They did not speak about democracy, but in tackling problems directly and personally, they were living democracy.

Speaking Up

A year after the “glorious revolution” and the events in “every Tahrir” across Egypt, I arrived back to the village. It was just after the December 2012 parliamentary elections, in which the Muslim Brothers had won a large majority, and I was curious to see what had happened. Some people were thrilled for personal reasons. A young woman who had been working for 12 years at the Antiquities Organization with no benefits or job security was happy because it was rumored that contract workers in the civil service would finally be given regular appointments. Others were taking advantage of the lapse in government oversight to move ahead with house-building projects—desperately trying to solve the long-term housing crisis that makes it hard for the next generation to
In Village X, lila abu-lughod had been revealed about just how and how much the system had wronged them.

The Good Youth were proud of the work they had done during the elections. They had urged people to vote, stationing themselves outside the school that was the polling place. They arranged transport. They helped people find their registration numbers and directed them where to complete their ballots. I saw the photographs: They were all neatly dressed with official badges hanging around their necks and laptops open. The voting was orderly and turnout good. One youth told me about those who carried old women on their backs up the stairs so they could cast their votes. This chivalrous community spirit marked the Good Youth's participation.

The Language of Morality

marry. Restrictions on building in their area were stringent and the economy of bribes and fines ruinous.

There was no doubt that everyone was hurting. There were no tourists. There was less work. Businesses were shuttered. As one person who had been working at a Red Sea resort put it, "We are hungry. The people are hungry. The revolution says, 'Be patient,' but you can't tell a hungry person to wait."

Despite the obvious hardships, felt keenly here where everyone in some way relied on the tourist industry, there was general excitement. Everywhere I went, people wanted to talk. They were talking politics—both national issues and local. I was particularly intrigued by the level of engagement of women and girls. At the national level, they were stunned by revelations of regime corruption, from top to bottom, and the sheer scale of theft by the elites. They were especially scandalized by the discovery (or rumor) that Suzanne Mubarak had taken for her personal property the jewels of Queen Nazli, mother of the former monarch, King Farouq. These gems belonged to the nation, they insisted. They were furious that the former president’s trial was probably not going to deliver justice for the Egyptians who suffered under his rule. They expressed a special empathy for the families of the young people killed in the streets by security forces during the first weeks of the uprisings—the martyrs.

They were also eager to talk about the parliamentary campaign. Their concerns about the Muslim Brothers had been eased by assurances that tourism would not be banned, but only tourists would be enjoined to respect local morality. But some also joked about the process. The Brothers had arranged for transportation to take girls and women to the polls. As one young woman said mischievously, "But how would they know who we voted for?"

Many people commented on how, unlike under Mubarak, everyone felt that they could talk about their concerns. Even if they did not know the way forward, my sense was that there was no going back to silence and despair. Too much had been revealed about just how and how much the system had wronged them.

The young men I spoke with in January 2012, a year after the revolution, were thoughtful and somewhat humbled by what lay ahead. They had been meeting regularly to figure out how to be useful to the village. What were the real needs of the community? Their projects were evolving, though the language of morality and service persisted.

If their first concern was to ameliorate immediate crisis, now they were turning to longer-term projects. Because they were local, they knew how much needed to be done. They knew there was a bridge over an irrigation canal that was collapsing; they repaired it so that children could reach school safely. They knew that families pay large sums for private lessons, often given by teachers themselves, without which students cannot pass exams. Many do not pass even with the lessons. So they began classes to help the children, for free. They celebrated children who did well, to encourage achievement, and they were considering starting literacy classes for adult women. A couple of months later, with the help of a foreign foundation, Caritas, they were able to provide teacher training for the young women who were members of the Good Youth. By midsummer, the Good Female Youth of the village had organized an after-school program. As one organizer explained, she included sports and games to get the students excited about the classes.

Health was another local concern. The Red Crescent had trained the young men in first aid, perhaps in preparation for the elections. When I spoke to them in January, they were thinking that women should get this training since they were the ones usually at home when accidents happened. By summer, they had gone to speak to the governor about the dire health conditions in the village and had organized a group of doctors to volunteer for a clinic in the local school.

Focused on service, they sometimes used the standard language of development and modernity that every Egyptian schoolchild imbibes. If they started the free classes for children to remedy the deficiencies of the schools, the reason they gave for adult literacy classes was to foster “awareness.” This
term signals the patronizing stance toward the non-literate or uneducated, particularly rural women, that is common among educated urbanites. A comment on the Facebook page suggested that the Good Youth needed to enlighten parents, described as mostly “completely unaware of the value of education.” I found this attitude disturbing, given how much parents in the village sacrifice for their children’s educations. But their desire to see uplift differed from standard modernist developmentalism in its religious and moral inflection. The young man who responded to this comment explained, “Your brothers of the Good Youth, whom God has guided and may He continue to bless with their deeds, have started on this. When we resume after the elections, we hope you can join us under God’s banner in raising the educational level in our village. And God willing, we will transfer the idea to the neighboring villages. And we will assist everyone, Muslim or Christian or foreign. May God make our work only for His sake.”

The biggest challenge the Good Youth faced in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections had been managing the tension between involvement in politics—always national to some extent—and community service. If civic engagement can be seen as democracy on the ground, it was not easy for the organizers to separate activism from electioneering. The Good Youth had a policy that if candidates wanted to meet with them, it had to be at a neutral location. Later, in March 2012, as the presidential election approached, heated debates about the dominance of the Muslim Brothers in the parliamentary contests flared up on the Facebook page. The administrator removed the posts and a discussion ensued.

The tone was strikingly polite. One post ended: “Regardless of the deletion, our village group makes me proud.” Eventually, the group administrator explained that he had deleted the posts because they were not “talking about the village’s problems” to which the group’s bylaws confined discussion. Indeed, the original statement on the Facebook page in January 2011 read: “The Good Youth is a group working for the development and provision of social services in Village X. Its slogan is: ‘Youth for building and giving.’ Its purpose is: ‘Building our society and nourishing ourselves as human beings.’” The bylaws posted on the site encouraged freedom of expression, mandated the inclusion of men and women, excluded partisan political discussion that might be divisive, asserted the purpose of the group as offering service to the village and community, and used throughout a respectful and moral language of community and kinship.

These bylaws were tested in the March 2012 exchange. The response to the administrator’s request for “the cooperation of our respected members” was a series of apologies. One offender said, “God willing, this mistake won’t be repeated… my deepest thanks and consideration for all your efforts.” Another respondent said, “We want to see the page light up with achievements and productive discussions like before…. May God bless you all and make you the wealth of this country.” Yet another said, “This is great. We’ll go back to the way we were…. God is our guide and most beneficent.”

After this incident, the original mission statement was replaced with a loving description of the village, noting its long history of struggle, naming its constituent hamlets and ending: “The group is limited to the children (sons and daughters) of the village and God willing, we will cooperate in an effective way to solve the problems of our cherished village.” A more extensive pamphlet documenting the group’s activities was now included, along with a new logo. The pamphlet opens with a long note of thanks to supporters. The second, larger section begins with the question: “Who are the Good Youth of Village X?” It explains: “Before the revolution, the youth were in a tough state of despair over what was happening…. But there appeared no way before for these youth to change it or improve it. The youth didn’t know what could be done in the face of the clear corruption in everything in the village and all the neighboring towns. Repression was the order of the day, because the system didn’t want anything different.” The pamphlet includes photographs of volunteers setting up garbage bins, sweeping roads, repairing the bridge, helping with the elections and tutoring children.

The Good Youth insisted that everything they were doing was in order to fulfill their service mission, “not for power or position, and with no interest except the revival of the village and making it a model” for others to emulate. The pamphlet drew a contrast between the youths’ work and the “connections and favoritism” that had driven the worst of the previous corruption, including on the official village council.

The youth were not giving up on politics. Just a few days earlier they had announced the formation of a new Facebook campaign: “Arrest the Fuloul of Village X.” (Fuloul, or “remnants,” is the derisive term for Mubarak-era apparatchiks.) The group said it would publish any evidence of corruption or collusion with the old regime in the village. In January, I had seen by the roadside a poster for “Youth Against the Fuloul.” I heard from someone else in the village that the youth had indeed assured that no one from the old guard got reelected to the local councils.

Doing for Themselves

What can we conclude from these stories from one village in Upper Egypt in the first couple of years after the revolution? Mona El-Ghobashy has argued that the main goal of the counterrevolution—an alliance that formed within 19 days of Mubarak’s ouster among the military, the Muslim Brothers and elements of the old regime—was to break the confidence of the first heady days that Egyptians could have “self-rule,” that they could regulate their own lives.1

The Good Youth—homegrown and driven to make changes for the better in their small part of Egypt—were enacting precisely that vision of self-rule. They were connected to what was happening nationally, but they worked locally. They did
not need the government, for it had failed them, and was continuing to do so, as indicated by Facebook discussions about hostile encounters with the governor over displacements in one hamlet.

This engagement was revolutionary, for the Good Youth as individuals, and for the community at large. It was not driven by ideology. It was not connected to political parties, though some found resonances in national platforms. (One young man said he was impressed with the Muslim Brother who came to speak to them: “All they want is dignity, health and education.”) It was carried out in a framework of shared morality and kinship and concern for the community. When these young people took back their village, they enacted a “leaderful horizontalism.” As John Chalcraft explains, “Horizontalism involves a distinctive break with the basic idea of having a blueprint for social action—whether a program, a revolutionary theory or an ‘answer.’” Given that there is no doctrinal blueprint, whether for revolution or reform, there is no need
for an individual leader or social class to implement or impose the plan, and no need for the older modes of propaganda and persuasion used to win over the public. In place of a blueprint comes another way of doing politics, based not just on non-hierarchical relationships, but on ‘the striving for consensus, processes in which everyone is heard and new relationships are created.’ Here a set of everyday practices and orientations—cooperation, communicative exchange, questioning, self-awareness and problem solving—lead to the discovery of common ground and the construction of enjoyable and potent forms of collective action. The idea of horizontalism has much in common with the idea of ‘direct democracy.’

The struggle to keep up this consensus building and collective problem solving has turned out to be daunting. On June 25, 2012, the day Muhammad Mursi of the Muslim Brothers was elected president, the Facebook page administrator wrote: “We created this group to have ongoing communication and to implement our ideas on the ground. Because of this, I hope you won’t post anything on the group page unless it’s related to our work, and please write with new ideas…. Let’s keep our group for work and action! We are one hand and, God willing, we will achieve our goals. And God, whose help we seek, bless us…. The Good Youth of Village X—God brought us together through love, and no one will part us.”

On that same fateful day when the presidential election result was announced, another young man e-mailed me: “History records that we youth are tasting freedom and democracy for the first time in the history of beloved Egypt, even if it tastes sour, bitter or salty to some.”

Over time, the Good Youth have become discouraged. Less than a year after Mursi’s election, members of the group were rounding up signatures as part of Tamarrud, the campaign that called upon the Muslim Brother president to step down. The youths also blocked the streets of Luxor to prevent the arrival of the new governor appointed by Mursi in June 2013. This man was closely associated with the terrible tourist massacre in 1997 that had so horrified them as children. They were proud that the governor resigned within a week. With the subsequent ouster of the Muslim Brothers, with the army back in power, with the economic freefall and scant prospects for the revival of tourism, and with the ongoing violence in the capital, the initial euphoria and sense of purpose has begun to fade. These good young men and women have seen the possibilities closing down all around them.

If the revolution for them was about feeling that they could finally talk, do for themselves, and run their own lives and country, the long aftermath has been more of a challenge.

Author’s Note: I want to thank the young men in the village who talked to me about their activities and Menna Khalil for crucial research help with Facebook.

Endnotes