

MARGINALITY

AND

EXCLUSION

IN

EGYPT

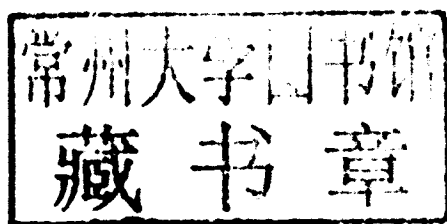


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**EDITED BY
RAY BUSH &
HABIB AYEUB**

Marginality and exclusion in Egypt

edited by Ray Bush and Habib Ayeb



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Measures

1 feddan = 1.038 acres or 0.42 hectares

One US dollar = LE6.032 (Livres Egyptiennes, Egyptian pounds), January 2012

One UK pound sterling = LE9.361, January 2012

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The book is dedicated to all those who lost their lives and who have been maimed and injured in Tunisia's and Egypt's 25 January revolution and the continuing struggle for political, economic and social justice.

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PART ONE

**Marginality, poverty and
political economy**

1 | Introduction: Marginality and exclusion in Egypt and the Middle East

RAY BUSH AND HABIB AYEB

Revolutionary upheaval in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 has challenged many commentators to rethink their often limited interpretations of politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Ideas of an 'Arab mentality' or of Arab 'mice' content with 'political passivity' and of a region simply not ready for democratic deepening have been upset by momentous struggles to throw off the yoke of repression and struggle for new patterns of justice and equality (Fisk 2003; cf. Fisk 2011). Yet commentators have been reluctant to talk about *revolutionary* struggles. There has also been a reluctance to contemplate agendas set by, among others, independent trade unions and the Youth Coalition in Egypt which pushed beyond the initial framing of rising demands for political rights to advance root-and-branch social and economic transformation. Commentary and analysis on the revolutions have preferred to speak of an 'Arab spring' or at best 'awakening'. There was a 'season', it seems, of demands for citizenship, political and social rights and respect rather than permanent and persistent revolutionary challenges to transform exploitative political economies. Repressive political regimes in Egypt and Tunisia were built not only upon networks of local crony capitalist power but also Western, especially US and EU, collusion with dictators who promised guaranteed stability, prevented the ascendancy of radical Islam, especially after 9/11, and refused to challenge Israel's destabilization of the region with continued occupation of Palestinian territory and invasions of its Lebanese neighbour.

If one interpretation of the revolutions has been to view regional turbulence as the result of more or less spontaneous popular mobilization against repression and absence of the rule of law, another has been to see the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia as the result of social media networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This narrative suggests that the revolutions were driven by new technology linking individuals to common causes of demands for improved human rights and the rule of law. Facebook helped mobilize protesters in Egypt sickened by the very public police murder of Khalid Said in Alexandria

in June 2010. The role of social media sites in explaining the ousting of Mubarak was given credibility by an important icon in the Egyptian struggle. Google executive Wael Ghonim was imprisoned for twelve days at the start of the Cairo demonstrations in 2011, and he noted in an interview with the *Huffington Post*:

I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg one day and thank him [...] I'm talking on behalf of Egypt. [...] This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook. This revolution started [...] in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within a few hours. I've always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet. [...] (Huffington Post 2011)

The uprisings, it seems, were now driven or facilitated by changes in communication technology. It helped network individuals and helped organize their mobilization, yet at the height of the revolution itself protesters were deprived of access to the internet. Mobile telephone companies, moreover, complied with dictators' requests to shut down communication networks.

Many interpretations of the revolutions and the role of Facebook share two immense flaws – something Rabab el Mahdi examines in more detail in Chapter 8. First, they fail to offer the historical context in which to understand the revolutions. By doing that they ignore more than a decade of resistance to autocracy. Secondly, they are reluctant to account for the social and class forces that created the revolutions. Working-class and peasant mobilization was the agent of change and remains a bulwark against counter-revolutionary challenges that have tried since the ousting of Mubarak and Ben Ali to impose the status quo ante. Failure to understand resistance as a product of social-class mobilization against dictatorship and political authoritarianism, as well as the power of many different marginalized groups, is a product of decades of neoliberal ideology. This is an ideology that focuses on individuals and their assumed 'free choices' and the sanctity of private property rights. Neoliberalism has deflected attention away from how social classes are constituted in conditions of capital accumulation and crony capitalism and how subaltern classes can mobilize to stop immiseration and challenge authority and dictatorship. None of this is surprising. Neoliberalism is a class project to reinstate capital accumulation after the capitalist crisis of the 1970s. In MENA reference to class has been erased from most of the academic landscape. Imperialism has promoted limited and partial economic reform, tied

dictatorships into programmes of aid and military assistance, softening demands for democracy by calling for (limited) political reform, governance and institutional change. The mechanism for promoting limited reform, and thus the sustainability of regimes that must remain stable, unless they can be replaced by direct military intervention, as in Iraq and Libya, was to fund and promote civil society advocacy. The irony is that the two MENA regimes that were closely monitored and received regular glowing reform reports from the international financial institutions (IFIs), and politicians in Washington and Brussels, were Tunisia and Egypt.

There has been a general refusal to understand the transformations that have taken place in Egypt and Tunisia as manifestations of resistance to wealth and power. Resistance has often been class based, from trade unions and farmers' associations and the autonomous actions of workers and peasants to challenge the reinstatement of a political economy that has promoted dispossession and increased inequality. After failing to recognize the strength of the revolutionary forces, after sticking with 'their dictators' for too long – until it was clear Mubarak and Ben Ali were being ejected from office – Washington and Brussels have tried to claim and co-opt the revolutions. Suddenly imperialism's erstwhile regional office-holders were dictators who blocked the people's claims for the universal rights of freedom and democracy. But as Marion Dixon has noted, the

effort of claiming and co-opting is funneled squarely to prop up the neo-liberal agenda that has brought to the region much of what the movements have risen to reject – a revolving door between wealthy businessmen and ruling party members, monopolistic and oligopolistic economies, rising food and housing prices, slashed wages/prices and protections for workers and farmers, dropping standards of living with weakened public welfare programmes, heightened restriction of rights and liberties ... (Dixon 2011: 309)

The West has been active since the revolutions to bolster their interests, to contain revolution and re-create new stability for increased market access driven by the agencies of international capital, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Bond 2011).

This volume of essays begins to uncover many of the underlying processes that inform why class and the mobilization of workers and peasants were so central to the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. The collection also examines groups of Egyptians who have existed on the margins of mainstream Egyptian society – street children, the

disabled, women and farmers. Many of the essays were first drafted before the tumultuous events of 2011, for a workshop in Cairo in 2009. All contributions have been revised, however, and they offer a glimpse of Egypt's political economy that has been much neglected. The collection provides an important insight into how conditions for revolution in Egypt were partly structured by long-standing patterns of repression, economic inequality and social injustice. The volume provides an essential insight into how Egyptians who were marginal to the erstwhile ruling party's strategy of crony neoliberalism emerged to support the toppling of the regime.

The collection provides an important backcloth to the revolution, indicating why the depth of feeling against the Hosni Mubarak regime was so intense. The essays may help explain why and how the structures of the state were ultimately brittle when confronted by so much rage and anger. The level of opposition, its spread to the major cities and also rural Egypt, confronted an overwhelmed security apparatus that was initially, at least in January and February 2011, less openly supported by the military. The military actions since the revolution, especially through the coordination of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and its brutal attempts at quelling street protest, have frustrated, among other things, popular demands for the ending of military courts, summary arrests and routine detentions. The January revolution became not only a struggle against autocracy but also against the system that the dictatorship advanced: a neoliberal political economy wherein Egypt developed but Egyptians did not. The essays crucially expose why the struggles that toppled the thirty-three-year dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak and the twenty-three-year brutal rule of Ben Ali need to be understood not only in terms of the immediate and dramatic events of early 2011. They need as well to be set in a historical context of persistent and recurrent struggles of opposition to dictatorship and neoliberalism. And they have been struggles that have been driven by workers and peasants, organized and unorganized youth, the middle class and the dispossessed and marginalized.

The collection interrogates the concept of marginality. Some authors argue its importance as an analytical category and endeavour to show how the term can usefully describe a range of Egyptian empirical realities. It becomes clear that the concept of marginality is nevertheless ambiguous. It has often been used to account for the ways in which some people, usually seen as individuals, or parts of distinct social groups or categories of people, rather than as part of social classes, have been excluded or pushed to the periphery of economic growth or

political development. The term marginal or marginality has a certain vagueness about it. It is used as a 'catch-all' phrase to encompass a range of very different situations. These may be situations of the most dramatic condition of poverty, or where individuals or groups of people experience merely a condition of less wealth or 'bad luck' compared with the 'average' person.

Significantly, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were accelerated by young people without leaders or organizations or political party membership. The demonstrations in Tunisia and in Cairo's Tahrir Square quickly developed from protests against dictatorship, rigged elections and security-force violence to include agendas for radical transformation of the structures of political repression and economic power. Collectively the revolutionaries objected to the ways in which wealth was concentrated in the hands of a super-rich class of capitalists who benefited from close links with the state and the governing parties.

The essays in this collection begin to unpack a myriad set of perspectives on who in Egypt was seen to be marginal to national development and what the backcloth was to the revolution. Before the detailed case studies, Ali Kadri offers an important framework for understanding the regional dimensions of immiseration and an answer to the paradox of the region: why, when there is so much wealth, especially from oil revenue, is more than half the population condemned to a life of poverty? He convincingly argues that the people in the Arab Mashreq have not developed. There has in fact been a process of de-development of commodity production centred on the petroleum sector and repressive political apparatuses. And the region's autocratic rulers have been defended by the USA in its overall defence of energy supplies and Israel's sub-imperialist role as policeman for Washington, and the interests of capital in general. This has ensured a high level of militarization in the region and the social and economic costs that this entails. Thus the recurrence of war and the continual fear of it, and the occupations in Palestine and Iraq, create justifications for heightened militarization and the downward spiral of political repression. This series of consequences is not inevitable. Ali Kadri does not echo the 'resource curse' mantra of the inextricable link between resource abundance and underdevelopment. Instead he sees the repressive character of states in the region, and the marginalization of workers and peasants in them (including labour migrants), as a product of the epoch of contemporary capitalist development and the specific form that it has taken in the Middle East.

By locating the region of the Middle East in the context of global

strategies of capital accumulation, Kadri's contribution raises questions about the efficacy of the term marginality. He exposes the idea that those on the margins may be more effectively incorporated into a declared policy of economic growth or political reform. This theme is extended by Ray Bush, who argues the importance of questioning the analytical veracity of marginality and exclusion. He argues instead that people's poverty in the region and in Egypt is the result of their exclusion not from government policy but from development. Capitalism is structured around class positions of wealth and power. The wealth of the capitalist class is based on their appropriation of surplus value from the exploitation of workers and peasants: if subaltern classes are excluded from wealth creation (marginalized) this is a systemic consequence of the capitalist organization of the political economy where this takes place. If marginalization is a direct and important dimension of capitalist development, the improved incorporation of the poor and those on the outskirts of the market economy will not reduce marginality or exploitation, it will merely sustain the reproduction of it. People are necessarily unevenly incorporated within capitalist relations of production and social reproduction, and this is clearly evidenced in Egypt. Improved incorporation of people who are poor, jobless and landless, without rights and much opportunity, will redress their 'marginality' only when commodity production is not organized for the private appropriation of *socially* created wealth.

If capitalist growth generates marginal people or the exclusion of workers and peasants, it also generates the promise and realization of opposition to the mechanisms that create impoverishment. Thus Asef Bayat offers a provocative account of how people's marginality may also 'provide space for alternative norms and lives, a place of respite and counter-power, by the very excluded and self-excluded'. The optimism and possibilities for struggle that exclusion creates is a theme that runs throughout this volume, making it unsurprising that revolutions succeed in ousting dictatorship. Reem Saad further problematizes the concept of marginality as referring to an individual or group of people situated on the 'margin' of 'society' or its global 'structure'. In everyday language, and also much academic literature, people's marginality or marginal status relates to extremely different and varied social categories and conditions. These definitions of marginality are various, multiple, contradictory and contested. Reem Saad argues that marginality can 'provide a greater impetus for change', and in some cases may have 'positive consequences'. She highlights her argument with two enthralling illustrations of women perceived to be marginal in Upper Egypt.

The centrality of struggle in the creation of opportunity for dramatic political transformation is captured in detail by Rabab el Mahdi. She shows in Chapter 8 how debates about marginality have tried to substitute for centrality of social class in understanding why and how Egypt's revolution emerged. She documents the ideological hold that neoliberalism has had in perspectives accounting for social transformation in Egypt, and the Arab world more generally. She demonstrates that 'the Egyptian revolution was the outcome of a historical process and not simply a momentary explosion'. In particular she highlights how labour protest dating back to 2006 created the conditions for the successful toppling of Hosni Mubarak.¹

Part One of this collection locates debates about marginality in the context of poverty and political economy. Part Two explores how marginality and poverty are produced and reproduced with case studies of examples that have historically been somewhat neglected and obscured from focus. In addition to the global and regional context established by Ali Kadri in Part One, Habib Ayeb details the underdevelopment of agriculture in Tunisia and Egypt. He offers a comparative analysis of the revolutions by documenting their rural origins. He examines how immiseration of smallholding farmers is accelerated by neoliberal agrarian policy. He documents how and why the struggle to depose Ben Ali in Tunisia began in the countryside and what the policy failures for promising food security have been. He locates the reasons why rural struggles over access to land in Egypt fomented in the years leading up to 2011, and why and how legislation to reward large landholders increased rural poverty. In so doing he helps to explain why after 25 January rural struggles, land occupations and farmer demonstrations emerged, although they have still been underplayed, in trying to establish the debate about a future post-revolutionary agriculture.

Saker el Nour also focuses on rural impoverishment and the difficulties that were evident in the erstwhile Egyptian government policy of at least rhetorically geographically targeting the rural poor. The strategy employed by the government of Egypt was flawed, El Nour argues, and it failed to meet the targets of policy-makers. He argues that this was because of a weak understanding of who the rural poor are, that they were not identified effectively, that decisions about poverty targeting were determined by corruption and spoils politics, and that as a result the programme was ineffectual in reducing rural poverty and actually added to the wealth of the rich.

One of the key processes that combined and uneven capitalist development has promoted is a spatial dimension to the way in which