

SPECIAL SECTION REPORT ON THE MODERN MUSLIM SUBJECTIVITIES PROJECT

Revolutions, Crises of Modernities, and the Production of Gender Subjectivities in Egypt

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Abstract

A primary concern of this project is to integrate the discussion of gender and gender subjectivities in the discussion of the overall dynamics of revolutions including the conditions that led to them, the understanding of their different actors, and their agendas for change. Another focuses on understanding the way revolutions and the crises of modernity to which they responded influenced the production of gender subjectivities and contributed, in turn, to the development of working subjects who were also private actors shaped by technologies of the self that helped them deal with complex tensions and dilemmas.

Keywords: Revolution, crises of modernities gender subjectivities, family, personal status

The Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project has drawn its theoretical and empirical inspirations from selected recent rich anthropological studies of women in the piety movements in Egypt and Lebanon which critically discuss the dominant liberal definitions of the subject, offer complex analyses of the relationship between Islam and modernity, and develop alternative theoretical formulations of subjectivities in the Middle East.¹ The project has added a nuanced framework, inspired by study of multiple and successive histories of modernities, to the discussion of the region, as well as introduced an appreciation for the similarities and differences that distinguished these modernities and their subjectivities from the global social imaginaries.²

The project's theoretical reference to the complex social practices relating to private and intimate relations provided another layer for the exploration of gender (roles, relations, and agendas) as part of the social and political dynamics of the 1952 and 2011 revolutions in Egypt. Theories of revolution tend to emphasize the interaction between specific international and national contexts (political and economic conditions that mobilize different social and political actors, especially the strength of the state and its class

support) and actors that shape outcomes. Most theories give little attention to gender broadly defined (social attitudes and roles that men and women play in- and outside of the family), especially the complex issues that relate to culturally and socially specific forms of intimacy in relation to discourses of change, the behavior of the dominant social and political actors, and the articulation of agendas. When social scientists eventually turn their attention to the issue of gender, it is usually as part of an effort to evaluate the outcome that revolutions and their policies have for women, as a specific significant constituency, whose status is frequently used as a measure of success or failure.

In a new book project, one of my research goals will be to problematize this partial approach to the study of gender and revolution through the contextualization of the histories of Islamic modernities, suggested by Dietrich Jung, and their impact on the study of modern Muslim subjectivities. Another will be to shed light on the influence that the crises of modernities had on subject formation as contributors to the causes and agencies that shape revolutions. This aspect of the project will study the changing relations that men and women had to work, to education, and to each other in the family, through intimate/private relations. Within this framework, revolutions provided important conjunctures and perspectives for studying the interactions between collective and individual subjectivities in the articulation of these crises and the forms of agency that they produced by testing existing boundaries of gender roles, relations, and interests as parts of their definitions of the good life.

The 1952 and the 2011 revolutions were shaped by and attempted to address two historically specific crises of Egyptian modernity. The 1952 revolution represented the demands of an assertive middle class using national cover to challenge an increasingly discredited bourgeois class and its agendas for political and economic change. In contrast, the 2011 uprising represented the defensive response of this shrinking middle class hoping to arrest its declining economic and political fortunes in the face of neoliberalism and the authoritarian state. Whether one was dealing with the anticolonial nationalist context of the early 1950s and 1960s or the postcolonial/neoliberal one shaped by powerful international and regional interests and actors (including the International Monetary Fund, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states), one is struck by the way their crises in gender roles and relations were not only inextricably and visibly tied to the larger political and economic challenges, but also added sets of issues, actors, and concerns for understanding the larger crises of modernity.

In the early 1950s, women's increased access to education and work led to greater assertiveness, expectations, frustrations, and dilemmas. As more working and middle class women participated in greater numbers in work outside the home, their participation in national protests for independence and support for the right to vote gained momentum in the face of diverse social and political opposition. Working and educated women attempted to renegotiate their roles in the family, especially in relation to their parents and prospective husbands. In the larger social arena, their aspiration, shared with young men, to choose their own mates met with the opposition of parents unwilling to give up control over this important life decision. The cultural production of this period, specifically films, works of fiction, and popular songs, showed extensive social preoccupation with how these changing roles, private decisions, and feelings were part of the modernization of society and its attempts to reconcile the old and the new.

In contrast, the 2011 gender crisis developed as part of neoliberal economics, which produced high levels of unemployment among young college men and women, resulting in marriage delays and costs beyond their means. Privatization without state or union protection of male and female workers contributed to the degradation of workplaces and wages. It also introduced sexual harassment within the workplace, in addition to on the streets and in the private sector. Male unemployment contributed other major changes in family structures contributing to the dramatic rise in the numbers of female-headed households (25–30% according to national statistics). The latter emerged as a major challenge of the dominant view of men as providers and protectors of women, which remains the major justification of gender inequalities in employment and resistance to major changes in marriage and divorce laws central to the definition of Egyptian Islamic modernity.

The above histories were linked to shifts in the imagining of the social orders discussed by the theories of successive modernities (see the introduction to this special section by Dietrich Jung, above). The rise and the consolidation of republican forms of authoritarian states as modern forms of government represented a type of organized society that derived political legitimacy from a declared commitment to social modernization that included gender relations. Republican commitments to formal equality coexisted with practical exclusions that produced political and economic inequalities that intersected with gendered ones. The debates on the achievements and problems of state or socialist engagement in the economy identified with the 1952 revolution, arguments over the privatized market economy assumed in the 2011 revolution, the type of state (authoritarian

or liberal) that provided markers for the building of modern societies and to satisfy the basic needs and expectations of all citizens were gendered and class based in very distinct ways. The different political and economic projects of the 1952 and 2011 revolutions contributed gender subjectivities that foregrounded professional subjectivities of middle class men and women over those of the working classes which were considered to be less modern and developed and therefore deservedly unequal. In the 2011 revolution, access to education remained the primary determinant of prized professional jobs, but the degradation of the educational system and its privatization presented young men and women with new challenges to their economic and social aspirations.

For women of both classes, mothering, child care, and birth control were obligatory national and cultural demands from which male citizens were exempt. This produced various subjectivities that were segmented by gender and class in their dependence on and separation from the state and the family, and had consequences for the society at large and its definition of the gendered individual.

The above dramatic changes in the socioeconomic structures of Egyptian modernities and their gender subjectivities in the 1952 and 2011 revolutions reflected the preoccupation of state and society with the entangled relationship between modernity and Islam as primary cultural signifiers. The state and social projects undertaken in 1952 and 2011 were varied: some were minimally Islamic putting Islam in the service of modernity and others were actively Islamic using modernity to underline the Islamic character of society. These processes were about much more than just how the state and other actors hoped to define the role of religion in society or how they hoped to deal with the representatives of political Islam. They were part of the projects of Islamic modernities with which the modern nation state was culturally identified; and moreover, they were not uniform and were frequently contentious.

The state centered modernity of the 1950s and the 1960s paid lip service to religion and only entered its period of crisis following the Nasserist state's military adventures in Yemen in 1963–64, deepened by the defeat suffered in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. This provided an opening for its Islamic challengers. The 1970s witnessed the forging of an alliance between President Anwar Sadat and the Muslim Brotherhood that ended with his assassination. This was followed by the tense coexistence between President Hosni Mubarak and the Islamist opposition whereby the state accepted the Islamization of society in exchange for acceptance by the representatives of political Islam (especially the Muslim Brotherhood) of a restricted role

in the parliamentary political arena. These developments provided very specific historical contexts for the production of distinct modern Muslim subjectivities, including those developed by Muslim women active in the piety movements, recent studies of whom have contributed to a rich debate and complicated our understanding of this group. Saba Mahmood and Sherine Hafez offered complex studies of middle class women in Cairo who were engaged in activities, including religious interpretations, as well as in voluntary charitable Islamic associations active in development. While Mahmood described the gender subjectivities of these women as rooted in a conservative patriarchal Muslim ethics, Hafez presented a more layered characterization of their Muslim ethics and gender subjectivities that combined Islamic and secularist views. Missing from these discussions were the ways in which they accommodated the individualizing tendencies of economic and political privatization, and the individual as an entrepreneur within and outside the family that distinguished the generation of young men and women that participated in and led the 2011 revolution from those who led and supported that of 1952.

The focus on the rise of political Islam as a threat to the state and its modernization project frequently hid the overlapping histories of religion and modernity in Egypt and how it complicated the history of intimate gender relations. The Egyptian personal status laws, passed in 1929, have for the most part undergone no major changes; they have provided national and modern religious markers of interpretations of the religious definitions of the rights and obligations of women and men, primarily in terms of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody of children. In a legal system that was largely based on Napoleonic civil code, the personal status law, *qanun al-ahwal al-shakhsiya*, also dealt with what could be alternatively represented as the affairs of the individual or those affairs associated with their personal lives. For example, the state civil code's reference to the individual and the private/personal utilized globally employed modern legal concepts for the discussion of gender relations within the family. In addition, modern separation of the public (modern) from the private/personal (Islamic), of which these laws were an expression, provided new structural parameters for the different national modernizing projects that were almost always either not Islamic or modern enough. As such, they represented contentious parts of the layered heterogeneous legal and religious histories, whose concepts, assumptions, and broad national and cultural agendas, influenced the views and strategies of political actors, including state and non-state (political parties and social movements) actors that have dominated the political arena.

The comparative study of the 1952 and 2011 revolutions provided another paradox for our understanding of the development of modern Muslim gender subjectivities during the last sixty years. While the 1952 revolution was for the most part silent on the discussion and change of personal status laws, suggesting the limits of its social and political projects, its policies of expanded access to education, public employment, and formal political rights for men and women had dramatic effects on gender roles and relations in the family. The cultural production of this period was generally preoccupied with the discussion of the changing relations between men and women within and outside the family, especially the rise and acceptance of the importance of heterosexual intimacy in the definition of successful and happy marriages. Love versus arranged marriages added new dimensions of marriage as an institution highlighting the danger of limiting the study of the Muslim family to either what the personal status laws stipulates regarding the rights of men and women or the social norms associated with the religious traditions. While there is no denying that personal status laws play very important roles in identifying the legal rights of men and women in marriage and divorce, their legal implications assume greater importance when marriages run into trouble. They tell us very little about the social, emotional, and sexual relations between men and women in the family. These intimate relations have yet to receive the attention they deserve, and they tend to be obscured by discussions that focus on the law.

The rise of the piety movement has recently led to some discussion of religious traditions (the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions) as sources of social norms that may influence the relations between husbands and wives gaining more importance in shaping their cultural sensibilities in socially conservative times. It was not clear how the Islamization of society during the 1980s and the 1990s affected the views and beliefs of conservative men and women about modern norms like heterosexuality, intimacy, and the body which the 1952 revolution opened for discussion.

Finally, the 2011 uprising contributed a confirmation of this last point through an expanded discussion of dignity and has led to a new emphasis on the embodied rights of the individual. This discourse has focused attention on challenging the daily indignities of sexual harassment experienced by women in the streets and workplaces, especially in the private sector, and the routine disrespect and physical abuse that men experience at the hands of the authoritarian state as the basis of a new individual subjectivity.

The return of a new national security state on 3 July 2013 did not provide hospitable social and legal environments for the development of modern Muslim gender subjectivities that addressed the above private and public

concerns. The writing of a new constitution and laws that criminalized state torture and sexual harassment by relying on the state, the key perpetrator of a culture that tolerated both, ignored the history and role the state played in this regard. More promising was the public discourses produced by the young activists and non-state actors of the 2011 revolution who focused on the daily struggles against the normalization of these political and social practices that violate the respect of the bodies of men and women in police stations, the streets, workplaces, and families.

The study of the histories of Islamic modernities and their discourses coupled with the layered understanding of subjectivities that produced revolutions and were shaped by them is what the new framework on modern Muslim subjectivities offers to the analysis of agencies and the political and social dynamics of change. It offers insights that appreciate the continuities and discontinuities that characterize the long and changing histories of Islamic modernities and how they compare to the global imaginaries.

Endnotes

¹See Mahmood 2005, Deeb 2006, Jamal 2008; Hafez 2011 offers a more recent and important addition to this literature and its discussion.

²For an excellent articulation of its theoretical framework and some of the empirical data upon which it was based, please see Jung, Petersen, and Sparre 2014, chapter 1.3.

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