

Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today

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Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today

Talal Asad

1

I have used the term *tradition* in my writings in two ways: first, as a theoretical location for raising questions about authority, time, language use, and embodiment; and second, as an empirical arrangement in which discursivity and materiality are connected through the minutiae of everyday living. The discursive aspect of tradition is primarily a matter of linguistic acts passed down the generations as part of a form of life, a process in which one learns and relearns how to do things with words, sometimes reflectively and sometimes unthinkingly, and learns and relearns how to comport one's body and how to feel in particular contexts. Embodied practices help in the acquisition of aptitudes, sensibilities, and propensities through repetition until such time as the language guiding practice becomes redundant. Through such practices one can change oneself—one's physical being, one's emotions, one's language, one's predispositions, as well as one's environment. Tradition stands opposed both to empiricist theories of knowledge and relativist theories of justice. By this I mean first and foremost that tradition stresses embodied, critical learning rather than abstract theorization. Empiricist theories of knowledge assert the centrality of sensory experience and evidence, but in doing so they ignore the

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prior conceptualization carried by tradition. My sensory experience is incommensurable with yours. It is only through language (integral to a shared form of life), and the conceptualization that language makes possible, that we can develop argument and knowledge as collective processes. Critique is central to a living tradition; it is essential to how its followers assess the relevance of the past for the present, and the present for the future. It is also essential for understanding the nature of circumstance and therefore the possibility of changing elements of circumstances that are changeable. Relativist theories of justice assert that *justice* is simply the name for the norms that actually guide and regulate a people's form of life. And yet what other people consider to be justice is part of the circumstance that confronts the followers of every living tradition. As such it constitutes a challenge to every critical tradition, an invitation to change contingent aspects of one's tradition, the circumstances in which it is embedded, or both. This is not a challenge that consists in abstract theories but of embodied (and yet criticizable) ways of life.

Discursive tradition and embodied tradition do not refer to two separate types of tradition, two mutually exclusive principles of social organization (like *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, say). In general I use the concept of tradition to address both the use of inherited language and the acquisition of embodied abilities by repetition. Discourse itself may stand detached from embodiment in order to initiate, regulate, and complete its capacities or to reflect on events in real life. But discourse may also be unmoored from life, having no connection with any reality. There are different ways of being articulated in and disarticulated from tradition.

One might suggest that having a tradition is an expression of a desire for the completion of a present that is simply unfinished time. Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote: "Tradition is not something a man can learn; not a thread he can pick up when he feels like it; any more than a man can choose his own ancestors. Someone lacking a tradition who would like to have one is like a man unhappily in love."¹ For Wittgenstein, in other words, tradition represents for someone who doesn't have it the object of an unattainable longing—the condition of belonging to another, being accepted as such by him or her, and of hoping to learn (and construct) through friendship who one is. Of course the language and practice of tradition can and

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago, 1980), p. 76.

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must be learnt (people do enter traditions they have not inherited), but Wittgenstein's emphasis is on the fact that what is learnt is not a doctrine (rules) but a mode of being, not a thread one can pick up or drop whenever one feels like it but a capacity for experiencing another in a way that can't be renounced.

I use the concept of embodiment therefore to address questions of beginning, growth, and completion, of finitude, hope, and failure; I use the idea of discourse in the same context to explore how citizens talk about and engage with power and authority in shifting moments of time. Different generations, ages as well as classes and genders, inhabit different trajectories of time, and their willingness to stand together and capacity to draw on other traditions varies accordingly.² I understand tradition to be given, not invented. Even when reform is proposed there is an assumption, explicit or implicit, that "the tradition's essence"—what is perceived as essential to it—is not to be changed but defended through purification, the process of separating what is contingent from what is essential. Thus, contrary to those who see an irreconcilable opposition between tradition and genealogy, I suggest that the very act of "purifying tradition" draws on genealogical arguments. Genealogical critique is not (as Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has insisted) a rejection of all grounding; its ground is today, the place from which one thinks on the difference between time present and time past and aspires to future time. The purification of tradition uses violence (or the threat of violence) to restore an obscured origin that can then accommodate itself more smoothly to the real, progressive world. This process of critical purification (modernization) is a process of what must be transgressed if tradition is to become "civilized." As a consequence, actual traditions, descriptively so identified, can disintegrate or implode.³

Discourses and acts that found a tradition are not exhaustive because subsequent events become part of those foundations by interpreting or

2. For a remarkable exploration of temporality in relation to politics—with special reference to the failed Grenada revolution—see David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, N.C., 2014).

3. I draw here, of course, on Michel Foucault, who opposed genealogy to transcendental critique. In endorsing the former, he observes that

this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom. [Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" trans. Catherine Porter, *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Porter, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Hochroth (New York, 1997), pp. 125–26]

developing them. In any living tradition there are arguments about whether exegetical texts, or texts belonging to other traditions, have any value for one's own tradition, and if so why. Disagreements therefore arise not only about the substance of interpretation but also over where exactly the limits of a tradition lie. These arguments and exchanges suggest that founding narratives are moments in ongoing conversations: so in principle tradition can accommodate rupture, recuperation, reorientation, and splitting—as well as continuity. Tradition is singular as well as plural. For subjects there are not only continuities but also exits and entries. Tradition accommodates mistakes as well as betrayal; it is not by accident that *tradition* and *treason* have a common etymology.⁴

So in what follows I want to think about politics in Egypt today, especially by attending to ideas about Islamic tradition that have been explicit or implicit in much of the discourse of participants and commentators of the events since January 2011. In particular, I want to ask what a liberal state, which is said to be a precondition of individual freedom (including religious freedom), makes difficult or even impossible. I note that of course not all liberal states are identical, but they do share something that enables them to be identified as liberal. More precisely, liberalism is an intellectual and political tradition that appears in various forms in different historical conditions. I begin, however, by asking what it is about “tradition” that secularists find antipathetic and then discuss how a learned follower of Islamic tradition interpreted aspects of it to me. I then argue that modern sovereignty (of subject and state) makes it difficult for certain kinds of embodiment, certain kinds of ethics, to flourish in our globalized, speeded-up world. I explore in what follows some openings and closures brought about by modern concepts of ethical and political practice in post-2011 Egypt.

2

Over the last several decades, before the coup in July 2013, whenever I visited Egypt I often heard the so-called Islamic Awakening (*as-sahwa al-islāmiyya*) censured. The critics regarded themselves as “modern,” and so signs of what they identified as religion in public offended them. What they found offensive wasn't always political. Their anxiety was focused on two aspects of what they saw as dangerous: on the one hand, the fastidious emphasis on ritual as evidence of blind obedience to authority, and therefore threatening to the autonomous modern self; on the other hand, the insistence on the priority of the *sharī'a* in the constitution of the state—a

4. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “tradition” and s.v. “treason.”

form of “religious” law that is politically divisive and archaic in its assumptions of social relations. The radical secularist position (not the most vocal in Egypt) is that religion belongs to the past, as do all illusions from which one has emancipated oneself. The more common view among secularists is that religion is essentially a private matter of personal ethics and that while it may perhaps be expressed in public ceremonies it must under no circumstances enter the same space as politics. Many modernizers view the present crisis of Arab society as being rooted in an unquestioning attachment to religious tradition. The famous poet Adonis, for example, has written at length on the need to break decisively with tradition (*salafiyya*). As an advocate of revolutionary change in Arab society he urges “the necessity of freeing the Arab from all dependence on tradition, the necessity of eliminating the past’s sacredness and of considering it part of an experience or knowledge toward which one has no obligation whatever [*ghayr mulzima itlāqan*].”⁵ This modern idea of choice stands defiantly against the idea of a past to which one is bound by language, capability, and affection.

The censure my secular friends made of what they considered Islamic tradition echoes a historical debate about religion since the early Enlightenment. The debate is partly based on a new psychology that emerged in Europe in early modernity, a psychology focusing on such interior states as sincerity, authenticity, and the will, and claims a clear-cut antithesis between freedom and authority.⁶ Since the seventeenth century, ritual has been spoken of very much as tradition has: it looks to the past as continuous and unchanging, it consists of formal and inauthentic action, it is based on nonrational thought, it submits one’s own will to that of another, and it prioritizes social convention over personal sincerity and freedom of action. This view was epitomized in the Protestant rejection of Catholic ritualism,⁷ eventually to become part of modern common sense.⁸

5. Adonis, *Ath-thābit wa-l-mutahawwil*, 3 vols. (1973; Beirut, 1983), 1:34.

6. See, for example, Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997); Antony Flew and Godfrey Vesey, *Agency and Necessity* (Oxford, 1987); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1977); and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).

7. Historians of ideas trace the beginnings of the modern critique of tradition to the so-called quarrel of the ancients and the moderns in the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, when religious and political apologetics confronted each other; see Paul Hazard, *The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680–1750*, trans. J. Lewis May (1953; New York, 2013). The ancients were not totally rejected by moderns but resituated; they were criticized, historicized, and used for new purposes.

8. The prominent British anthropologist Maurice Bloch elaborated the concept of traditional authority by arguing that the very formality of oratory (as in the formality of

The old assumption that tradition is antimodern has been countered in several ways. Thus Adam Seligman and his colleagues have recently argued that the formal character of ritual has the function of smoothing social life where a rigid adherence to one's actual feelings ("sincerity") would seriously disturb it. The theoretical object of submission to ritual is therefore not the suppression of authentic feeling but its management by the use of conventional formalities so that social life becomes possible.⁹ Again, the principle of precedent in tradition is also known to be crucial to modern law. In both common law and the principle of *stare decisis*, the reasoning in prior judicial decisions is followed unless there are strong legal reasons to do otherwise.¹⁰ And in liberal democratic countries the constitution is the foundation on which future politics are expected to be built and which citizens must venerate. Finally, respectful attention to the objects, texts, buildings, and landscapes that have survived from the past become valuable evidence in the present for reconstructing that past, and a critical assessment of such evidence is essential to the making of veridical historical narratives. Discursive fidelity to the past and attention to the way in which language has constructed its categories (those used by people who lived in the past as well as those used by scholars who have studied them) are central to the modern discipline of history.¹¹

manners) was a means of social control and political domination because it rested on the repetition of a priori forms as opposed to authentic expression. Formal speech and behavior—whether in religious ritual or in political oratory—should be seen for what it really was, the denial of choice and therefore blind submission to authority; see Maurice Bloch, introduction to *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*, ed. Bloch (London, 1975), pp. 1–28. This approach to ritual therefore reinforced the idea that to think and speak autonomously and rationally, the subject needed to break from tradition and claim the legitimacy of her own beliefs. The book that has had the greatest impact on anthropological thinking on tradition is *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983). My approach to tradition is quite different, and draws on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

9. Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford, 2008).

10. See David Lieberman, "Law/Custom/Tradition: Perspectives from the Common Law," in *Questions of Tradition*, ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto, 2004), pp. 233–57.

11. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 217–51, has become especially attractive to critics of the concepts of authenticity and tradition. But contrary to the simple way this famous essay has usually been read, we should note that it actually articulates a problem that was quite apparent to its author. Here is the problem. Since the Benjaminian notion of aura spells uniqueness and authenticity, the destruction of aura undermines tradition. The difficulty with this is that tradition not only guards the uniqueness of authentic things, it also conveys historical knowledge of them. "The authenticity of a thing," writes Benjamin, "is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the

And yet one may object that none of this, surely, proves that religion should have a place in modern politics. Some continuity with the past may be necessary because it facilitates social intercourse, or because it provides a measure of predictability to the law (and therefore to the state), but religious tradition bases itself on unquestionable authority whereas democratic politics requires public debate capable of being brought to a rational conclusion.¹² I'll return to this and other liberal claims about politics

historical testimony rests on [its] authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object" (p. 221). So Benjamin explicitly recognized that tradition was the process by which something authentic was preserved and passed on down the generations. A humanly made object—say an old dagger—has aura by virtue of the fact that it displays its uniqueness in its shape and materials, as well as in its scratches and discolorations, all signs of its ancient history. An old document that embodies specific traces of the past similarly has an aura. Memory is central to the way the past is conveyed and re-presented, a point Benjamin makes more elaborately in "The Storyteller," where he also emphasizes what we now know about Homeric poetry—namely, that the memory embodied in the epic, and also the recall required for its performance, both depend on a process of iteration, on *the same* being repeated with perhaps occasional slight modifications; see Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, pp. 83–109. The time employed in the work of tradition is not simply the homogeneous time of modern progressive history. It is the complex time of everyday experience, remembrance, and practice. Thus memory, too, may be authentic or inauthentic, just like any physical object. The distinctive question for Benjamin is whether it inhabits more than one time.

12. Can there be a rational basis for choosing between contending traditions? MacIntyre, who has done the most to rehabilitate the idea of tradition in Anglophone philosophy, proposes how such a rational choice can be made. Citing Thomas Aquinas's debate with the followers of the Muslim Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd, MacIntyre argues that Thomist Aristotelianism provides

a standpoint which suffers from less incoherence, is more comprehensive and more resourceful, but especially resourceful in one particular way. For among those resources . . . is an ability not only to identify as limitations, defects, and errors of the opposing view what are or ought to be taken to be limitations, defects, and errors in the light of the standards of the opposing view itself, but also to explain in precise and detailed terms what it is about the opposing view which engenders just these particular limitations, defects, and errors and also what it is about that view which must deprive it of the resources required for understanding, overcoming, and correcting them. [Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1990), p. 146].

This is an attractive argument, but can't one reasonably claim that in time it may be possible to overcome apparent incoherence by a proper resort to the resources of one's own tradition? In other words, while MacIntyre points to criteria for judging the rational vulnerability of particular traditional beliefs in transcendental form, he doesn't say when arguments based on those criteria become decisive or why time is crucial to persuasiveness. Being able to grasp the force of a criticism leveled at one's tradition from outside it, to be persuadable, one has to be a person living a particular form of life who is yet prepared to change his or her opinion entirely at a particular point in time. If that move occurs, it may be closer to a conversion than to a deductive conclusion because the truthfulness of a tradition is essentially a matter not of

later, but first I want to talk a little about the Islamic concept of tradition so that it might help us think about the times and authorities of politics in Egypt.

In 2009 I was in Cairo for several months and had weekly conversations with Shaykh Usama Sayyid al-Azhari, occasional *khatīb* (person authorized to deliver the Friday sermon) of Sultan Hassan mosque, and also a protégé of Shaykh Ali Gum‘a, onetime Grand Mufti of Egypt. I was initially concerned with hearing about his views on human rights in Islam, but as he spoke I became more interested in what he had to say about the formation of personal virtue within Islamic tradition. Thus at one point Shaykh Usama commented “We say *al-a‘māl bi-nniyyāt* [deeds are to be judged by intentions] but where do intentions come from?” He went on to say that “the process by which human beings were formed” (*takwīn al-insān*) was what formed intentions, and therefore the possibility of a just social life. The constitution of intentions by behavioral and verbal action takes place in various contexts of social life. He went on to talk about “the education of good character” (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) through the practices of devotion and discipline, but insisted that the ethical formation of the individual was not a matter for the individual alone, that it took place through interactions among people and things in several social locations: “household, school, mosque, the media, and the street.” In each location there were proper and improper ways of behaving and interacting with others, behavior that had to be learnt, and being enacted was part of the process of learning. It was not simply that practice mattered; it was that learning to practice aptly what was learnt that was critical. That was why, said Shaykh Usama, when ibn Taymiyya spoke of faith (*imān*) as something expressed primarily in and through actions (*a‘māl*), he cited a well-known hadith about the foundational status of devotional practices (*‘ibādāt*) in Islam, “Islam is built on five [pillars]” (*mabniya al-islām ‘ala khams*).¹³ The rituals cited are: a public articulation of faith (*shahāda*), the formal worship of God five times a day (*salāt*), fasting in the month of Ramadan (*sawm*), and giving charity (*zakāt*).¹⁴ The required declaration of intention (*niyya*) preceding every act

propositions but of a form of obligation carried out over time, achieved not by theoretical proof but by persuasion through conversation and demonstration in and appeal to the solidities of everyday life. Persuadability is the measure of a subject’s capacity to be persuaded—and therefore also the precondition of a successful process of persuasion. There is, of course, no special virtue in persuasion; one can be persuaded to commit serious intellectual mistakes and crimes.

13. Shaykh Usama Sayyid al-Azhari, interview by author, 2009.

14. And “a fifth of the spoils of war” (*khums*) is also cited as a pillar in the hadith discussed by ibn Taymiyya, a source that does not mention the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*);

of devotion was part of the devotion. The verbal articulation was supposed to sink into the act. It was therefore different from the formation and implementation of intention in acts that belong to matters in commerce and politics that might or might not be realized.¹⁵ For Ibn Taymiyya, as for Ghazali, so Shaykh Usama reminded me, the unthinking religiosity of ordinary people was more important for the tradition than the formal reasoning of philosophers and theologians precisely because it was embodied in everyday life.

What was crucial in traditional devotion was both its initial guidance by an authoritative teacher—whether parent, friend, or shaykh—and its perfectibility. It was in this exercise of the soul, as Ghazali put it, that spiritual orientations and sensibilities could be learnt and confirmed.¹⁶ Thus repetition of the same creates (paradoxically) something different, so that vice turns into virtue and inability into ability. The conception of time here stands in clear contrast to the linear time of historical progress. In the former, time can be completed, the past bound to present and future; in the latter there is no completion, only continuous improvement into an indefinite future, and an indefinitely accumulating past that is left behind.

It is easy to confuse what Shaykh Usama was saying with what is called self-fashioning, a process well known in the ancient world and revived in the European Renaissance. Christian thought and practice had rejected self-making and developed an alternative in the monastic discipline that taught willing submission to tradition. Augustine expressed this rejection in a memorable warning: “Hands off yourself. Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin.”¹⁷ The individual, in other words, should not assume that he or she was sovereign. The subject did not have the authority to make him- or herself; that authority resided in the practice of submitting oneself to the discipline of tradition. Submission is here conceived of not as a passive or coerced state but as an act of connecting to the authority of a tradition. Submission was therefore not unqualified because opposition to

according to Sunnis, the requirement of *khums* has lapsed after the Prophet’s death. See Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Imān* (Beirut, 1996), p. 12.

15. Wael Hallaq has an excellent analysis of this aspect of the *sharī‘a* in Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity’s Moral Predicament* (New York, 2013).

16. In Ghazali’s words, by “exercising the soul” (*riyādat an-nafs*) one can develop a virtuous constitution—by learning orientations of faith and exigencies of a lived form of life in which destructive desires are gradually restrained (Ghazali, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm ad-Dīn*, ed. Badawī Ahmad Tabana, 4 vols. [Cairo, n.d.], 3:47–77). Shaykh Usama often cited Ghazali, and used the latter’s psychological vocabulary.

17. Quoted in Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London, 1972), p. 30.

false claims to authority was itself an essential form of obedience. *Islam* (“submission”) shares this orientation, and the ethical language that goes with it, with premodern Christianity, and has developed it even more vigorously in the *sharī‘a* tradition, of which the practice of *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf* (discussed below) is a part. This should not be surprising, incidentally, because Islam developed in late antiquity in a world where Byzantine and Sassanian empires ruled and Christian, Judaic, and Mazdaean traditions flourished, and so, as Muslims interacted with non-Muslims, they inherited institutions and ideas from that complex history and went on to develop them in diverse but distinctive ways.

With the growth of commercial society, however, the possibilities of self-invention have opened up for much of the population and have been justified as the right of the sovereign self. Many critics have pointed out that that form of embodiment is based on the illusion of sovereignty because and to the extent that the individual’s behavior is a response to the market. According to this critical view the market that organizes modern commercial society, like all transcendent force, requires consumers and investors to fall into line. However, this view is not persuasive to most people who feel that they are making free choices in the market, that the market offers them a means of fulfilling their own desires. But this assumption rests on the belief that coercion is always and only external, always what is apparent to consciousness. It ignores the old problem of internal coercion and therefore the possibility that one cannot be free until the inner compulsion that clouds one’s judgment and distorts one’s conscious action is dissolved. As philosophers of antiquity and the Renaissance put it, one’s emotions (*passions*) imprison one, and it is only the intentional use (*action*) of reason that can liberate one from this prison. So there is a crucial difference between self-care that is entirely subject to the individual’s choice and responsibility (*self-invention*), and the discipline of the self whose experience and authority lie in tradition.¹⁸ The former rests on the assumption that the self is self-contained (“buffered” in the word of one modern philosopher) and the latter on the recognition that it overlaps with, and contains, other selves.¹⁹

18. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold Davidson (Malden, Mass., 1995). For Christianity, a classic is Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1992). I have myself written a little on medieval monastic discipline in Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993). For a later period, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980; Chicago, 2005).

19. The “buffered self” is a term used by Charles Taylor to distinguish moderns from the “porous self” of premoderns: “Modern Westerners have a clear boundary between mind and world, even mind and body. Moral and other meanings are ‘in the mind.’ They cannot reside

A modern secular version of self-care is institutionalized in Freudianism but with the interesting twist that the unconscious past is made the source of psychic blockages whose removal can be secured through a talking cure. But to regard the authority of the past as only the source of blind obedience is to ignore the possibility that the past may be reached in the present not only through the discovery of unconscious desires and fears formed in the past that act as coercive forces in the present but also in an opposite direction, through conscious repetition that aims at making one's self-conscious actions unself-conscious in the future. When one acts unself-consciously one is not suppressing desires—and therefore coercive forces—into one's unconscious. One's desires are being educated so that one does not encounter them as obstacles to living. The disciplined body is not a coerced body but a "docile" body, in the older sense of a body that is "teachable."²⁰ To be teachable is not only to be able to listen to another person (one's teacher) but also and especially to be able to listen to oneself; that is a skill to be acquired and perfected through tradition. Of course one may be taught to do wicked things but that is a general problem of persuasion and learning, not one special to living through tradition.

What Shaykh Usama was trying to describe was thus more interesting than the disapproval of my friends in Cairo. What he sought to convey was the idea of intention itself being constituted in the repeated acts of body-and-mind within a social context. In fact, like the mastery of all grammar, the ability to perform devotions well (to devote oneself) required not only repetition but also flexibility in different circumstances. It was not simply a matter of acting as in the past but of acquiring a capability for which the past was a beginning and by which the need to submit consciously to a rule would eventually disappear. When one mastered the capability, its exercise did not require a continuous monitoring of oneself ("Am I following the rule correctly?").

outside, and thus the boundary is firm" (Charles Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* [Cambridge, Mass., 2011], pp. 219, 220–21). But the question that Freud has helped us to ask is whether being buffered is in fact how moderns live, or simply what they consciously assume must be how they ought to live. One can accept that there are significant differences between moderns and premoderns, but does the simple binary of "buffered" and "porous" catch that difference adequately? Believing that the self is buffered (when it isn't) has a repressive function, so that what conflicts with that belief is pushed into the unconscious, ready to resurface in irrational ways. (Augustine: "Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin.") I have discussed the buffered self briefly in Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), pp. 36–57.

20. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "docile."

According to Shaykh Usama there was always a social dimension to the disciplines of devotion, as in the traditional duty of every Muslim “to urge what is good and oppose what is reprehensible” (*amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar*),²¹ including advice (*nasīha*) and warning (*tahdhīr*). What I found intriguing about his discourse was the attempt to tie *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf* to the virtue of friendship (*suhba, ikhwa*), to present it as a matter of responsibility and concern for a friend rather than simply of policing. The language and attitude in which one carried out that duty was integral to what *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf* was, because “every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim.”²² What is known historically in Christian history as pastoral care is here diffused among all Muslims in relation to one another.

Michael Cook has pointed out in his valuable historical survey of *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf* that the duty of “forbidding wrong” finds expression in a rich vocabulary.

A wide variety of locutions are used for this besides ‘command’ (*amara*) and ‘forbid’ (*nahā*). A man may speak to (*qāla li-*) the offender, exhort him (*wa‘aza*), counsel him (*nasaha*), censure him (*wabbakha*), shout at him (*sāha*), and so forth. . . . Other things being equal, one should perform the duty in a civil fashion. . . . But although in general one should speak politely, there are times when rudeness is in place.²³

Clearly the performance of that duty is in crucial measure dependent on the vocabulary used, and the differences in language cannot be reduced simply to two imperatives—obligatory and forbidden actions—that are central to what we would today call law. They articulate a range of interactions belonging to tradition. And yet despite his reference to the rich vocabulary employed in it, Cook reduces this tradition to the imperative of “forbidding wrong,” a move that, among other things, distracts attention from the complex process of encouraging right. Of course, the former logically presupposes a conception of what is right, but cultivating right behavior is not exhausted by prohibitions as Shaykh Usama clearly recognized—it is usually a longer and more complicated process of learning, in which the substan-

21. A Qur’anic reference to *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf wa nahy ‘an al-munkar* is to be found at 3:110.

22. In one of our discussions Shaykh Usama cited the famous hadith from Muslim: “man ra’a minkum munkaran falyughayyuruh biyadih, fa in lam yastati’ fabilisānih, fa in lam yastati’ fabiqalbih fa dhālik ad’afu-l-‘imān” (Any one from among you who sees an evil doer, let him change him by action, and if he cannot do that, then by speaking out, and if he cannot do that then silently in his [own] heart—and that is the weakest form of faith) (Shaykh Usama, interview by author).

23. Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 96.

tive language and the repeated practice of the tradition, as well as the contingent circumstances in which they occur, are interlaced. It requires speaking to those whose behavior one wants to change in the way one would speak to a friend.

According to Shaykh Usama, a just society was possible only if its individual members learnt the virtues through tradition, and were helped to do so by relatives, teachers, and friends. He insisted that even if you meet a stranger you should behave towards him as though he were a friend unless you have good reason not to do so. One could reprove a person kindly, but if urging him to reform failed to produce a positive result, one should boycott him until he changed because countering the misguided behavior of a friend was a duty of friendship.²⁴ One implication here—although Shaykh Usama did not articulate it—is that speaking harshly (as Cook notes in his review of the historical vocabulary) may sometimes be necessary to make even a friend change his or her behavior.²⁵ Pointing out explicitly that something is unconditionally forbidden is of course part of that tradition—but only part of it. In a modern context this would include political boycott, mass protest, and civil disobedience, all responding to a particular or cumulative injustice of state authority.²⁶

Hussein Agrama contrasts *hisba* as a form of care of the self and also as a legal device: “While *hisba*, in its classical *Shari‘a* elaborations, was part of a form of reasoning and practice connected to the cultivation of selves, in the courts it became focused on the maintenance and defense of interests aimed at protecting the public order.”²⁷ His account demonstrates that when the *shari‘a* tradition of *amr bi-l-ma‘ruf* is incorporated into the judicial system of the state, it becomes part of the state’s coercive power and legalizes suspicion in the interest of public order, and this makes friendship not merely impossible but also a distortion of the modern (impersonal) concept of justice. Agrama argues that the premodern *shari‘a* as practiced in the Fatwa Council in Egypt is not law but a tradition that seeks to resolve the moral blockages encountered in everyday life by subjects who recognize themselves as Muslims. With the development of the mod-

24. Ghazali, whom Shaykh Usama often quoted, has written at length about the duties of friendship; see Ghazali, *Adāb us-suhba wa-l-mu‘āshara* (Beirut, 2007). On the duties and correct ways of advising and instructing friends, see especially pp. 66–69.

25. See Hussein Ali Agrama, “The Legalization of *Hisba* in the Case of Nasr Abu Zayd,” *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 42–68.

26. I have discussed *naṣīha* (advice) in the context of state policy in Saudi Arabia in Asad, “The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East: Notes on Islamic Public Argument,” *Genealogies of Religion*, pp. 200–38.

27. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*, p. 20.

ern state, however, another part of the *sharī'a* has been transformed into and treated in the Personal Status Courts in Egypt as law. Agrama's insightful account of the work of the Fatwa Council brings it close to the tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* as a form of care of the self—with the difference that *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* is initiated by someone concerned about another's behavior, whereas the Fatwa Council responds to requests for advice and help from someone perplexed or worried about the rightness of their own behavior as a Muslim. It is for this reason that Agrama traces the authority of the fatwa not to doctrine (the normative rule) but to the work done together by the shaykh and the individuals who come to him seeking the right way to go on as Muslims. The authority of this care of the self is rooted not in the sovereign subject but in the sovereign *sharī'a* that preceded him or her and yet remains always copresent.²⁸

Agrama draws on the argument of a famous article by Wael Hallaq that presents the *sharī'a* not as a timeless structure but as a complex temporality best grasped in terms of evolving tradition.²⁹ Agrama is also aware that the premodern, prestate *sharī'a* is not law in the modern understanding of that concept, not a system of legal doctrines backed by sovereign state power, but a tradition consisting of normative practice and commentary that includes (but is not exhausted by) justiciable cases. In part the *sharī'a* is applied to matters that are justiciable, and in part (through such traditions as *amr bi-l-ma'rūf*) to individual or collective pressure at a political level, as

28. Understanding the *sharī'a* as tradition as opposed to a fixed structure (even as the context for understanding it as a normative ideal in relationship to the time of "real" history) seems to me essential. Thus although the well-known account of the *sharī'a's* primary sources include the Qur'an and Hadith as well as reasoning by analogy, the authority of doctrinal consensus, and independent reasoning, custom (*'urf*) is also incorporated into the *sharī'a* by devices such as necessity (*darūra*), so long as it doesn't contravene the primary sources. *'Urf* is that which is *ma'rūf* (good custom, fitting practice, decent behavior) as in *amr bi-l-ma'rūf*. Good custom was not recognized at first as an independent source of law even though it was continually integrated into the *sharī'a*. However, since the sixteenth century *'urf* has been formally recognized as a legal category. The changing character of allowable practice is therefore also part of that tradition so long as the changes don't affect what is allowable. So one might suggest that (allowable) habitual practice isn't merely a possible source for the *sharī'a*, it is in a deep sense what the *sharī'a* is—by which I mean that the authority of the *sharī'a* resides not in (written) rules and commands but in embodied practices (including sound interpretation put into practice of what the sources say) in accordance with living tradition. The changing character of custom in different historical circumstances inevitably affects the way in which Qur'anic and prophetic authority are interpreted and argued over in the *sharī'a* tradition. Hence the tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* can be seen not only as coming within the purview of the *sharī'a* but also as an expression of the everyday concern of friends and kin for the welfare of one another's souls, as well as an expression of the occasional need for addressing the holders of power.

29. Hallaq, "Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16 (Mar. 1984): 3–41.

well as to attempts at blaming, warning, advising, urging, and others, to encourage friends, kin, and colleagues to act in a praiseworthy way. Which is why, as Agrama shows, although the work of the Fatwa Council is fully informed by the *sharī'a*, it does not deal with law but with a nonmodern conception of ethics.³⁰

Five years after I met Shaykh Usama, Abdul Mun'im Abu-l-Futuh (a Presidential candidate in 2012) invoked the tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* in answer to questions about the uprising and the coup, and the role of Egyptian religiosity in those events. "This religiosity [*tadayyun*] is a definite fact," he replied.

The Egyptian personality includes deep faith and devotion to the sacred, and [a sense of] considerable interpenetration between everyday life and the sacred. But this religiosity is not always accompanied by a social, political, and legal consciousness, and sometimes it is [merely] formal or superficial or ritual. The importance of religiosity in the January 2011 revolution was that it formed the moral background to the conscience of the revolution even if its discourse didn't display that clearly. As for the events of 3 July 2013 and later, the powerful propaganda that preceded 3 July joined in distorting and treating with contempt the Islamists in preparation for the events of 3 July and after. And the matter reached the point of doubting even what is sacred. . . . This was what weakened the values and meanings of fundamental religiosity that forbids the shedding of blood and commands what is right and forbids what is wrong and tyrannical [*al-qiyam wa ma'āni at-tadayyun al-asāsiyya allaṭī tahrūm safk ad-dimā wa ta'mur bi-l-ma'rūf wa tanhi 'an al-munkar wa-z-zulm*] and so millions of people confirmed and excused and supported ugly behavior that was without historical precedent. So here was where superficial religiosity failed because of its separation from values and norms.³¹

Abu-l-Futuh's observation on the massacres of pro-Morsi protesters by the military regime extends *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* into an explicitly political context.³² He invokes *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* as a religious tradition that authorizes the cultivation of politically relevant virtues. What he sees that tradition as

30. See Asad, "Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt," *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif., 2003), pp. 205–56, in which I tried to argue that in its premodern form the *sharī'a* is not a primitive confusion of morality and law but something quite different from both as they are understood in modern society.

31. Abdul Mun'im Abu-l-Futuh, interview by Mohammed Tabishat, 2014.

32. See Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt*, 14 Aug. 2014, www.hrw.org/reports/2014/08/12/all-according-plan

offering is not a rule about right and wrong (as in a court of law) but the ability to recognize a particular injustice and to react to it by demanding a return to justice—without having to calibrate the matter by reference to generalizable moral principles. Even if that ability is not always acquired perfectly, it is what that tradition, as embodied practice, seeks to build. And where the building is successful, it enables daily life to be lived justly without having to find justifications for moral—or political—obligation.³³

3

So I turn to the January 2011 uprising and what followed the ouster of President Mubarak and ask how religion, authority, and tradition are linked together in that story. One cannot seriously maintain that religious tradition was a significant inspiration to that overthrow of authority,³⁴ but there can be no question that since the fall of Mubarak, religion has been involved in a complicated way in what followed that remarkable event. Hannah Arendt has traced a very specific concept of tradition that was central to European history, in which it was bound closely to both authority and religion, such that undermining of the one inevitably led to the undermining of the other two.³⁵ This historical sketch of tradition is relevant to the Middle East because it begins with the Greco-Roman experience that is part of the classical heritage of both the northern and the southern lands of the Mediterranean,³⁶ and it ends with post-

33. What both Shaykh Usama and Abu-l-Futuh had to say is consistent in some respects with what has been written by several Western critics who take a long historical view of Western liberal culture, although their sources of inspiration are different. For example, in a well-known essay Elizabeth Anscombe describes the emergence of a modern concept of ethics in which the Aristotelian concept of virtue ethics has been historically abandoned and yet a quasi-legal notion of obligation has been retained in secularized fashion (Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 [Jan. 1958]: 1–19). She thinks that philosophers since David Hume are correct in asserting that there is an unbridgeable gap between what is the case and what ought morally to be the case—but that is only because in the absence of a divine commandment *morally ought* has no content. Her criticism is that the modern concept of moral obligation tends to rely on notions of conscience, or of self-legislation, or of consequentialism, all of which are either meaningless (their usage allows for any or no content) or are confused about what comes under the notion of practice and intention. Thus conscience as the founding criterion of moral obligation is absurd because one's conscience may dictate anything—including unjust behavior—and legislating for oneself is meaningless because of the metaphor used. Anscombe thinks that it would be better, in modern philosophy and common discourse, to abandon the modern liberal notion of moral obligation altogether (rooted as it is in the idea of the self-contained—"buffered"—self). Her philosophical argument is consistent with an understanding of the *sharī'a* (especially of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf*) that I encountered at length in Shaykh Usama's words, and more briefly in Abu-l-Futuh's statement.

34. And yet religion was not absent from the uprising; see Asad, "Fear and the Ruptured State: Reflections on Egypt after Mubarak," *Social Research* 79 (Summer 2012): 271–98.

35. Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" *Between Past and Future* (1968; New York, 2006).

36. Garth Fowden has argued recently for an extension of the temporal and spatial limits of

Enlightenment European political thought and practice that have had a profound impact on Muslim societies ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Arendt argues that with the rise of modern science the authority of religion was irretrievably lost, and so tradition as idea and practice was also undermined—or, at any rate, radically transformed. The idea and practice of tradition that postrevolutionary Europe identified and critiqued emerged, says Arendt, not with the Greeks but with the Romans, and crucial to that conception were two things: the notion of foundation (the sacred foundation of Rome, the state that Roman politics sought to preserve and extend) and a religion of the ancestors essential to Roman political identity. Arendt notes that the Latin for *authority* (*auctoritas*) derives from the verb *to augment* (*augere*), and that what those in authority sought to augment was the foundation. Although authority was rooted in the past, this past was present in the actual life of the city, especially in the domestic rituals of the Romans. Authority, tasked with augmenting the foundation, was vested in the Senate and distinguished from power (*potestas*)—or the capacity to use force—that the people possessed. In the early centuries of the Christian era, says Arendt, the Church took over Rome's political constitution, the most significant aspect of which was its adoption of the distinction between authority and power, conceding political force to the secular arm (the princes) and reserving for itself the authority of the keeper of the Christian tradition.³⁷ There was, nevertheless, a link between the two—as there was in medieval Muslim governance between the collective authority of the *ulama* and the individual *amir's* power, where the latter was expected to adjust his civil actions to the normative demands of the *sharī'a* as articulated and maintained by the former.³⁸ The important difference, of course, is that the *ulama* did not have a monopoly on pastoral care as the Church did. With the modern attempts at building the sovereign nation-state, religious authority was detached from political tradition

antiquity as traditionally defined—from the sixth century (the rise of Islam marks the end of antiquity as well as the split between the northern and southern Mediterranean lands) right up to the end of the millennium (Islamic lands and the northern Mediterranean belong to a single complex history with traditions shared as well as diversely developed). Fowden's book, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, N.J., 2014), is primarily an intellectual history, but it constitutes an important new challenge to the writing of quite separate histories of what is now called Europe and the Middle East.

37. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*.

38. Wael Hallaq has an impressive analysis of the political context in which premodern *sharī'a* rule operated, including this separation between power and authority; see Hallaq, *The Impossible State*.

and political authority was thereby secularized—which is not to say that religion was henceforth never used by the state to legitimate its actions but that politics has come to be very differently articulated from the configurations of power and authority that had previously prevailed.³⁹

One of Arendt's points is that although the bond between authority and religion has dissolved in Europe, the Roman experience of foundation has survived—and therefore, too, a crucial sense of tradition. In fact since a foundation is itself a rupture from the past and an opening to the future, this very ambiguity lends itself to the concept of revolution. But when the Roman conception of founding a political tradition becomes sharply separated from religious authority in thinkers such as Maximilien Robespierre, the authority of a popular revolution becomes merged with the necessity of violence. The violent founding of a nation-state becomes a kind of tradition for as long as the state's foundation is invoked and explicitly augmented. Arendt tells us that since the American and French Revolutions, a fused form of authority/power has become instrumental. In the concept and practice of revolution it was not the use of violence that was new but its role in constituting a new legitimate order *for the good of the people's future*. What she does not note, however, is that coup d'état belongs to the same family of political violence as revolution but differs from the latter in being a challenge from within the governing elite—one that aims to change only the rulers of the state not the system itself, but that legitimates itself in terms of necessity (saving the nation and ensuring its progress).

Thus, not only is the dominant tradition of political authority in Europe today not religious in either the Roman or the Christian sense, but that authority makes the people—the nation—sacred as an eternal subject, and it claims that national memory (recovering the past) and the people's will (making the future) are functions of one and the same national subject.⁴⁰

39. Ira Lapidus has traced this separation to the *Mihna* (the so-called inquisition) in ninth-century Baghdad through which the defiant *ulama* emerged triumphant in their challenge to the Caliphate's pretension to theological authority. However, Lapidus's claim that this represents secularization is misleading. See Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (1988; Cambridge, 2014).

40. Arendt claims that there was only one successful foundation that was relatively nonviolent—the American Revolution, based on the preexisting power of self-governing colonies; see Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963; New York, 2006). In making this claim, however, she ignores the constitution of the United States as an expanding political power based on violence—expanding geographically and socially—from the very beginning: Indian massacres and forced removals, slavery, the civil war, institutionalized racism, the US-Mexican war, and the extension of federal state power and authority, all have helped to constitute the United States. It is only in retrospect, and when this revolutionary history is set aside, that the writing and formal adoption of the constitution in 1787 on the basis of prerevolutionary power of the

Of course, Arendt is not the first to maintain that modern society (or capitalism) has destroyed tradition. However, she does point out that the demand to create new concepts with which to think and act in a broken time reflects the human ability to make new beginnings. But she does not attend to the resulting paradox: to the extent that what is new actually marks a beginning, it also initiates a tradition. It could be said, therefore, that the repetition of beginnings in modernity represents an enduring aspiration for continuity that is continually betrayed—an unhappy yearning for tradition that eludes one.

The 25 January 2011 uprising in Egypt expressed an aspiration that was neither religious nor secular—to overthrow the old system and make a new beginning, to initiate a democratic tradition that would flow from that beginning; a desire that the people's political obligation be founded on loyalty to the nation and not on fear of the state's violence. From then on, there would be no more political cruelty and deception; justice and progress would follow naturally if government is truthful and visible. (Yet it should not be overlooked that the security police too believed in visibility, as when they exposed tortured victims for people to see and thereby become afraid, or when the judiciary staged show trials for the same reason in order to defeat the nation's enemies.)

But an aspiration is not a realization. Some years later, well after the 3 July military coup, looking back at the January uprising, it becomes apparent that there never was a revolution because there was no new foundation. There was a moment of enthusiasm in the uprising, as in all major protests and rebellions, but the solidarity it generated was evanescent. A hopeful attempt at beginning a tradition never guarantees the hoped-for future; clear aims, good judgment, patience, and willingness to learn a new language and to inhabit a new body are required to respond to the various dangers and opportunities that emerge from attempts to found a new political order. Paradoxically, the first attack on the promise of a new political tradition in the January uprising was the removal of Hosni Mubarak—by the military. Most activists were delighted at what they saw as

colonies can be regarded as the founding of the American republic. In other words, apart from the many verbal emendations that were made to the text of the constitution, the republic was constituted—often very violently—both before and after 1787. Aziz Rana convincingly shows how the contemporary US drive for global hegemony is part of its complex political tradition in which the continuous continental expansion, the transformation of an agrarian into an industrial economy, and the waves of always useful but not always welcome immigration, were reflected in the often violent reconstitution of state authority and power; see Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

the solidarity of the army with the people: “‘id wāhid!” (one hand!) was the slogan that met the soldiers as they entered Tahrir Square, but the army generals saw Mubarak’s resignation more clearly as a first step toward an orderly restoration of state power. They understood that it was not the uprising that undermined state authority but the erosion of state authority—of its credibility—that had allowed the popular uprising to explode and the military to move in. The state was no longer the one Anwar Sadat inherited from Gamal Abdul Nasser. The army, big capital, and the interior ministry had by this stage fragmented the state’s singular purpose and authority into a number of reconcilable interests among the major leftovers from the Mubarak regime.⁴¹ It was the rebels’ failure to recognize that fact that gave them an exaggerated sense of their own power.⁴² When people talked about “a transitional” period, there was, therefore, some confusion of the time required for institutionalizing the people’s will (*irādat ash-sha‘b*) with the time for restoring the sovereign state’s authority and majesty (*haybat ad-dawla*),⁴³ because both times sought the legitimacy of political rule.⁴⁴

Arguments about political legitimacy raged in Egypt after the July 2013 coup d’état, although it was not always clear how those who made the claims and counterclaims saw the relationship of legitimacy to legality.

41. See Yazid Sayigh, “Above the State: The Officers’ Republic in Egypt,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 1 Aug. 2012, carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48972

42. The Muslim Brotherhood suffered from the opposite fault. Its hesitation in joining the 2011 uprising (for which they were repeatedly criticized by secular liberals and leftists) may partly be explained by a fear of repression. Thus when *Kifaya* (a protest movement, its name literally meaning “Enough!”), which arose in the last decade of Mubarak’s rule) organized a public protest against Mubarak’s rule in 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood immediately called for their members in large numbers to join it. They also mobilized their own protests demanding political reform. These protests collapsed without any positive results and were followed by further severe penalization of the organization. See Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt After Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton, N.J., 2008), p. 14.

43. The term *haybat ad-dawla* has been widely used by both supporters and opponents of the regime in Egypt. Thus it was used by the Morsi presidency to condemn street protests against itself (Bassam Ramadan, “al-ikhwān: mā yahduth amām ‘al-ittihādiyya’ jurm munazzam lil-qadā’ ala haybat ad-dawla,” *Al-misry al-yawm*, 2 Aug. 2013, www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1457246). For an interesting use of the term in relation to the modern Egyptian state in the nineteenth century, see Khalid Fahmy, “haybat ad-dawla,” *Ash-shurouq*, 23 Aug. 2013.

44. See, for example, the very interesting account of developments from the revolt of January 2011 to the coup and its aftermath in July 2013 by Ibrahim El-Houdaiby, “Changing Alliances and Continuous Oppression: The Rule of Egypt’s Security Sector,” *Arab Reform Initiative*, June 2014, www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Houdaiby_-_Egypt_Security_Sector_-_June_2014.pdf, p. 22. In spite of the many valid criticisms that can be made of the Muslim Brotherhood (and Houdaiby makes many of them) his representation of the Muslim Brotherhood as essentially part of the counterrevolution seems to me unconvincing. The evolving situation was too fluid, confused, and emotionally charged for the categories of revolution and counterrevolution to be useful in describing what happened.

Max Weber's classification of political authority (legitimate domination) into three ideal types is perhaps the most famous in the social sciences, but it gives only one of them a basis in legality: rational-legal authority. The other two, tradition and charisma, are unconnected to law.⁴⁵ Carl Schmitt, by contrast, saw legitimate rule in terms not of consent to authority but of the right (the power) to resist, arguing that the loyalty of citizens to the state was in effect another name for the fact that that right was not being exercised. His assumption was that the nation-state must be homogeneous, sharing a single normative order for political and legal reasons: the right/power to break the claim to legitimate domination is not, in other words, derived from positive law but from the normative order of society that exists prior to the constitution of the state and its law, an order that provides the constitution with its foundation.⁴⁶ It is the Schmittian conception of legitimacy, incidentally, that makes it possible for mass street protests against an established political authority to claim that they are exercising the people's will. Politics that derives from the sovereignty of a modern liberal state is always open to a continuous fear—the fear that the state's authority may be violently undermined by the secret work of internal enemies.

“Terrorists” in authoritarian Egypt, as in liberal-democratic America, are such a threat, and therefore also a spur to reinforcing the devices aimed at meeting it. In theory the liberal state may concede the legitimacy of political dissent, but when popular protest threatens to become politically effective, when it seeks to change the fundamental way the state is run, then the state's concern for stability opens up different forms of action. “Traitors” are close to “terrorists” but more dangerous to the state's legitimacy because while feigning to be ordinary citizens they abandon their traditional obligation to the state and convey their loyalty to its enemies. It is therefore rational for the state to extend its security systems (all the while arguing for their necessity and legality) through technologies of surveillance (directly, or indirectly with the help of private sector enterprises), a strengthened police force, and the encouragement of denunciation.

One approach to understanding attitudes to state violence in Egypt is through a consideration of some remarks by a well-known journalist, Hilmi Namnam, speaking at a meeting shortly after the coup d'état. He refers in positive terms (as many did) to the necessity of violence against pro-Morsi protesters by the security forces. “No democracy or society,”

45. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, ed. Parsons (New York, 1947), pp. 324–86.

46. See Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, N.C., 2004).

Namnam insists, “has ever advanced without the shedding of blood.”⁴⁷ Namnam’s concern is not simply to assert that the necessary price of progress is the physical elimination of its enemies but also to suggest that progress is not a matter of completing a particular project but of an indefinite advance subject to transcendent principles; it is this process that constitutes secularity, the real nature of society. “We must get rid of the lie that Egypt is by natural disposition [*bi-l-fitra*] a religious state,” Namnam goes on, “because Egypt is secular by nature.”⁴⁸ The deliberate violence of the progressive Egyptian movement is secular because it wants to make an increasingly better future in this world; the coercive activity of Islamists, by contrast, seeks conformity with a divine plan. It is motive, not effect, that distinguishes the two kinds of violence. Thus when Islamists appeal to religious authority, instead of the people’s authority, they obscure Egypt’s real nature. In making this claim Namnam draws on a revolutionary tradition that affirms the necessity of political violence as a means of making historical progress. The necessity of this secular violence is called for by an unseen future, a force in which all rational individuals should have faith.

Hannah Arendt had this to say about the origins of this tradition:

Necessity and violence, violence justified and glorified because it acts in the cause of necessity, necessity no longer either rebelled against in a supreme effort of liberation or accepted in pious resignation, but, on the contrary, faithfully worshipped as the great all-coercing force which surely, in the words of Rousseau, will ‘force men to be free’—we know how these two and the interplay between them have become the hallmark of successful revolutions in the twentieth century, and this to such an extent that, for the learned and the unlearned alike, they are now outstanding characteristics of all revolutionary events.⁴⁹

According to Arendt, therefore, all projects in which the use of violence and the creation of terror among those subjected to it are regarded as essential to the creation of free human beings must be distinguished from the active rejection of oppression presenting itself as necessary or from its

47. “Mafish dimūqrāṭiyya wa mafish muḡtama’ intaqal ila-l-amām bidūn damm.” See the video of the workshop organized by the journalist Hilmi Namnam discussing the making of the new constitution by the military-appointed committee (*halaqa niqāshīya lil-hay’at al-injīliyya hawl dastūr misr ba’d 30 yūnyū* [“a discussion group belonging to the Evangelical (Coptic) organization after June 30”]). Many middle-class workshops, Muslim and Christian, have been held on this topic, especially in Cairo; see Ahmed Abd El Monem, “Lazim Nabattil Kadhba an ‘Misr Dawla Mutadayyina Bil-Fitra,” *YouTube*, 28 July 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=__rdetkbs_s

48. *Ibid.*

49. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 106.

passive acceptance as inevitable. “Necessity,” she suggests, has changed from being an excuse for particular cruelties to being the truth of a sacred cause.⁵⁰

Reflecting on the left-wing romance with revolution, Michel Foucault once described the devious path of revolutionary necessity as follows. Marxist and Marxisant movements that aimed to capture the state apparatus because it was a historical necessity encountered a typical dilemma. Not only was it deemed necessary for the revolutionary party to model itself on the power structure of the reactionary state in order to fight it effectively, it also found it necessary not to destroy state apparatuses entirely when it took over the bourgeois state. It was necessary for state apparatuses to be retained in order to fight the class enemy. Furthermore, in order to run the appropriated state apparatuses, revolutionaries had to turn to technicians and specialists from the old regime who had the necessary experience—that is to say, who were members of the old class and who therefore brought with them the continuity of old time.⁵¹ This fatal dilemma about clashing necessities—central to Egypt’s brief experience of liberal democracy—was intimately connected to the aspiration of revolutionaries to control the sovereign state. I will return to this point below when I discuss the encouragement by the military government of a growing body of patriotic citizens who voluntarily denounce their fellows to state authorities.

The question of how political intentions are formed and then expressed in action within a fluid, evolving situation—or even to what extent intentions matter for understanding what happens in the political world—is more complicated than accounts such as Namnam’s would have one believe.⁵² The eminent jurist Tariq al-Bishri makes a more interesting obser-

50. Before Arendt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty had analyzed revolutionary violence in Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (1947; New York, 1969).

51. See Foucault, “Body/Power,” *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., ed. Gordon (New York, 1980), pp. 59–60.

52. One might ask why so many ordinary Egyptians come to hold a mistaken view of their country’s identity, seeing it as religious when it is not. One answer often given by liberals is that the masses are ignorant and the Islamists provide a reactionary leadership that renders violence against them necessary in the cause of progress. This is not an explanation, of course, but a claim. In a sophisticated study, Carrie Wickham has recently provided an account of the ruralization of the Muslim Brotherhood and its influence on its leadership, as well as the consequent greater emphasis on ritual among ordinary members, trends that she connects to the group’s increasing conservatism and quietism in relation to what she calls the “predatory” Mubarak state (Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* [Princeton, N.J., 2013], p. 141). But here and elsewhere in her study Wickham’s approach makes explicit something Namnam misses, that it is the interaction of different generations of the Brotherhood’s leaders with individuals from different classes, and with

vation. The hatred of secularists toward the Muslim Brotherhood, he argues, has been politically far less significant than the enmity of the state apparatuses toward them because self-styled secularists had neither mass organizations nor direct access to the repressive instruments of the state.⁵³ As a relatively small cultured elite from the middle and upper classes, secularists were well represented in and by the media. However, whereas their hostility toward political Islam was ideological, notes Bishri, the regime in control of the state apparatuses was concerned not with Islam but with the threat to their power and privilege issuing from the only major movement for genuine systemic change in the character of the state. The state therefore saw the Brotherhood as a serious political challenge, on the one hand as represented by the professional unions of doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and others that were dominated by the Brotherhood, and on the other hand by the Brotherhood's nationwide organization with its considerable popular following. Bishri says that after the uprising of January 2011 he had hoped the deep state, the secularists, and the Brotherhood would all come together peacefully to establish and consolidate democracy in Egypt because the alternative would spell disaster. The fact that that comprehensive alliance didn't take place was, in his opinion, the fault of all three.⁵⁴ However, what actually took place, I would suggest, was not

authoritarian state institutions, that helps explain their political sensibilities and predispositions.

53. The mobilization of large numbers of lower-middle-class Egyptians for a "continuation of the revolution" was largely the achievement of those who worked through the big business community, the ministry of the interior, and the media, warning the populace that instability would lead to a decline in incomes, that government mismanagement had led to crucial shortages, and so on (Mohammed Bamyeh, "The June Rebellion in Egypt," *Jadaliyya*, 11 July 2013, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12876/the-june-rebellion-in-egypt). Some of the activists eventually turned against the army whom they had initially welcomed, but by then it was too late (see "Activists Turn Against the Military in Egypt Despite their Support for it in Morsi's Removal," *Al-quds al-'arabi*, 20 Feb. 2014, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=136030). "The rebels of June 2013 regard what they have done as a continuation of the revolution of January 2011," noted Mohammed Bamyeh shortly after the coup (Bamyeh, "The June Rebellion in Egypt"). General Sisi reproduced this view in his justification of the military intervention: "in January 2011 the forces of the people rebelled. Subsequently they found that the revolution was heading in a direction that was not commensurate with its purpose so they sought to redress that. Simply put, they felt that their hopes had been frustrated, that the revolution had deviated from its higher purposes, and that their vision for the future had been darkened by clouds and shadows that could not accommodate the essential qualities of the ages of enlightenment, knowledge and proficiency" (quoted in Ahmed Eleiba, "The Facts Could Not Be Ignored," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 18 July 2013, weekly.ahram.org/News/3407/17/The-facts-could-not-be-ignored.aspx).

54. Tariq al-Bishri, interview by Tabishat, May 2014. See also an earlier article by Bishri in which he argues that "the present conflict is essentially between a military coup and military rule on the one hand and democracy on the other rather than between the Brotherhood and its

a collective moral failure, a fault, but a particular political success in recapturing the sovereign state in which the winners were propelled by powerful emotions and used state violence (which their supporters endorsed) in order to save political time—by cutting short the elected president’s period of legitimate rule. It is often suggested by liberals and secularist militants that the Freedom and Justice Party government should have reached out to them as potential allies against the deep state, but supporters of the Brotherhood point to the longstanding hostility of these elements towards them (which no doubt was reciprocated) and ask rhetorically what value there would have been in reaching out to a small, unfriendly, yet politically powerless current. This is the kind of mutual distrust, based on a long history of contradictory political experience, that renders new foundations virtually impossible.

Many critics have talked about popular anger at Morsi’s arrogance and incompetence,⁵⁵ and about the fear that he was “Brotherhoodizing” the state and “Islamizing” Egyptian society. But Dina Khawaga, professor of Political Science at Cairo University, has made several perceptive observations about the anti-Morsi protests in 2013; thus while she recognizes the tensions and criticisms within the so-called Islamic Awakening, she explains the hostility to Morsi’s presidency by reference to the idea of “moral panic” (*al-hala’ al-akhlaqi*), the sense that “what is sacred to the nation” (*muqaddisāt wataniyya*) was being undermined by “what is sacred to religion” (*muqaddisāt dīniyya*).⁵⁶ Of course, this is not the only time that someone has used the expression “moral panic” in the context of general

opponents” (al-Bishri, “as-sira’ al-qā’im al-ān huwa bayn ad-dimuqrāṭiyya wa-l-hukm wa-l-inqilāb al-askari wa laysa bayn al-ikhwān wa mu’aridayhum,” *Ashurūq*, 10 July 2013). This was a week after the coup.

55. “By intimating that Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood had, in some way, hijacked Egypt’s political process, the United States, in the crucial weeks after the July coup, effectively legitimated the logic that the coup was necessary in order to salvage Egyptian democracy. As we have shown, Morsi’s year in office was more democratic than his critics allege, and the military-backed government that seized power in the coup is significantly *more* autocratic than Morsi ever was” (Shadi Hamid and Meredith Wheeler, “Was Mohammed Morsi Really an Autocrat?” *The Atlantic*, 31 Mar. 2014, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/was-mohammed-morsi-really-an-autocrat/359797/). The other familiar complaint against Morsi was that he simply played along with “counterrevolutionary forces.” And yet compared to the old constitution, the one drafted under the Muslim Brotherhood government was more concerned to define and restrict the powers of the President. For example, Article 73 of the 1971 constitution gave the President extraordinary powers to fight any “danger to the safety of the nation”; Article 136 allowed him to dissolve parliament “whenever necessary” (“nass dastūr jamhūriyyat misr al-‘arabiyya li-sana 1971, faculty.ksu.edu.sa/74394/Documents/20%201971%دستورPDF.pdf”). Such articles were removed in the new constitution.

56. Dina Khawaga, interview by Tabishat, May 2014.

public tensions (it was first used in English at the beginning of the nineteenth century),⁵⁷ but Khawaga's characterization of the general atmosphere of anxiety, hostility, and volatility in the period leading up to the coup does raise a question that neither secularists nor Islamists in Egypt have debated publicly. In what sense can it be said that there were different notions of the sacred in this political contest? And how did one notion threaten the other?

Some left critics have insisted that to focus on the Sisi coup (as the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters do) obscures the fact that Morsi's government was itself a part of the "counterrevolution," because it continued to rely on the repressive apparatuses of the interior ministry and the military.⁵⁸ But that doesn't, I think, quite explain the ferocity of the winners against the Brotherhood, which never had control of those apparatuses, lacked a paramilitary force, and was prepared (so its enemies say) to make an alliance with more powerful elements of the "counterrevolution" such as the army. The ferocity was expressed in sweeping arrests of the Brotherhood's leaders, death sentences imposed on its alleged supporters in mass trials, and savage repression of public protesters. I was struck, as many other observers were, by the passionate expressions of hatred against the Muslim Brotherhood coming from liberal and left members of the middle and upper classes. You don't understand (I was assured over the phone by a Western-educated friend in Cairo shortly after the coup), the Muslim Brotherhood is a reactionary, terrorist organization. The anger in their voices was palpable. And when the security forces massacred hundreds of peaceful Brotherhood supporters, some left activists insisted that that tragedy was also the fault of the Brotherhood. This enthusiasm for the successful exercise of political violence is striking, and clearly very different from the sentiment of inclusive solidarity that challenged state repression in the January 2011 uprising. The emotional undertone of political alignments and responses tends to be ignored or underestimated in many accounts that attribute rationalistic motives to the struggling forces.

57. "Safeguards against the Cholera," *The Journal of Health*, 22 Feb. 1832, p. 180.

58. In a recent interview with the London based daily *Al-quds al-'arabi*, the spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, Ibrahim Munir, claimed that, had the Brotherhood kept quiet about the massive corruption of the Egyptian military, Morsi would have remained President. Apart from reference to the enormous properties owned by the generals (it is estimated that the army controls about forty percent of the Egyptian economy, but its budget is not open to government inspection), Munir claimed that the military had authorized the redrawing of Egypt's maritime boundaries and ceded thereby considerable areas containing vast underwater gas resources to "other states," all in exchange for personal bribes (Ibrahim Munir, "Ibrahim munir li-'al-quds al-'arabi': law sakat al-ikhwan 'ala-l-fasad fi misr lazalla Morsi ra'isan," interview by Muhammad 'Ayish, *Al-quds al-'arabi*, 22 Nov. 2014, alquds.co.uk/?p=254556).

The motives of people who called or were encouraged to call for Morsi's removal were no doubt complex. They included traditional lower-class deference toward the elite that took the initiative, as well as a desire on the part of middle-class militants to revolutionize the nation-state and a fear on the part of those who owed their privileged position to the Mubarak regime that their lifestyle was threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood. Motives are often colored by the concealed desires and misguided views that people have of themselves, of their remembered past and present experience, and their hopes for personal and national futures. Once one insists on putting everything into boxes labeled *politicized religion* and *personal belief* as attributed motives, one has already appropriated the right to describe every political event in terms of his or her attitude toward freedom (for or against) and thus foreclosed more complicated accounts attending to shifts in perspective, fluid motivations, revised judgments of persons and events, and accidental happenings—and thus the collapse of attempts to build a new tradition. The shifting adjustment to one's ordinary life, or resentment toward it, is precisely how the diverse temporalities of tradition are articulated—or challenged.

Sometimes the attempt to explain political protest takes a more sophisticated form. Thus a day after the coup the sociologist Hazem Kandil wrote reassuringly,

Those who grieve over this affront to ballot box democracy forget that Egypt, like any new democracy, has every right to seek popular consensus on the basic tenets of its future political system. Revolutionary France went through five republics before settling into the present order, and America needed a civil war to adjust its democratic path. It is not uncommon in the history of revolutions for coups to pave the way or seal the fate of popular uprisings. Those who see nothing beyond a military coup are simply blind.⁵⁹

Kandil sees the June protests and the July coup as the work of a single subject (“Egypt,” a “new democracy”) following a clear cut road (the “democratic path”). But invocations of democracy are part of a discourse that all conflicting sides share, and it is not always clear what they mean by it other than something self-evidently “good.” Those who carried out and supported the military coup were defending democracy. Those dismayed by the forcible removal of a legitimately elected (albeit widely criticized) president feared that this act would damage the prospect of establishing

59. Hazem Kandil, “The End of Islamism?” *London Review of Books Blog*, 4 July 2013, www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/07/04/hazem-kandil/the-end-of-islamism

democracy. For some, installing democracy meant following a model supposedly embodied in Western states—different from country to country, of course, but sharing a political tradition of ideas and practices. For others democracy meant an end to the pervasive corruption and cruelty of Mubarak's regime, for yet others a just distribution of wealth in Egyptian society. Kandil's casual reference to France's history of failed republics (entangled as it was with colonial empire and its aftermath) and to America's bitter civil war to construct a strong centralized state (that now extends militarily across the globe in collaboration with international corporations) is not relevant to the anxieties generated by Sisi's coup today. What constitutes Sisi's authority—the necessity of his intervention to save democracy, or the people's acclamation? Of course, holding a national election is no guarantee of having entered a "democratic path," whatever that might be, but surely dismissing electoral procedures isn't democracy in any sense. Kandil may be justified in saying that Egypt "has every right to seek popular consensus on the basic tenets of its future political system," but the unanswered question remains, how, other than by the ballot box, can one determine that that right is indeed being exercised?⁶⁰

60. In a second piece, published eight months after the coup, Kandil writes: "There is no getting around it. What Egypt has become three years after its once inspiring revolt is a police state more vigorous than anything we have seen since Nasser. As in the dark years of the 1960s, the enemy is everywhere, and any effort to expose and eradicate him is given popular assent." The main theme of Kandil's story is what many anti-Morsi observers have called "religious fascism" (Kandil, "Sisi's Turn," *London Review of Books*, 20 Feb. 2014, www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n04/hazem-kandil/sisi-turn). By its dishonesty, incompetence, and hunger for power, says Kandil, the Muslim Brotherhood facilitated the emergence of a police state for which they are therefore responsible. From the Brotherhood's scheming there emerged the military government's repression. But although Kandil speaks of the Muslim Brothers as "fascists," *fascism* is merely a term of abuse echoing "Islamofascism," used by Christopher Hitchens among others; see Christopher Hitchens, "Defending Islamofascism," *Slate*, 22 Oct. 2007, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2007/10/defending_islamofascism.html. Kandil undertakes no reassessment of the reasons for his earlier optimistic judgment about the coup, nor why it is right to attribute political disaster only to the Muslim Brotherhood and not also to the "revolutionaries." His account rests on claims and allegations drawn uncritically from the Brotherhood's fiercest enemies on the right and on the left. Kandil's message, like that of the military government and its supporters, is that there are enemies of the state (enemies of society), and that the state has the authority—the duty—to identify and deal firmly with them. He seems to be perturbed only by the fact that the state's suppression of enemies has now also begun to affect left and liberal members of the middle classes. Unfortunately he doesn't address the familiar claim that it is the state's rhetoric of national security, its identification of potential enemies within the nation, its appeal to nationalist sentiment, and its celebration of a military officer as the savior of the nation that constitute the logic of fascism and not the inflated political aspirations of the leadership of a movement that lacked a paramilitary wing and that, as a government, was imprisoned within a hostile political environment, faced by intractable economic problems, and displayed a profound lack of political judgment. Whether the entire leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood was utterly devious or merely obtuse is a minor question. It was certainly a fatal mistake for it to make a bid for the presidency, despite earlier

Echoing Kandil, the noted historian Khalid Fahmy wrote two weeks after the coup, “We were taught in schools that we were a patient and passive people, and for generations we accepted facile sayings about the genius of Egypt, its tranquil landscape, its gentle river and undemanding people. And yet here we are, proving to ourselves that we write our own history and that we can depose our rulers if they do not succumb to our will.”⁶¹ Fahmy tells his readers that this traditional representation of popular submission is no longer credible because the coup has proved that “we” (all the classes, rich and poor, men and women, Muslims and Copts?) have the ability to “depose our rulers.” This claim attributes to the Egyptian people a transcendent power—the power to make happen what is true (to unseat disobedient rulers), and to say what is true (to write a triumphant history), a power no longer constrained by religious authority. Yet the considerable numbers of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt’s cities and villages discovered that they could not retain their legitimate rulers. It appears that the people’s power exhibits itself only in deposing but not in installing or reinstalling its rulers.⁶² Because the nation includes

assurances that it would not do so. But the idea, held by many critics of Morsi, that his government naturally chose to work with, rather than attempt a major reform of, the security establishment, fails to address the problem of the interior ministry’s entrenched power that included the support of the army generals and intelligence officials so long as their autonomous power and privilege remained unaffected—not to mention a hostile higher judiciary and media. Kandil does not consider whether the orchestrated movement of protest at the end of June that eventuated in and supported the military coup compromised the attempts, however limited, to build a democratic tradition. (Incidentally, the term *religious fascism* is now commonly and uncritically used in the authorized press to describe the military suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood; see, for example, Mahmoud al-‘Alayly, “Min ath-thawra ila ad-dawla,” *al-Shurūq*, 16 Nov. 2014, www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=16112014&id=1446390b-cae9-4837-97fi-106cdc3a7e11.)

61. Khaled Fahmy, “A Revolutionary People,” *Ahram Online*, 15 July 2013, english.ahram.org/NewsContent/4/76433/Opinion/A-Revolutionary-People.aspx

62. There is some dispute about the actual numbers of anti-Morsi protesters, given the interest of the latter in exaggerating the numbers and of their opponents in minimizing them; see Jack Brown, “Exactly How Many Millions Were We, My General?” *International Boulevard*, 17 July 2013, www.internationalboulevard.com/exactly-how-many-millions-were-we-my-general. It will take some time to make reasonable assessments of how many and who were involved. Several observers have noted that Morsi’s supporters were largely poor. Robert Fisk visited Egypt before as well as after the coup, and reported on massacres and popular demonstrations with considerable perspicacity. In an article published three weeks after Morsi’s ouster by the military Fisk described two protests in very different parts of Cairo:

One point that stood out—and it may be unfashionable to say so—is that the Brotherhood supporters were generally poor and looked poor in their grubby abayas and plastic sandals. Some of the Tahrir demonstrators, who were truly revolutionaries against Mubarak in 2011, trooped over the Nile bridges waving posters of General al-Sisi. And one has to say, painful as it is to do so, that the sight of well-heeled people holding aloft the

those who are persecuted as well as their persecutors, those who want stability at any price and those who want justice at any price, the permanent victory of either side is never guaranteed. A paradox of the modern nation-state, including Egypt, is that on the one hand it minimizes the existence of significant internal differences in order to assert national homogeneity, and on the other hand it emphasizes difference as significant in order to exercise the violence that is “necessary” to its sovereignty.

Whatever coherent sense the idea of sustained unity has, it comes not from common sentiment but from the shared life of a tradition—and even that does not preclude bitter disagreement among those who follow the same tradition, and mutual accusations of taking what is contingent for what is essential and worth defending to the last. The disputes themselves, however, make for a kind of unity. The modern sovereign territorial state, by contrast, doesn’t have such a unity because the lives of people within it are too disparate in the things they value, in the pasts to which they attach themselves, in their sense of what group they belong to, in the bodies they inhabit, and in the authorities they invoke. It is precisely because of this diversity that democracy (for all its obscurities and ambiguities) has emerged as an assemblage of political and legal devices—including elections—for addressing the ineradicable presence of difference, disagreement, and mutual hostility within the modern state with minimum damage; why the skills and sensibilities required to engage effectively in democratic politics are acquired by experience, sustained by goodwill, and blessed by good luck; and why the ballot box is an indispensable part of democracy whatever else democracy might be.

As hostility to the Morsi government mounted, the secular activists joined the state apparatuses and their business allies (who had been working to unseat Morsi from at least November 2012), allowing the army to enter the political arena publicly yet again.⁶³ Certainly Morsi’s incompetence was linked to his exaggerated sense of presidential power and immunity and to his underestimation of the resources and tactical skills of his

photograph of a general in sunglasses—albeit a wonderful and very democratic general—was profoundly depressing. What really happened to the 25 January 2011 revolution? [Robert Fisk, “Robert Fisk on Egypt: As Impoverished Crowds Gather In Support Of Mohamed Morsi, The Well-Heeled March Behind Their Images Of The General,” *The Independent*, 27 July 2013, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/robert-fisk-on-egypt-as-impooverished-crowds-gather-in-support-of-mohamed-morsi-the-wellheeled-march-behind-their-images-of-the-general-8734453.html]

63. The army was supported financially and militarily by the United States; see Julian Pecquet, “Kerry Says Muslim Brotherhood ‘Stole’ Egypt’s Revolution,” *The Hill*, 20 Nov. 2013, thehill.com/policy/international/190967-kerry-says-muslim-brotherhood-stole-egypts

enemies. The June 2013 popular movement that drew on a variety of complaints and fears (some genuine, some grossly inflated by the pro-Mubarak media)⁶⁴ was ostensibly aimed at the restoration of the January 25th revolution, but what it did was facilitate the coup.⁶⁵ In the 2014 military-backed constitution, references to the 25 January uprising present in the previous constitution were removed—and hardly anyone noticed. In general, 25 January has been erased or vilified by the state media and military violence has openly claimed authority by invoking its own version of revolutionary tradition.⁶⁶ The possibility of democratic time has collapsed, and it will not—at least for an indefinite period—be retrievable.⁶⁷

The military coup consisted not merely in the removal and imprisonment of the president and the violent suppression of opponents to the new-old order but in getting various social actors to accept Sisi's claim to exercise temporary authority over the contending sides (*al-atrāf*)—the nationally elected president on the one side and the opposition on the other—in his giving the street protests military protection, and in requiring the two sides to resolve their disagreement within a short, specified period of time. In thus positioning himself (and the military) above a crisis of the state Sisi was enabled by the emotional rhetoric of popular sovereignty to present his unilateral resolution of that crisis (for which Morsi's obduracy was said by opponents to be entirely responsible) as an affirmation of the people's will.⁶⁸

64. Thus in the public criticism of the constitution, for example, written under the Morsi presidency, the substance of the complaints were directed essentially at the process by which it was arrived at and not at the content. The impression given by the opposition was that this was in every respect an appalling document.

65. See Sheera Frenkel and Maged Atef, "How Egypt's Rebel Movement Helped Pave the Way for a Sisi Presidency," *BuzzFeed World*, 15 Apr. 2014, www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/how-egypts-rebel-movement-helped-pave-the-way-for-a-sisi-pre

66. See Nur Rashwan, "Sabāhi: ad-dākhiliyya tafrut fi istikhdam al-quwwa . . . wa-l-i'lam yaqūd hamlat isā'a did 25 yanāyir," *al-Shurūq*, 11 Jan. 2014.

67. The sporadic fighting by protesters against the coup (not necessarily members of the Muslim Brotherhood, although they were usually described as Morsi supporters in the Egyptian media), in the Sinai as elsewhere, provides the military with a modern form of legitimacy, the violent suppression of religious "terrorists" who threaten the safety and integrity of the people and its state. On the one hand, the military arrests and massacres Islamists; on the other, churches are conspicuously left unguarded to face vengeful Muslim Brotherhood supporters. (It should be noted, however, that rights activists have raised serious questions about the degree to which the ministry of the interior has been actively involved in incidents aimed at increasing sectarian hostility and general alarm; see, for example, Fahmy Huwaidy, "tārīkhān lil-azma," *al-Shurūq*, 6 Jan. 2014.)

68. State sovereignty was restored even though prior agreement with Israel and financial support from the Gulf countries were apparently necessary to ensure it. General Sisi sought support from both Saudi Arabia and Israel shortly before the coup, the former promising money and the latter military coordination against Hamas in Gaza. On prior knowledge of the coup by Saudis, see Esam Al-Amin, "The Grand Scam: Spinning Egypt's Military Coup,"

In his book published shortly after the 25 January uprising the poet Yasir Anwar recounts incidents that exemplify secular feelings of unease and repugnance for the vocabulary of Islamic tradition, including such banal phrases as *inshā'allah*.⁶⁹ But the main interest of that book lies in its desire to transcend the political categories used by Marxists, liberals, and Islamists in their polemics:

We have escaped from a prison of politics to a prison of old books. No one sees this world with his own eyes, only with the eyes of others: this one is a Marxist, that one a Wahhabi, and a third a Sufi. We are all in need of a translator because we don't share a common language [*lughatnā laysa wāhida*]. How can Ibn Taymiyya debate with Marx? How can Hegel converse with Ibn Arabi? If disagreement is considered a source of culture and a sign of its fertility and vitality, cultural despotism and polarized thinking reign supreme over the present scene. Faced by the dominance of [social] fragmentation and splintering, the idea of eliminating the other has taken the place of accepting the other, of the relationship of neighborliness, of the interweaving [of different ideas]—all this has disappeared.⁷⁰

CounterPunch, 19–21 July 2013, www.counterpunch.org/2013/07/19/the-grand-scam-spinning-egypts-military-coup, and on Israel, see “Al-Sisi Informed Israel of the Coup Three Days Prior,” *MEMO*, 16 July 2013, www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/6575-al-sisi-informed-israel-of-the-coup-three-days-prior. See also Baheyya, “A Grande Entente,” *Baheyya: Egypt Analysis and Whimsey*, 12 Aug. 2014, baheyya.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2014-01-01T00:00:00-05:00&updated-max=2015-01-01T00:00:00-05:00&max-results=4&m=0, for an excellent analysis of the overlaps between regional democratic struggles and the struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

69. Anwar recounts his exchange in a meeting at a cultural event with an aggressively secular woman poet sitting beside him who belonged to the Egyptian communist movement (“whose infidelity we had forgiven but who did not forgive us our faith,” *alladhīna sāmahnāhum ‘ala kufrihim wa lam yusāmihūna ‘ala īmānina*). “We began to talk,” he continues,

and when she asked me whether I was going to recite a poem, I said to her: ‘*inshāllah*.’ And the doctor of philosophy immediately responded: ‘How backward!’ I was astonished that the expression *inshāllah* should have irritated her so. I smiled at her outburst but that didn’t help in restraining her loquacity—and from her elaborate interpretation of *inshāllah* and other common expressions as the cause of this nation’s backwardness, and from her urging me to be enlightened. So I said to her: ‘I am an Other. Do you not speak of respect for the Other [*ihtirām al-ākhir*]? I am, dear lady, that Other.’ I realized at that moment that the nation’s crisis was hidden within its cultural elites—to whom I hope I do not belong. [Yasir Anwar, *Al-‘almāniyūn wa-l-islāmiyūn; muhāwala li-fad al-ishtibāk* (Cairo, 2011), p. 7.]

70. Anwar, *Al-‘almāniyūn wa-l-islāmiyūn*, p. 24.

Anwar's complaint that "no one sees this world with his own eyes" is problematic, of course, because no one can do without authoritative knowledge accumulated from the past; in that sense our own eyes are also the eyes of others who have preceded us. But he is right to draw attention to the significance of friendship and antipathy in exchanges between people who do not always recognize the disparity of times to which the people they draw on or dismiss belong. Heated debates across radically different traditions, he says, seem endless and fruitless because appropriate sensibilities and the exercise of imagination are both lacking. Certainly mutual distrust and hostility have been major features of political life in Egypt ever since January 2011. Especially in times of political upheaval, fear, suspicion, and facile attributions of intention render trust—and therefore friendship—extremely fragile.

But first, why is rational debate of primary importance to democracy? One answer is that it has a decisive outcome and is therefore the best way, in politics as in law and natural science, of determining the truth. Liberals typically represent religion as appealing to divine authority, and that is why (liberals believe) debates about religious belief—or debates generated by it—are passionate, inconclusive, and prone to violence.⁷¹ Less well known is the liberal state's dependence on early modern arguments for capitalism, in which the idea of "interest" increasingly displaced the idea of "passion" as the principal mode of politics.⁷² The good that is calculable (economic value) was considered superior in politics to the good that isn't (religious value) because only the former could be conclusively assessed. This discursive move gave the market its ideological claim to being a neutral mediator for resolving conflicts over value, a claim that has since become central to the secular tradition of the modern liberal state. The electoral process itself has adapted itself in several ways (resource investment, targeting swing voters, gaining and losing seats) to the idea and practice of the market. The market has become part of liberal common-sense and liberal governance: no pursuit of sectional interests within the sovereign state, no politics; no free commerce, no paradigm of political liberty. It's this formula that underlies the emergence of the modern state

71. Passion, it is still said, is a force that overcomes one, as opposed to action that one undertakes. It is common knowledge that this aspect of secularism emerged in Europe out of the theological polemics and wars, thus helping to form the early modern state that had to administer mutually hostile Christian churches. By contrast, modern Middle Eastern states grew mostly out of processes of colonial deconstruction and anticolonial attempts to constitute a nation that therefore had the right to its own state. The ruptures in their respective traditions were different, but the concept of sovereignty as the organizing principle of the modern state was shared.

72. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*.

according to which politics now comes to be the interest in gaining access to the total system of social control embodied in the sovereign state for the realization of calculable goods. Although the inconclusiveness of debate about religious belief was originally a reason for proposing that appeals to transcendence be excluded from the domain of politics and confined to the private sphere, today inconclusiveness is no longer grounds for excluding debate from politics. Indeed the inconclusiveness of argument (such as over the manner and degree of state intervention in the economy or in religion), the turnaround of party government, is part of that inconclusiveness that is now regarded as a political virtue, a sign that liberal democracy is at work.

To understand how the democratic promise of the past appears in the present, how the authority of the 2011 uprising was aborted and replaced by another, one needs to attend not only to connections between the power of the state and popular resistance to it but also to the constitution of subjects who adjust fully to modern sovereignty—as well as of those whose conditions of existence are incompatible with it. The subject is not only, of course, what he owns and thinks but also how he or she has learnt to move and sit and speak and feel in different situations—and what he or she wears and eats. So my final comment on Anwar's complaint is this. It is not simply that public views are now mutually unintelligible (which they are), or that debate is interminable (which it is). It is that, like the destructive shifts following capitalist crises, the fractious time of petty dispute and distrust overwhelms the temporality of learning discursive traditions, on recognizing how dependent one is on others, and living accordingly.⁷³ The power of the modern sovereign state resides not only in what it promotes but also—and especially—in what it disables when it joins with a particular economy (capitalism) and a particular metaphysic (nationalism).

4

There are several excellent studies of Egypt's acquisition of liberalism—including a vocabulary of freedom, equality, progress, the moral sovereignty of the individual, and so forth—since the latter part of the nineteenth century, a process which was interrupted only partly by the country's socialist phase under Nasser and then resumed in the liberal

73. This was already apparent to observers in the emerging culture of modernity in late nineteenth-century Europe. Thus Paul Valéry writes, "Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life. They have even become real needs for many people, whose minds are no longer fed . . . by anything but sudden changes and constantly renewed stimuli . . . We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit" (quoted in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* [Cambridge, 2000], p. 1).

policies of Sadat.⁷⁴ These are, however, not simply moments in Egypt's past; they are integral to a contradictory present in which people invoke aspects of the country's political traditions, the beginning of state welfare, state funded education, and secularization—as well as the growth of the secret police and the military.⁷⁵ Nasser's state reforms of Egyptian society and economy are usually set in opposition to the "liberal" periods that preceded and succeeded his rule. Thus much Egyptian political history since the defeat of 1967, and especially after the death of Nasser in 1970, is seen by the left as the unraveling of the state structure even though the military and security apparatuses retained and even enlarged their presence in it. Various state functions and projects were privatized, and the so-called Islamic Current in urban society emerged as the most important organized opposition to the secularizing state.⁷⁶ There are certainly different ways of marking out political periods in Egypt but underlying all of them since the late nineteenth century is the aspiration of its ruling classes to catch up with modern time, whether in a liberal or a socialist Egypt.

It is not always remembered that Nasser's land reforms benefited farmers who were considered to be efficient and productive, as against the very large population of poor peasants,⁷⁷ that after Nasser's death the long-standing project of increasing efficiency and productivity helped to promote arguments for free enterprise rather than state ownership as the engine of growth and the precondition for national welfare. Whether the state is or is not despotic, efficient growth is its primary function together with maintaining its continuity and strength, and rulers have thus become

74. For an account of the critical period in Egypt's political liberalism, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment: 1922–1936* (Berkeley, 1977).

75. For a critical but not entirely unsympathetic account of Nasser's revolutionary project by a Marxist, see Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society* (New York, 1968).

76. See Tariq al-Bishri, *Misr bayn al-'isyān wa-t-tafakkuk* (Cairo, 2006).

77. The expropriation of large landed property was essentially political, aimed at undermining Egypt's ruling elite. "While the direction of the redistribution of agricultural income has in general been from richer to poorer groups," writes Patrick O'Brien,

the reduction of rents, the elimination of middlemen, and the abolition of interest charges by the Agricultural Bank affords greater benefits to those who cultivate, borrow, and sell on a larger scale than to smaller and less affluent farmers. Moreover the selection of owners for land redistributed under the agrarian reforms did not favour the most impecunious families in the countryside but was biased, on efficiency grounds, towards existing tenants or those considered likely to be competent farmers." [O'Brien, *The Revolution in Egypt's Economic System: From Private Enterprise to Socialism, 1952–1965* (Oxford, 1966), p. 295]

See also Eva Garzouzi, *Old Ills and New Remedies in Egypt* (Cairo, 1958), pp. 100–103. For a later account of the way "development" has reinforced inequality in rural Egypt, see the excellent article by Timothy Mitchell, "America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry," *Middle East Report* 21 (Mar.–Apr. 1991): 18–38.

receptive to arguments for privatization and marketization. And it is the continuous dislocation effected by the logic of the market that renders tradition increasingly precarious. The unities enabled by market-promoted lifestyles—fashions in clothes, foods, corporal appearance—are not to be confused with the embodied disciplines of tradition that Shaykh Usama talked about because fashion is ephemeral. One can take up fashion or abandon it whenever one feels like it.

As in other parts of the globe, the idea of freedom of the individual in modern Egypt has merged with the idea of the free market, expressed in part in the Supreme Constitutional Court's reforms of the bureaucratic laws that were seen to be holding back private enterprise.⁷⁸ In the period of economic and political liberalization a plethora of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have created an expanding space of civil society. Middle-class activists, with institutional funding from Euro-America and access to Western networks, tell their fellow citizens to claim their rights as free persons from their state and to produce more efficiently in a free economy.⁷⁹ One result has been that this civil society has become further alienated from the predicament of the urban and rural poor.⁸⁰ Market-time, with its emphasis on the sovereign consumer, not only undermines much of the continuity of everyday life but also disrupts the time necessary for cultivating trust that goes beyond the interests of the individual.

Over the last few decades the increasing circulation of money from rentier income has contributed to rapid social mobility that has helped undermine past solidarities and commitments and has created personal aspirations together with resentment at the failure to realize those aspirations.⁸¹ Several years ago, the prominent Egyptian social critic and political economist Galal Amin bewailed what he saw as a change in people's be-

78. See Tamir Moustafa, *The Struggle for Constitutional Power: Law, Politics, and Economic Development in Egypt* (Cambridge, 2007).

79. NGOs often aim to encourage economic development through entrepreneurship among craftsmen and the poor whom they employ. See Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo* (Durham, N.C., 2005), esp. chap. 1, "Introduction: The Power of Invisible Hands," pp. 1–36. But these NGOs rarely address the really poor. For an interesting journalistic account of the predicament of the urban poor, the mutual understanding between the police and businessmen, and the assistance that poor squatters typically received from the Muslim Brotherhood, see Tom Dale and Abulkasim al-Jaberi, "Land Rights, Labor and Violence in a Cairo Slum," *Egypt Independent*, 15 July 2012, www.egyptindependent.com/news/land-rights-labor-and-violence-cairo-slum. The claim of critics that the Muslim Brotherhood was in league with big business and the police is a generalization that requires careful examination.

80. The elitist character of NGOs in Egypt, their inability or unwillingness to reach the mass of ordinary citizens, is described in Mohamed Hussein El Naggar, "Human Rights Organisations and the Egyptian Revolution," *IDS Bulletin* 43 (Jan. 2012): 78–86.

81. Al-Bishri attributes the new corruption to the governing elite—but other

havior. Promise keeping, pride in one's work, and loyalty to old relationships are, he wrote, now rarely valued.⁸² Hisham al-Hamamy, advisor to Abu-l-Futuh, cites an expression to describe what he sees as the growth of self-interest in Egyptian society, "gildi wa gaybi," literally, "my skin and my pocket," that is, "all that matters is what affects my body and my money."⁸³ From a relativistic perspective (according to which the successful individual is the sole judge of what is ethical behavior and the successful nation is the sole criterion of what is justice) the principle of *gildi wa gaybi* cannot be faulted.

With the increasing complexity of social-economic life, relationships have a tendency to become oversimplified and crude. The space of genuine friendship, critics say, is disappearing. With the growth of consumerism, differences among life chances deepen too;⁸⁴ continuity with the past, essential to friendship, is devalued.⁸⁵ When some people speak of growing

commentators regard it as far more widespread (see al-Bishri, *Misr bayn al-'isyan wa-t- tafakkuk*).

82. "Patterns of behavior that were highly regarded in a more stable society such as sticking to one's word or promise, pride and personal integrity, are now less prized. Such values are less fit for a rapidly changing society where loyalty to old relationships, be they friends, spouses, places, or principles appears as nothing more than an excessive sentimentality unbecoming in one who is on the make" (Galal Amin, *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians? Changes in Egyptian Society from 1950 to the Present* [Cairo, 2000], p. 24).

83. Hisham al-Hamamy, interview by Tabishat, May 2014.

84. Galal Amin elaborates on the effect of the national and global economy on the moral state of politics and society under Mubarak; see Amin, *Misr wa-l-misriyūn fi 'ahd Mubārak, 1981–2008* (Cairo, 2009). A crucial part of his account is concerned with the enormous expansion of the middle class from Nasser's socialist revolution onward and its recruitment into the expanding state bureaucracy that remains overblown. The open-door economic policy initiated by Sadat and continued under Mubarak led to the amalgam of a massive bureaucracy with a consumerist culture fueled by the infusion of rent income—from overseas remittances, expanded tourism, and the Suez Canal. The creation of a consumerist culture requires not only the flow of unproductive income but also the expectation of continuous economic growth and the material aspirations of the middle and upper classes that go with it.

85. Thomas Hobbes, the great theorist of modern sovereignty, writes in a memorable passage on the state's psychological preconditions:

BY MANNERS, I mean . . . those qualities of man-kind, that concern their living together in Peace, and Unity. To which end we are to consider, that the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a man satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later. The cause whereof is, That the object of mans desire, is not to enjoy once onely, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire. [Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1914), p. 49]

corruption (*fasād*) in Egyptian society, it is the autonomous self they claim to see emerging everywhere. To what extent these reactions reflect a sense of anxiety on the part of the older middle classes about rapid social mobility that sometimes seems to threaten them is difficult to say. If looked at carefully, of course the matter is complicated. People still belong to families and associations, and they claim they have friends. Nevertheless, commitment to others—and trust in them—is in considerable tension with the liberal incitement to individual autonomy. It would be interesting, in this regard, to trace the changing discourse of ethics as it reflects the increasing subjectivization of morality—that is to say, the increasing shift of moral authority to the conscience of the autonomous individual. Thus today, in Egypt as elsewhere, secular moderns—especially those belonging to the middle class—define ethical behavior by appeal to conscience or by reference to good or bad consequences. This subjectivization of morality (so different from *sharī‘a* traditions like *amr bi-l-ma‘rūf*) makes it much more difficult to develop a coherent moral language with which citizens can collectively criticize state policies.

When the middle classes welcome the modernization of Egyptian society, they point to individual autonomy as the basis of economic enterprise and efficiency and to its rejection of religious group identity in politics. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century restructuring of Egyptian society and polity towards what was conceived of as modernity encouraged a new form of governmentality, subjective self-fashioning (based on freedom from external constraint) that has increasingly eroded the conditions for embodied tradition. But it is not quite correct to say that the pervasive corruption of Egyptian society that accelerated with marketization has removed any space for ethics. What one sees, I suggest, is a new form of ethics that is gradually overtaking the old, a morality modeled on the law in which the individual legislating his or her transcendental principles for him- or herself stands in tension with the legislation of the sovereign state.

Hostility to the presence of religion in the public sphere is part of being modern. It is a reflection of the fact that the concept and practice of religion—as well as of politics and ethics—are in the process of being formed or radically reformed in modern liberal society. Thus one might point out that religion has not been excluded from the state. The ancient Mosque/University of Azhar has acquired an increasingly public role in the post-coup era. Working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Religious

The process of ceaseless desire strikes at the root of the discipline that is fostered by tradition, and already by the nineteenth century this was becoming apparent to many observers.

Endowments, the present Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar, Ahmad at-Tayyib (who supported the military coup), aspires not only to greater prominence in the public domain but also to greater collaboration with the state in the extended regulation of mosques, preachers, Islamic research centers, and some university faculties, and seeks to project an Islam that he sees as appropriate to the twenty-first century. But two points need to be noted about that Islam. First, “true” Islam is the product of a calibration; it excludes “extremism,” that is to say, Islam that uses “illegitimate” violence; hence it is more often referred to as moderate or liberal Islam that assigns the use of violence to the state. Second, its attachment to the state is a form of administration, not politics. Although politics takes place within the framework of the modern state, its typical form is the political party by which it competes for power with other parties. In that sense moderate Islam is not political. It is a force in the service of state authority, an instrument of modern sovereignty for the protection of modern sovereignty—an aim to which the Muslim Brotherhood has also been committed.

In his oration before an audience of senior military and police officers celebrating the “6 October victory” in the 1973 war against Israel, Shaykh Ali Gum‘a, previous grand mufti of Egypt, denounces the Muslim Brotherhood as a sectarian minority, as “heretics and traitors” (*khawārij*), as “dogs of hellfire” (*kiḷābu-n-nār*), and therefore as deserving of slaughter by the military protectors of the nation.⁸⁶ In the video of this event the military authorities are visibly satisfied with this theological denunciation, one that conforms to the government’s branding of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Shaykh Ali Gum‘a’s posture is neither surprising nor new because, as a Sufi adept, he is known to have close religious connections with many members of the security police (and, so it is said, with Sisi himself) who therefore come to him for spiritual advice.

There is true religion and false religion for everyone (including the state) to whom religious tradition matters. Making this distinction is part of what conflicting claims to orthodoxy within tradition do, as articulated by Shaykh Ali Gum‘a. But the construct of religion itself allows outsiders to attribute beliefs, practices, and attitudes to other traditions (yes, that *is* their religion, and that is why all its believers are our enemies). In the Schmittian politics thus generated, friends are essentially those who share one’s enmity towards defined others. The aim of this politics is to defeat the enemy and eliminate or convert him to “real” orthodoxy and orthodoxy—whether inspired by divinity or by humanity.

86. “Talk by Dr. Ali Gum‘a in the Meeting of the Commander in Chief with the Army and the Police in the Central Military Quarters,” *YouTube*, 18 Aug. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTBgYcJaAgo

5

A question I have tried to address in this essay is why liberals and the left in Egypt sought so fiercely to exclude religion from political space. The short, familiar answer is that they tend to see the future as the continuous progress of humankind led by secular states, and therefore tradition (especially religious tradition) as divisive and a source of political discord. The result is not only a distrust of religion's attempt to enter politics (the space that seeks to control society as a whole) but a visceral hostility towards religion as the political enemy rather than the military or multinational corporations.

I have already argued against the claim that religious disagreements are typically inconclusive and therefore should be excluded from the rational debate that democracy requires. I might add that theological disagreements are themselves resolved—which is one way that religious traditions evolve. It is true that such resolutions presuppose certain assumptions that others may not share, but that is a problem common to all situations where opponents are unable to reconcile their fundamental values. This impasse doesn't in itself inevitably lead to violence, and not all eruptions of violence draw on religious values. However, my aim in this essay is not to defend religion; it is to explore a problem that remains generally obscured in the secular hostility to what is assumed to be religion. I argue that the problem with what can be called political religion is the politics that derives from the sovereign state and the religion that is conceived and practiced in response to it.

Many Egyptians have an understandable concern at the attempts to impose an Islamic personality on a country containing diverse traditions and identities.⁸⁷ But the crucial question is not why should an Islamic identity not be imposed on Egypt. It is, what is there about the modern state that requires a homogeneous political identity? The modern state seeks a singular personality for itself in the exercise of sovereignty, and claims that this is necessary for the progress and modernization of its subjects. The desire to assert and preserve the unity of the people rests on a political metaphysic that is shared by liberals and Islamists alike, a metaphysic that underpins the modern concept of sovereignty—the belief that

87. Thus Tarek Osman writes in criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood, “in Egypt, Islam—as a frame of reference, an identity, and a major social component—has *always* existed alongside Arabism, Mediterraneanism, Levantinism, Christianity, and pharaohism” (Tarek Osman, “Egyptian Dreams,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 14 May 2014, www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=573, emphasis added). But these are elements of a nationalist ideology, not of an actual, historical sense of belonging experienced by various peoples in Egypt. It is the function of statist ideology to suppress the untidy formation, diverse experiences, and multiple attachments of people in historical societies.

there is such a thing as a homogeneous nation, that a homogeneous nation has the right to absolute independence represented by a state, and that the state must reflect the nation's singular personality. Thus a common complaint against Morsi was that he was not acting as the leader of all Egyptians. This was never problematized publicly by questioning in what sense a president elected by a majority of citizens in a heterogeneous state can be the leader of all Egyptians, as opposed to being the legitimate head of state and defender of its constitutional personality (made more difficult by the repeated rewriting of the constitution). Like all heads of liberal democracies, he responds to the conflicting interests of fellow citizens by yielding to those who exert effective pressure on his government, whether through elections or financial pressures or personal allegiances. Even the Supreme Constitutional Court is not the ultimate guardian of a unified people in Egypt.

One may recall here a remark Foucault once made in relation to the Iranian revolution: "Concerning the expression 'Islamic government,' why cast immediate suspicion on the adjective 'Islamic'? The word 'government' suffices, in itself, to awaken vigilance."⁸⁸ Naive critics of Foucault have taken his interest in the Islamic Republic of Iran as evidence of his romance with political Islam (in response perhaps to his early criticism of the left-wing romance with revolution). But they are mistaken. Foucault's reaction to the Iranian revolution is his concern (as so often in his writings) to think beyond clichés and, in particular, to formulate questions about how truth is manifested in connection with the exercise of self on self, "the relations between the truth and what we call spirituality"—a topic that preoccupied him in his last years.⁸⁹ In the comment about the Iranian revolution he is posing a question about the modern state's practice of sovereignty and the sovereign subject in that state. The modern state (including varieties of the liberal state) is held together not by moral ideals and social contracts but by technologies of power, by instrumental knowledge, and also, importantly, by the way it requires dependence on and demonstration of truth (traitors are those who conceal the truth).

The genealogy of the modern state is to be found primarily not in legal, constitutional histories but in the evolution of the concept and practice of politics conceived of as the autonomous apparatus of control by the

88. Foucault, "Open Letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan," in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, 2005), p. 261. For an excellent review of the book, see Jonathan Rée, "The Treason of the Clerics," *The Nation*, 28 July 2005, www.thenation.com/article/treason-clerics

89. Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Michel Senellart (New York, 2014), p. 115.

state—and by those who have access to the state through political parties—over the life of an entire society. This evolution emerged in and helped define modern Europe, later to be adopted, adapted, and imposed in the Middle East (and elsewhere). Medieval European legal theories of *status regni* tended to have a personal view of power according to which the ruler possesses or even embodies the institutions of government, although the modern state's genealogy, as Quentin Skinner has pointed out, lies in advice books for magistrates and in the mirror-for-princes literature that emerged from them, especially in Renaissance Italy. In that retrospectively traced tradition it was argued that the most important requirement for the prince to maintain his state as a prince was to keep control of the power structure within one's *regnum* or *civitas*. This vindicated the idea that there is an autonomous civil or political authority whose purpose is to regulate the public affairs of an independent community and to reject interference by any outside power in its own *civitas* or *respublica*.⁹⁰ Thus, according to Hobbes, sovereign power is alienated to and vested in “an Artificiall Man” who is neither the ruler nor the ruled but the apparatus of government that it is the duty of rulers and ruled to maintain.⁹¹ The concept and practice of the state's monopoly of legitimate power, as well as of its external and internal sovereignty, together belong to this discursive tradition. (The defence of the modern state by liberals rarely if ever addresses the fact that its triumph involved not merely the taming of religion but also the crushing of city freedoms by rising territorial principedoms based on modernized military force and centralized social discipline.)⁹²

Crucial to political sovereignty today is the founding distinction between citizen and alien. In premodern times the distinction between someone born and bred in a particular place and another who has come from elsewhere to settle in that place was socially recognized, but that fact rarely defined legal privileges and disabilities. The distinction that mattered in premodern law (and is not recognized today) was between free and slave. The distinction between alien and citizen is not only massively evident in the modern state but has been a crucial step in its formation.⁹³ Since the

90. See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978).

91. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 1.

92. See, for example, Richard Mackenney, *The City-State, 1500–1700: Republican Liberty in an Age of Princely Power* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1989), and Philip S. Gorski, *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 2003). Mackenney sees the process as essentially secular, Gorski as religious, but both recognize the centrality of power—repressive as well as productive—in the formation of the modern state.

93. See Keechang Kim, *Aliens in Medieval Law: The Origins of Modern Citizenship* (Cambridge, 2000).

paramount aim and duty of the modern state is the maintenance of its sovereignty, it assumes the authority to expel or intern aliens where their presence constitutes a threat to security. Under circumstances it perceives as critical, the state may even deprive citizens of their civil rights, defining them by emergency laws as actual or potential enemies of the state—as in the case of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who find themselves (like Palestinian and Syrian refugees) in the modern category of aliens.

There is a tendency nowadays to identify the modern state with liberal democracy, a political arrangement to which, minimally, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the election of parliamentary representatives, and the right to express public dissent are said to be central. But *modernity* is usually used to mark historical time, and also to refer to an assemblage of values, institutions, and projects that are not entirely coherent—two senses that are often assumed to overlap. This identification seems to me problematic, however, for at least two reasons. First, there are states—authoritarian and/or religious—that have an arguable claim to being considered modern. How would one characterize the Islamic Republic of Iran? As not modern but still Islamic? As not really Islamic but modern? As neither modern nor Islamic? These questions are relevant to any serious assessment of Morsi's alleged attempt to "Islamize" the state in Egypt. Was he trying to turn the state back to a premodern—because religious—time or was he simply moving forward on the modern principle of state sovereignty as the representative of a predominantly Muslim society?

The second reason why the identification of the modern state as a liberal democracy is not satisfactory can be put in the following way. The liberal democratic state can transform itself into forms that are neither liberal nor democratic. Thus there are clear indications in the secular US that civil rights—the freedoms that a liberal state is constitutionally required to articulate and defend—are being openly eroded. This is not due to accident or to some eternal human vice. Many of the reasons for such transformation are intrinsic to its liberal character—most importantly, its commitment to securing the life and property of its citizens, to making them fully safe. Popular struggle to oppose that erosion is extremely difficult because it is not simply a matter of the restoration of rights but of confronting an elaborate structure of state protection, control, and secrecy that is almost impossible to dislodge.⁹⁴ Hence the typical liberal problem of

94. For a discussion of that institutional structure see the very interesting interview with Glenn Greenwald on the significance of the congressional report on CIA Torture; see Glenn Greenwald, "Corrupt, Toxic and Sociopathic": Glenn Greenwald Unloads on Torture, CIA and Washington's Rotten Soul," interview by Elias Isquith, *Salon*, 11 Dec. 2014, www.salon.com/

“how difficult the trade-off between liberty and security can be in a democratic society”⁹⁵ that is confronted in Egypt (as elsewhere in the “war against terror”) today. This gives cause for worry about liberty to some citizens while offering to others an opportunity for extending state security and state power—for the sake of property if not always of life.

The crucial point about the modern nation-state is precisely its mobile and contradictory character—on the one hand its commitment to defending the citizen and securing general welfare and continuous progress, and on the other hand to defending the state so that it can fulfill this commitment. Because the latter task takes priority over the former, it calls for the accumulation of secret information about the entire subject population in order to preempt any possibility of subversion by a minority within it. In societies heavily dependent on information technology (like the US) this can be done by sophisticated techniques such as the National Security Agency uses. But in all revolutionary societies this has been done by recruiting as many of the ordinary population as possible into becoming secret informers on neighbors, colleagues, friends, and relatives. What is at stake, after all, is the patriotic citizen’s duty to defend his or her nation-state and the latter’s task of defending and transforming society in a progressive direction.⁹⁶ The incidental result of this mode of defense, ironically, is a general increase in fear and anxiety and thus a greater desire for social tranquility. A recent study by Husni Hammada has shown how Nasser,⁹⁷ committed as he was to creating modern Egyptian subjects,⁹⁸ sought to build a comprehensive network of informers in revolutionary Egypt to make sure that people were speaking and thinking in the right way. Writing about the increase of denouncers in the urban flow of ordinary life in Cairo, the journalist Belal Fadl speculates as to whether Sisi will be able to realize Nasser’s dream of a nation in which everyone is a poten-

2014/12/11/exclusive_corrupt_toxic_and_sociopathic_glenn_greenwald_unloads_on_torture_cia_and_washingtons_rotten_soul

95. George Packer, “The Holder of Secrets,” *The New Yorker*, 20 Oct. 2014, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/20/holder-secrets

96. Foucault, incidentally, failed to mention this in his discussion of the paradoxes of revolutionary necessity that I mentioned above: every citizen is a denouncer.

97. See Husni Hammada, *Abdul-Nāsir wa tanzīm at-talī‘i as-sirī* (Beirut, 2014).

98. In his opening speech to the first session of the National Assembly on 22 July 1957, President Nasser proclaimed: “We must ever keep in mind that the most important, the most difficult and the most crucial of our problems is to rear in this part of the world a lively, vigilant and conscious nation and that human beings are the raw material of which such a nation is made. The real effort, therefore, in building the new Egypt lies in the adequate development of the latent potentialities with which the Creator has endowed this raw material” (quoted in Garzouzi, *Old Ills and New Remedies in Egypt*, p. 5).

tial denouncer of his or her fellows.⁹⁹ The denouncer patriot is essential to the national project of transforming Egyptians into a secular, democratic people. This kind of system is made less important by the new information technologies for collecting private data that liberal-democratic governments in the West now use.

Stephen Clark has argued that, looked at critically, liberal arguments for political obligation within the modern state have no force; consequently the only alternatives are between anarchocapitalism and a theocratic state, and it is the latter he endorses: “Either the state can have no authority beyond that of a simple police force (if it has that much), or else it must be supposed to embody a sacred, moral purpose that constrains or contains all lesser purposes within society.”¹⁰⁰ The questionable assumption here, shared by those who urge the sacralization of the state and those who don’t, is that in the absence of political sovereignty nothing but social chaos and ruthless individualism can obtain.

Instead of answering the question “A secular or a religious state?” one might try to imagine what politics not focused on the sovereign territorial

99. See Belal Fadl, “Hal yanjah as-sīsī fi tahqīq hilm ‘abdu-n-nasser bi an yasbah kul muwātin mukhbiran,” *Mada Masr*, 9 Nov. 2014.

100. Stephen R. L. Clark, *Civil Peace and Sacred Order* (Oxford, 1989), p. 82. Clark goes on to cite Simone Weil, but he doesn’t note that Weil wrote this in a time of despair, when Nazi Germany was occupying France and the felt need for rallying resistance against the occupier seemed critical, so I give a much longer quotation from her book:

Since the people’s obedience towards the public authorities is a necessity for the country, this obedience becomes a sacred obligation, and one which confers on the public authorities themselves, seeing that they form the object of it, the same sacred character. This doesn’t mean an idolizing of the State in association with patriotism in the Roman style. It is the exact opposite of this. The State is sacred, not in the way an idol is sacred, but in the way common objects serving a religious purpose, like the altar, the baptismal water or anything else of the kind, are sacred. Everybody knows they are only material objects; but material objects which are regarded as sacred because they serve a sacred purpose. That is the sort of majesty appropriate for the State.

If we are unable to inspire the people of France with a conception of this nature, they will have only the choice between anarchy and idolatry. Idolatry might take a communist form. That is probably what would happen. It might also take a nationalist form, in which case it would presumably have as its object the pair of idols so characteristic of our age, composed of a man acclaimed as leader and at his side the iron-bound machine of State. But we mustn’t forget that, first, publicity is able to manufacture leaders, and secondly, if circumstances place a man of genuine ability in such a situation, he rapidly becomes a prisoner of his rôle. In other words, in the language of today, the absence of a pure source of inspiration would leave the French people no other alternatives than anarchy, Communism or Fascism. [Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (London, 2002), pp. 179–80.]

Sacralizing the state, whether as an idol or as a common object serving a religious purpose, seems to me equally dangerous. Weil is of course right to stress the need for roots as a condition for transcendent commitments. But having roots doesn’t logically presuppose the nation-state.

state might look like. In order to do so one would need to draw on older ideas that have been pushed out by the narrative of secular progress since premodern times, such as the absence of rigid territorial boundaries and the presence of overlapping authorities. One can belong to a People without thinking that it must therefore complete itself by governing its own territorial state.¹⁰¹ It is only with the arrival of the modern concept of sovereignty that jurisdiction and territoriality have come to be defined in terms of each other, although some ambiguity remains on this point in international law, most acutely as it relates to the new humanitarian norm of “Responsibility to Protect.”¹⁰²

The primary question is how far rights and duties attaching to civil status can be negotiated (just as they now are in international law) without an overarching authority. Whereas the latter regulates relations among sovereign states, one might think of a plurality of groupings, each with its institutional order and purpose but overlapping in membership and/or territory, and each capable of being continually readjusted through negotiation. In the absence of sovereignty there would be no distinction between international and domestic law. The negotiation between relatively equal parties would build mutually recognized custom (*urf*) through precedent, difference that can be recognized and negotiated as difference—difference in time as well as in purpose. Some parties would be subsidiary to others for narrowly defined purposes and times but none would have the comprehensiveness, the final authority, and unchanging continuity claimed by the sovereign territorial state. The customs could develop into traditions not defined by bounded territory or exclusive membership but embedded in networks of commercial and intellectual relations and political and spiritual movements extending unevenly and intermittently, beyond various existing borders—a state of affairs that Fowden in his book

101. Thus even the word *umma*, usually taken nowadays to signify “a nation,” has a Qur’anic sense of ethical formation and creatureliness detached from territoriality. As used to signify a human grouping, *umma* has evolved historically. Originally it carried no sense of exclusive descent or territoriality. The word occurs several times in the Qur’an, generally in the sense of the followers of a prophet or the beliefs and practices that distinguish them from others—and so of the moral space they share. It also refers to a moral exemplar, Abraham (16: 120), and to the world of natural creatures as a paradigm of divine justice (6:38), but never—in the Qur’an at least—to a polity. Ridwan as-Sayyid has traced the evolution of its meanings from pre-Islamic usage, through the Qur’an and “the constitution of Medina,” and into the classical period; see Ridwan as-Sayyid, *al-Umma wa-l-jamā’a wa-s-sulta* (Beirut, 1984), esp. pp. 19–87. The dominant secular sense that *umma* has acquired in modern times is that of “nation,” as in *al-umma al-‘arabiyya*, “the Arab nation”—and therefore of a nation-state—and as in *al-umam al-muttahida*, “United Nations.”

102. Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, United Nations, www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/index.shtml

on the world of late antiquity has called a commonwealth.¹⁰³ The experience of having to live together, the learnt ability to negotiate practical problems by reference to techniques and knowledge acquired from the past (or from a very different region) is the open-ended, cooperative way of a commonwealth.

I stress that my concern is not with democratic relations between international units, still less with a decentralized utopia in which all power is held locally.¹⁰⁴ Autonomous local groups can be almost as cruel as the state, but my point is that one might try to think of ways in which no sovereign center of power, whatever its scale, can actually exist. The individual can recognize—and act on the recognition—that he or she is partly reflected in other selves, just as his or her group is partly reflected in other groups.

The idea of numerous nonhierarchical domains of normativity opens up the possibility of a very different kind of politics—and policies—that would always have to address numerous overlapping bodies and territories. Procedures to deal with differences and disagreements would include civil pressure directed against authorities, such as civil disobedience, to make officeholders accountable. But the differences would not take the form of a legal distinction between citizen and alien, or between Muslim and non-Muslim. The tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* could form an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship (and therefore of responsibility to and between friends) not on the legal principle of citizenship. This sharing would be the outcome of continuous work between friends or lovers, not an expression of accomplished cultural fact. The same tradition might find its way to collective acts of protest against excessive power (and so there have to be notions of power's temporalities and bounds). There would be neither the power nor the technical ability of state apparatuses to impose a single legal authority or to deploy an institutionalized force. The risk of a military force being formed to create an exclusive territorial body would have to be met not merely by constitutional barriers but also by the work of tradition in the formation, maintenance, and repair of selves who are bonded to one another. The longing for tradition by someone who doesn't have one that Wittgenstein spoke of is not a frightened wish for the comfort that comes from submission to authority; it is a desire for being transformed through friendship, through

103. See Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad*.

104. See *Global Democracy: Normative and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Daniele Archibugi, Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, and Raffaele Marchetti (Cambridge, 2012). Interesting though this collection is, its interest is quite different from mine—not the ideal conditions of national and international democracy, but the possibilities of fluid and overlapping identities that may escape some of the dangers of the modern state.

belonging to others who belong to you, as they themselves are also changed by that mutuality.

The late Neil MacCormick has published an interesting exploration of how aspects of such an arrangement might be made to work in the context of the European Union, although the European Union remains a bounded territorial unit containing states and their subdivisions, overridden by a power center consisting primarily of the European Central Bank and the Brussels bureaucracy.¹⁰⁵ In a stateless order it would be impossible to aim at capturing state power or to impose a single identity and a single destiny. In sum, only if sovereignty were to be replaced by more complex forms of authority, time, and belonging would both secularism and political Islam have no *raison d'être*.

Of course, even in a world where political sovereignty no longer existed, the past would continue to be necessary for a coherent form of life, or for a life aspiring to coherence. The familiar claim that tradition is a model of the past *in* the present tends not only to separate the past unthinkingly from the present; it also renders tradition as a representation of time sited in a circumscribed reality (the present). However, whenever people quarrel about whether or not they can continue to live essentially as they do now because the world is (or is no longer) the way it is claimed to be, we have a more complicated relationship between tradition, time, and place. Tradition may turn out to be not so much a model of the past that is inseparable from its interpretation in the present as a set of practices that presuppose today as a part of unfinished time. Whether the present in Egypt is still in some significant sense part of the time of January 2011 (when an attempt was made to establish a new political tradition) or whether that time now belongs to an irretrievable past is perhaps too early to say. But certainly the project of doing away with sovereignty (of state and subject) is part of unfinished time—although to identify time as unfinished is not to say that there is still time enough.

Finally, one may gesture at what one thinks of as a possible solution to the intolerable cruelties and injustices of the sovereign state, but applying that solution successfully is quite another matter. The interests of governing elites as well as of the classes that benefit from the opportunities provided by Egypt's sovereign state have to be reckoned with. The sentiment of national loyalty and pride may be fluid, unevenly distributed, and indeterminate, but it is still powerful. In Egypt the considerable numbers of voluntary police denouncers guarding against what people who support

105. See Neil MacCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty: Law, State, and Nation in the European Commonwealth* (Oxford, 1999). The European Union parliament has very little power.

the regime say are traitors, spies, and terrorists is one symptom of that sentiment of patriotism—although Egypt is by no means exceptional in this regard. Given the world we live in, the mere suggestion that sovereignty be dismantled therefore borders on fantasy. Today no state accepts the violation of its sovereign right—although that is precisely what happens to weak states that are unable to do much about it. For in practice there are rights overriding the principle of sovereignty that powerful sovereign states can exercise.¹⁰⁶ Thus the US—and Israel—insist on their right to use preemptive violence against another state or against a foreign population on the grounds of self-defense, as well as on their duty to intervene by force in the affairs of another state in order to protect a population against imminent massacre by its own rulers or by sectarian elements whom the state is unwilling or unable to restrain.

All modern sovereign states, including Egypt, are invested in the continuous search for global markets and investment capital, as well as in dependence on military security and access to the most sophisticated weaponry. They are driven by an ever-present desire for increasing profit, consumption, and power, all under the auspices of financial and industrial corporations. The results, with which virtually everyone is familiar, include accelerating climate change, systematic environmental degradation, and impending nuclear disasters and financial collapse, developments that cannot, so it seems, be stopped. It is this excess, expressed by continuous desire and willfulness, that traditional forms of life have sought to control—even if often they have failed to do so. But in our world the (morally) sovereign individual and the (politically) sovereign state, each reflecting the other, neither able to change this world for the better, are both trapped, gridlocked. That is the tragedy not merely of Egypt but of our time.

106. In a perceptive historical review David Scott has traced the changes underlying the different ways sovereignty is conceptualized in international law and invoked by strong Euro-American states when applied to weak Third World states; see David Scott, “Norms of Self-Determination: Thinking Sovereignty Through,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 4, nos. 2–3 (2012): 195–224.