

# The Wheel of Production Must Turn: The Striving for Normality as a Commitment to Reality in Post-2011 Egypt

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**Abstract:** In Egypt, calls to restore normality emerged almost immediately after the 2011 uprising started. In the following years, they gained increasing appeal, paving the way to an authoritarian restoration. The revolution of January 25 ended with the victory of a party that promised stability and a strong military ruler, in large part because those promises echoed many people's anxieties and hopes about the future and resonated with their day-to-day practices of handling urgent everyday concerns. This success did not just rest on ideological agreements over political ideals, but also on what we describe as *commitments to a reality* that those involved would consider not to need explanation or legitimation – that is, as normal. Normality, we argue, is best understood as an inherently ambiguous, 'essentially contested' concept that unites three distinct dimensions: (1) *what is*, that is, an ordinary recurring reality that may or may not be normative; (2) *what is and ought to be*, that is, what is naturalized and pursued as normative and necessary; and (3) *what ought to be but is not*, that is, an expectation of what ought to be unproblematic and self-evident, yet is not within reach in the here and now. This productive ambiguity of normality allows for major transformations to take place in the name of the restoration and maintenance of a self-evident reality.

[*Egypt, normality, stability, reality, revolution, authoritarianism, utopia, political anthropology*]

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

30 June 2013 was an intensely awaited day. Appeals to join demonstrations had been running since the spring. An initiative named 'Rebellion' (*tamarrud*) was gathering sig-

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas towards this article were developed and discussed at panels at the WOCMES in Ankara, 2014, the EASA conference in Tallinn, 2015, the AAA meeting in Denver, 2015, the DGSKA conference in Constance, 2019, and in public lectures and conferences held at the University Mohammed VI in Rabat, the University of Oran II, and the University of Bern in 2015, the University of Copenhagen, Aarhus University, and ICS, University of Lisbon in 2016, the University of Hamburg and the University of Zurich in 2017, the Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt in 2018, Sophia University in Tokyo and the University College London in 2019, and EHESS in Paris in 2021. Special thanks go to the participants in our

natures against President Mohammed Morsi. The leaflet listed the following reasons, addressing the president in Egyptian Arabic:

Because security didn't come back to the streets... We don't want you  
 Because the poor still have no place to be... We don't want you  
 Because we're still begging from foreigners... We don't want you  
 Because the martyrs didn't get their rights... We don't want you  
 Because there's no dignity for me and for my country... We don't want you  
 Because the economy has collapsed and relies on begging... We don't want you  
 Because of your dependency on the Americans... We don't want you.

Signature gatherers were ubiquitous across the country, sometimes waiting for cars to stop at crossroads, and even asking foreigners to sign. The leaflet calls for the restoration of order and security and for the economy to be saved, combined with the revolutionary demands of the 2011 uprising (bread, freedom, dignity, social justice, and the rights of martyrs) and nationalist appeals equating dignity with national pride and independence. Bringing together an eclectic mixture of demands as if they were one shared cause, the leaflet reflects the uneasy alliance against the Muslim Brothers between supporters of more radical change and those who were longing for a return to stability under the umbrella of a strong state. While the first often argued that, if a tyrant would replace Morsi, the people would remove him, as they removed Mubarak, the latter were supportive of a takeover of the state by the army. 'A military man needs to take charge' (*rāgel 'askarī lāzīm yemsik*) was a view heard frequently in Cairo during that period. Power cuts, economic difficulties and the increase in petty delinquency on the streets fed their grief against the government. A strong feeling of political polarization led many to expect bloodshed.

The event gathered huge numbers of participants. Days before, the loudspeakers in the metro stations started to play patriotic songs. Aymon Kreil's future wife joined the demonstrations. Walking with two friends who were opposed to Mubarak, they lost their group and found themselves in the middle of supporters of the former president. Using the wrong slogans around the wrong people almost led to a clash. In his neighbourhood, Aymon noticed the enthusiasm of former NDP (the National Democratic Party, the former ruling party) members he knew for the change to come. The following day, when the armed forces issued their 48-hour ultimatum to President Morsi to resign, manifestations of joy filled the city centre. People were chanting, waving

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research for their ideas, time and engagement, and to Paola Abenante with whom we developed much of the theoretical groundwork for this article. We also thank Asmaa Essakouti, Yasmine Berriane, Annelies Moors, Mukhtar Saad Shehata and members of the research unit Age and Generation at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient for their support and ideas, and the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their precious insights. Research for this article was funded in part by the Bijzonder Onderzoeksfonds of Ghent University, the European Research Council, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Germany), the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Egyptian flags and pointing green lasers into the sky, in the fashion of demonstrations at that time. Soon the slogan ‘The army, the people and the police are one hand’ dominated, and it became clear whose agenda would gain the upper hand: that to restore order and stability.

In this article, we pursue two questions. One is ethnographic, asking how attempts by many to continue living ordinary lives during a revolution can be linked with the widespread popular support for a counterrevolution and the establishment of a new authoritarian state. The second is theoretical, asking what kind of normality was appealed to and achieved by the continuation of ordinary life and by calls for a return to stability.

To answer these two questions, we examine the work undertaken by many Egyptians during the period following the 2011 uprising to craft a political and social reality that they would consider not to need explanation or legitimation and therefore would describe as normal. The normality they sought was expressed in terms such as ‘stability’ (*istiqrār*), ‘ordinary/normal life’ (*ḥayā ādiyya/ṭabī‘iyyā*) and the idea that ‘the wheel of production needs to turn’ (*‘agalet al-intāg lāzim tedūr*), a metaphor referring to the wheels of a machine working and hinting at the economy’s need for stability. These terms reflect practices of living a predictably ordinary life, as well as strivings for an unproblematic good life yet to be realized. In exploring these calls and practices, we point at the key productive tensions they share: how the liminal rupture of the revolution gave rise to an urgent need to maintain and restore ordinary routines (in the section ‘Rupture and ordinariness’), how some people we encountered sought to restore an idealized here and now (in the section ‘Yes to stability’), and how political normalization violently imposed itself as an inevitable reality, thereby making some Egyptians long for a normal life abroad (in the section ‘Dealing with reality’). Towards the end of the article we engage with theoretical and comparative research by arguing for a theoretical understanding of normality that, rather than reducing it to any one aspect, recognises the ambiguity between three different dimensions: the existing (that which is, even if it is not normative); the normative and naturalized (that which is and ought to be); and the desirable (what is not but ought to be). This makes normality a productive term that participates in the shaping of social realities. In conclusion, we address the ways in which the successful establishment of political stability can result in transformations.

In doing so, we bring into dialogue different instances of distancing towards revolutionary events: the effort to maintain a daily routine in times of trouble, the appeal of political normalization, and the wish to find living conditions that ought to be self-evident yet are unavailable. Despite their differences, these positionings share two important features. First, their aims are commonly articulated in similar terms as being normal (*‘ādī / ṭabī‘ī*). Second, they are grounded in an explicit commitment to reality that is not perceived as a matter of ideology but relies on an understanding of a given state of the world as recurring and unproblematic.

An important methodological decision deriving from our approach is not to focus on explicitly ideological commitments and conflicts. While the revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt can be and have been studied in terms of a struggle over the values

and interests that should organize state and society, we highlight a different dimension: the powerful appeal of recurrence and order, the promise of a life without ‘headache’ (*waga’ dimāgh*) in which people and things are in their expected places, even if these might not always be the right or best places. The reality involved in such an appeal is contestable and has been fiercely contested by supporters of radical change. Commitments to a self-evident non-ideological reality are embedded in power relations and are utopian in their own way. However, their utopia is articulated as based upon an existing setting that only needs to be restored to its right form, often being accompanied by a denial of the legitimacy of politics as a means of questioning the social order and commonly held expectations.

Normality is also gendered. Our focus in this article is based mainly on contexts that in Egypt are associated with male roles (even while in fact they are often occupied and claimed by women as well): interaction in streets and alleyways, political action and public performance, and breadwinner roles (Ghannam 2013; Naguib 2015). This is not to say that they are the only or the most relevant contexts – on the contrary, homes and families in particular are central sites of a normal life (see, e.g., Elliot 2021; Winegar 2012) – nor that women have no say in the public space. Indeed, the maintenance of the divide between female-marked domesticity and male-marked contexts of public interaction is an example of a reality that is both a normative expectation and a claim that the divide reflects a self-evident reality by those who find it unproblematic.

We develop our argument through ethnographic research we conducted in Egypt during the turmoil of 2011–2013 and the ensuing period of stabilization. Aymon worked throughout the decade in an old neighbourhood of central Cairo that, during the revolutionary period, was known as a stronghold of Mubarak and army loyalists. Samuli Schielke followed the trajectories of men (and fewer women) from a rural region who by means of migration, education and business sought to realize a materially and morally good and stable family life. The groundwork of our conceptual approach was laid in collaboration with Paola Abenante (2014; Abenante et al. 2015). Our fieldwork shares an immersive approach, rarely relying on interviews, and mainly working through long-term knowledge of social milieus, families and individuals. Our fieldwork also shares the overwhelming experience of major political events that affected the lives of the researchers and their interlocutors alike, even while their positions towards those events were often different. At times, some of them supported extreme violence as a solution to problems. The experience of trying to listen to them while feeling at odds with some of their positions was an important motivation in beginning our inquiry.

## Rupture and Ordinarity

At the height of the Arab uprisings in 2011, change was the word of the day in Egypt. It expressed the idea, however vague, of a radical transition, of discarding the old and

corrupt and replacing it with something new and better. Many invested their dreams in this change to come. The specific dreams of change people had and the ills they hoped to replace were diverse and often mutually exclusive. Depending on which political trend supporters of the revolution sympathized with, that dream could involve aims such as democracy, social justice, more gender equality, less gender equality, a better functioning capitalist economy, the overcoming of capitalism, quicker and easier marriage, the protection of the environment, Arab solidarity, more observance of Islamic virtues and identity, a more secular society, and revenge for the martyrs of the revolution. However, whatever the issues at the top of one's agenda, they were more often than not accompanied by the expectation that a new, better normality would be the desired outcome of the change.

Opposing the call for change, a return to the status quo<sup>2</sup> before the revolution was also a common demand at the time. Supporters of the Mubarak's rule gathered around the slogan 'yes to stability' (*na'am li-l-istiqrār*). The sense of liminality, the feeling that all ordinary rules were suspended, which Walter Armbrust (2019) so well documents for this period, also inspired the desire to restore normality at all costs. In the course of the revolutionary period, this desire found increasingly antagonistic and radical expressions, culminating in the summer 2013 when supporters of the military supported the mass killing of the supporters of the Muslim Brothers and Mohammad Morsi.

The experience and effects of participation in the events of the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath have been studied extensively (e.g. El Chazli 2020; Ryzova 2020; Armbrust 2019; Ayata and Harders 2018). However, the repeated defeat of those who hoped to let revolution rule from the streets draws attention to the social dynamics that opposed the revolutionary utopia of the rule of the *midān* ('public square'; also 'battlefield') epitomised by Tahrir Square in Cairo. In late 2011, while a revolutionary minority occupied Tahrir square again and demanded an immediate end to military rule, the Muslim Brotherhood went ahead winning the parliamentary elections. In 2013 and 2014, the new military-led rule defeated street protests by supporters of the deposed President Morsi with extreme violence before crushing all organized opposition movements in the aftermath (see Abaza 2017).

Disrupting the ordinary order of life was a declared goal in the occupation of squares and other revolutionary actions. To many others, however, these revolutionary hopes appeared as a threat, a disruption of processes they expected to recur forever. As a result, the revolution appeared to them as a danger to the ordinariness in which life was anchored.

A striking feature of those days was indeed the fact that often only a few blocks away from dramatic events, life appeared to continue its normal course, with people shopping and sitting in cafés, and with public transportation functioning. Ordinary life was severely interrupted only briefly, most dramatically perhaps in Cairo in the

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2 *Status quo* in the sense of 'facts on the ground' that may not be considered legitimate or ideal, and yet appear resistant to change (Bryant 2019).

summer of 2013, when the main streets and squares became unsafe due to clashes and curfews, and a frightening silence came over the otherwise busy and noisy city (Malmström 2014). Yet, even during this violent time of rupture, side alleys often still provided an appearance of near normality.

During the uprising that led to Mubarak's removal, the barricades and checkpoints that inhabitants had installed in Cairo and other major cities from January 28 on were not intended to resist the police or the army, but to prevent trouble from entering their neighbourhoods. The 'security vacuum' (*al-infilât al-amnî*) more than politics was the overt concern of those who picketed all night long to ensure the safety of the streets. Rumours of looting travelled across the city, with no real means of verification, since the Internet and mobile networks had been cut. Accordingly, inhabitants of all political shades participated in the surveillance (Klaus 2012; Lachenal 2012).

As for 2013, when the military seized power with the support of a large-scale popular mobilization, and supporters of deposed President Morsi in turn organized wide-scale resistance that was violently suppressed, there were many fewer checkpoints being run by the local inhabitants than there had been in 2011. The army discouraged Cairenes from erecting any, and instead a heavy police and military presence enforced a curfew. However, in narrow alleys, such as that in Cairo in which Aymon was living, life went on even at night. The coffee shop, for instance, continued to work until late, an oasis of light and noise in a stark contrast to the deserted main street just around the corner. Many people were following the news on state television, with broadcasts full of reports about military operations against supporters of the Muslim Brothers labelled as violent terrorists. Some customers carried sticks, in case things got out of hand. Even though the inhabitants did not erect barricades to secure their neighbourhoods as they had done two years before, the simple fact of not observing the curfew without even considering it a transgression shows how those living in the alleyways drew a border between events on the national stage and the space of daily routines and interactions they were inhabiting. This sense of non-involvement in major events concurred with a general effort to refrain from any discussion about politics in the alleyways in order to avoid conflicts, even though the majority was supporting the military takeover and although it was impossible to prevent such conversations from erupting from time to time.

Thus, it appears that many people, when they were not directly involved in the conflict, worked to maintain or restore a degree of normality in a situation where violence threatened the fabric of their ordinary routines. Researchers who have studied other violent situations share this observation (e.g. Das 2007; Allen 2008; Kelly 2008). In their accounts, as well as our own ethnographic experience, situations of experienced rupture and uncertainty tend to be paralleled – and countered – by a more or less explicit effort to maintain the continuity of daily routines.

## Yes to Stability

Walter Armbrust (2019) argues that the 2011 uprising opened up a period of liminality which in turn inspired an appeal to stop the confusion it produced. He emphasises the figures of tricksters such as the TV anchor Tawfiq Okasha, who became a successful spokesperson for certain anti-revolutionary currents from 2011 to 2013.<sup>3</sup> Armbrust also includes Egypt's current president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in his roster of tricksters. In addition to the trickster qualities Armbrust identified, however, we argue that el-Sisi's success was more importantly based on his ability to embody normality as a political project. His rise was preceded by the call (which we first heard in 2012 and 2013) that 'a military man needs to take over'. This call was made from the background of the long-term role of the military in politics since the revolution of the Free Officers in 1952: military men had ruled the country for almost sixty years, and therefore they were the best promise for a return to normality.

For his supporters, el-Sisi as a military man embodied the promise and possibility of stability (*istiqrār*), thereby drawing upon an important heritage of the Mubarak era. In the heyday of the Mubarak's rule, political stability went hand in hand with strong economic growth and a clientelistic redistribution of the fruits of growth to those who were on good terms with the ruling networks. In vernacular use in Egypt, stability is both political and personal: it evokes a predictable, controlled state of affairs, as well as a man's ability to provide for his family and be settled in his home (Makram-Ebeid 2012). For many Egyptians, this was an accomplishment they sought to restore.

Our fieldwork was full of encounters in which the people we met explicitly argued for an orderly return to a controlled state of affairs. Those who made such arguments were not necessarily avid supporters of the government; rather, they sought to maintain and restore routines and relations which they mastered and which they relied on in their lives. Already on 30 January 2011, in the midst of the revolutionary turmoil, some regular customers of the coffee shops which Aymon used to frequent were vocally demanding an end to the demonstrations out of a concern for security and the country's economic well-being. Cars displaying placards with the pro-Mubarak slogan 'Yes to stability' peppered the streets.

One day later, on 31 January, Aymon was sitting in a coffee shop with a group of young men following six days of clashes between the police and the demonstrators. In the coffee shop, the contrast with the atmosphere on Tahrir Square was striking. The main talk that day in the group was about the time they had spent guarding their neighbourhood in the 'popular committee' (*lagna sha'biyya*) to which each one belonged. Popular committees were informally organized checkpoints with the aim of protecting neighbourhoods from being looted after the police had withdrawn from the

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<sup>3</sup> Armbrust relies on Paul Radin's (1956) classic description of the trickster, an ambiguous figure on the margins of human society, both creative and destructive, laughable and cunning, at the mercy of his impulses and reasserting society's values through his capacity to subvert all order.

streets on 28 January. The men were teasing each other, making jokes about bad checkpoints where ‘people were gathering in the [inner] courtyard’ instead of controlling the passers-by in the street. They contrasted it with the heroic stories by a bulky young man with tattoos carrying a pack of cable ties. ‘In our place, they stand their ground, even if there is some gun fight, even if they should fall’, he added. He stridently denounced the dangers of chaos. One of his main concerns were the many weapons circulating after the recent attacks on police stations. He added a quote he attributed to earlier Islamic authorities: ‘Better 60 years of an unjust ruler (*ṣulṭān ḡālim*) than one day of discord (*fitna*).’<sup>4</sup> The prevailing opinion among those seated there was that people needed to stay at home from this day on and avoid the demonstrations.

A year later, in March 2012, Samuli and Mukhtar Shehata (working together on a documentary film project) interviewed al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad, a senior fisherman working on Lake Burullus near the Mediterranean coast. Addressing the widespread squatting and seizure of property that the 2011–2012 absence of government controls enabled, he argued:

Lake Burullus has been destroyed during the revolution. It’s all trespassing now. Anybody can, if they like, steal and dry up a part of the lake. The police don’t come by on patrols. They have all stopped working. And the kids have become shameless, and people do what they want.

However, he did not claim to be against the revolution – in fact, few people in Egypt did after Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011 (see also Cantini 2021). Al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad recognized the revolution as a reality that undoubtedly existed, but now it should be resolved to an orderly conclusion, which he anticipated to be the presidential elections that would occur two months later:

The revolution isn’t over yet. The revolution is only over when a new president seizes power – for better or for worse. If things go well and everybody gets what is their right again, and the state returns to what it was, then the revolution’s over. But it’s not over yet.

From the point of view of al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad, a restoration of the power of institutions was a necessary condition for a secure existence. Political elections are a common means to generate an ordered normality after an upheaval. In this case, however, the elections did not yet bring about such order or normality: that was left to the years after 2013, with the gradual consolidation of a new military-led political regime.

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<sup>4</sup> The sentence mixes up a quote some attribute to Egypt’s Islamic conqueror ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ and some to the 8th century *ḥadīth*-collector Mālik ibn Anas: (‘Better a tyrannical and unjust ruler (*ṣulṭān* or *ḡākim*, depending on the versions) and no persisting discord’) with a quote from the famous 13th-century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya (‘60 years of a tyrannical leader (*imām*) are better than a night and day without one’).

Since 2013, al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad has been an ardent supporter of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, whom he considers a leader worthy of comparison with Gamal Abdel Nasser. Equally important as his words are his actions. During the revolution, they mirrored those before and after – working on his boat, handling the affairs of the local fishermen’s association, supporting his family, and arranging his children’s marriages. As the interview with him took place immediately before the wedding of one of his children began, Mukhtar and Samuli were present not only as researchers but also as invited wedding guests, whose socially assigned task was to witness the enactment and reproduction of normal and normative ways of living. For al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad, the practice of living an ordinary and orderly, safe life devoid of surprises and well-connected by ties of kinship and patronage was not merely a way of surviving uncertain times: it was in itself the *model for* (Geertz 1973) the counter-revolutionary utopia of a good life. As a low-ranking policeman explained to Aymon during a friendly conversation at a coffee shop, ‘everybody needs to stick to his place’ (*kull wāḥid lāzim yelzem bi-makānuh*).

The Egyptian writer and blogger Belal Alaa (2018) argues that being sceptical of change but accepting it as a fact once it happens is a characteristic feature of a conservative ‘ethics of survival’ wherein inequalities and injustices are seen as the features of an inevitable ‘normal/natural condition’ (*wad’ ṭabī’i*). The only reasonable and responsible thing to do with them is to manoeuvre them to one’s advantage. Alaa’s analysis is a critique, a polemic even, against a social mainstream that would not adopt the idealistic aims of the revolution and other utopian projects. His comments echo the common criticism at the time of the revolution of those who did not engage in politics, labelled as ‘the Couch Party’ (*ḥizb al-kanaba*) because of their supposed habit of merely watching major events on television in their living rooms.

Belal Alaa’s critical analysis is helpful for appreciating the work of normalization in the context of this crisis and how it is located at the juncture of an institutional project and the desire to restore ordinary living conditions. However, what we call a commitment to reality and what he calls an ‘ethics of survival’ (Alaa 2018) does involve a utopian dimension, even while claiming to be anti-utopian. Not all utopias are non-places or projected futures: there are powerful, conservative utopias that promise an idealized yet familiar here and now. Such utopias are paradoxical because they refer to a good life that supposedly already exists while simultaneously evoking a past to be restored or an ideal yet to be achieved – even while it may remain unachieved.

## Dealing With Reality

In his book on football during the revolutionary period, Carl Rommel (2021) shows anti-politics to be an important feature of Egypt’s recent history (see also Roussillon 1996; Ben Néfissa 2011), based on the binary between ‘the nation’ as a principle of

unity and consensus, and ‘politics’ as a principle of disarray and selfish pursuits. This binary is an example of what Luc Boltanski (2009) calls a ‘semantic consensus’: a shared framework of reality that channels criticism and guides the striving of a great number of people towards conformity. It forcibly excludes elements in the world which do not fit into the reality it shapes. The territorial nation state is an especially powerful standardization device. Boltanski adds that such realities are accompanied by marginal, unofficial discourses and practices that range from resistance to cynicism and opportunism (Rommel provides many such examples). However, even those who are not content with existing conditions must reckon with them as inevitable because that is the reality imposed upon them and, as such, is self-evident (Wedeen 1999; Hibou 2011).

When faced with a radical questioning of existing power relations, as it happened in 2011, Egyptian rulers and institutions worked to mobilize the explicit support and agreement of many of their subjects by evoking the appeal of ever-competent military rule and a well-ordered life of anti-politics. However, their power is equally dependent on a sense of fear, futility and inevitability among those who do not support or agree with it. Following Veena Das, violence is not overcome when a violent event ends; instead, it may become indistinguishable from the social life after the event (Das 2007:219). While visible, political violence on the streets progressively declined in Egypt after 2013, it remains present as an invisible yet constant fear of forced disappearances, random arrests, unfair trials, torture and killings (Amnesty International 2022:152-157). Its invisibility makes this violence a powerful companion and an ally of ordinary normality.

In spring 2014, Samuli returned to Egypt after an absence of almost a year. The infrastructural problems of the supply of electricity and water that were cited as one reason to depose Morsi in the previous summer had not yet been solved, and police stations had been transformed into fortresses after a bombing campaign by jihadist militants. Yet, as he walked the streets of Alexandria he felt little of any of this. People he knew who had been highly politicized in previous years were now focussed on living their lives, looking for jobs and getting married. Cultural life was thriving, too. Some supporters of the deposed president were still trying to convince him that their ultimate victory was nearer than it might seem. Others, however, were in the process of settling with the revolution being over. They did so less out of conviction than out of an acknowledgement that the new status quo may last for a long while.

In a conversation in October 2014, Zāhir, a white-collar employee who was born in the same village as al-Ḥāgg Muḥammad and who now lived in Alexandria, described to Samuli the sense of pressure that had compelled him to pursue migration to North America as his long-term goal – a goal that might be within his means due to his training and experience in the private sector:

I cannot imagine staying here. I feel constantly under pressure from all sides: pressure to fulfil conventional obligations, pressure of work, a fear that I can be arrested by the police at a checkpoint and put into prison just like that, without participating

in a demonstration or anything. At my work, I find myself having to convince workers not to strike, although I would rather see myself on their side.

Zāhir considers himself a leftist, participated actively in the events of 2011 to 2013, and rejects the current rulers of the country. Like many others who shared his view, he settled for waiting in the hope of another revolutionary opportunity in the future. Yet until then, he had to continue living. By 2014, he had come to the conclusion that, for the time being, his two options were either compliance or exit. Because compliance came at a high emotional cost and, at the same time, provided no relief from the fear that one could still be randomly picked up at a checkpoint and disappear, he was looking for an exit through emigration. Either way, he had stopped acting as a revolutionary and had begun acting as a functional part of the unremarkable flow of ordinary life that was and remains the primary accomplishment and source of legitimacy of the current rulers. He located his own idea of a good here and now outside Egypt in a shift that Samuli has observed across social milieus in his fieldwork: more Egyptians than before 2011 think of migration as a permanent relocation to a life of comfort and safety abroad, rather than as a way to earn the financial means to return home to an idealized life in stability.

## Elements of an Anthropological Understanding of Normality

The political crisis which shook Egypt in the early 2010s ended with the victory of a party that promised stability and a strong military ruler, for an important part because that promise echoed with many people's anxieties and hopes about the future and resonated with their day-to-day practices of handling urgent everyday concerns. This success is less a matter of ideological agreement on political ideals. In fact, it can coincide with strong ideological disagreement and discontent. The promise of stability under a military leader successfully addressed what we call commitments to reality. That reality, however, has a utopian aspect when the here and now is presented as something that supposedly already exists and is simultaneously evoked as an ideal to be achieved or restored – yet it may remain unachieved in the here and now. This paradox is identical with what both vernacular and academic languages call normality.

Normality, in the sense of *what is or ought to be the recurring reality in the here and now and is or ought to be in no need of explanation or legitimation*, has emerged repeatedly throughout our ethnographic narrative. It became evident in the demand for a return to security and economic prosperity that motivated demonstrators on 30 June 2013; in the coffeehouse in the alley that stayed open in 2013 as if nothing dramatic was happening; in the policeman's and the fisherman's evocations of a properly working state with people in their proper places; and in the former revolutionary's grudging

compliance, as well as his hope for a life elsewhere where he would not be cornered by pressure and fear.

We propose to consider these evocations and practices of normality as elements of an ‘essentially contested’ (Starrett 2010:628) concept that does not exist apart from the conflicting commitments to reality in which it participates. While it is possible to define normality analytically in unambiguous terms (some of which we discuss below), any clear-cut definition of the term results in the loss of the ambiguity that makes references to ‘normal’ and ‘normality’ and calls for ‘normalization’ productive in the first place.

While the ambiguity cannot be resolved in practice, it can be analysed and understood in a way that allows us to grasp the work that evocations and practices of normality do. Our fieldwork experience in learning to understand what our Arabic-speaking interlocutors meant when they called something ‘*ādī* (normal, ordinary) or *ṭabī‘ī* (normal, natural) is a helpful starting point towards such an understanding.

The Arabic word *ṭabī‘ī* means natural, normal and self-evident. It evokes obvious facts such as in *ṭab‘an*, ‘of course, naturally’, and unproblematic ways of living, such as in the news headline ‘Normal life has returned’ (*‘ādat al-ḥayā al-ṭabī‘iyya*).<sup>5</sup> The ‘normalization’ (*ṭaṭbī‘*) of relations with Israel is rejected by most in Egypt. Occupying a similar semantic range, the word ‘*ādī* means customary, common, recurring, ordinary and normal. As a reply to thanks or in response to a question, ‘*ādī* means that something is alright and there is no need for further justification. One of Samuli’s interlocutors, a migrant service worker, switched from Arabic to English to explain his preference for Dubai: ‘Life here is uncomplicated (*basīṭa*), unlike in Egypt. Here life is normal.’<sup>6</sup>

Yet, things can also be ‘*ādī* in a troubling way, such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as Lori Allen’s (2008) Palestinian interlocutors described this period to her: a state of exception one learns to endure and tolerate. In 2007 Tawfiq, a key interlocutor in Samuli’s fieldwork, was working as a health inspector in a state-subsidized bakery, where every day he wrote in the inspection book ‘condition: normal’ (*al-ḥāla ‘ādiyya*). Tawfiq pointed out that this is neither good nor bad. It simply is what it is (Schielke 2015:171). His comment was grounded in an underlying discontent, a desire for a meaningful, dramatic turn that would make things less ‘*ādī*.

In contrast, the interlocutors of Alice Elliot (2021), Moroccan women waiting to travel to Europe where their migrant husbands had lived for years, even decades, experienced the circumstances of their ordinary lives as not ‘*ādī* at all. Feeling that they were living unfulfilled lives, neither properly married nor unmarried, they put all their hopes in joining their husbands abroad. Migration was their unrealized dream of a

5 See, for instance, *al-Abram* 30.1.2011, p. 15; *al-Abram*, 1.2.2011, p. 5 and 8; *al-Abram*, 6.2.2011, p. 9 and 11; *al-Gumburiyya* 6.2.2011, p. 1, 2 and 9; *al-Gumburiyya* 8.2.2011, p. 15; *al-Gumburiyya* 9.2.2011, p.2; *al-Gumburiyya* 14.2.2011, p.1.

6 He spoke the last sentence in English.

normal life. Architects and house-builders whose building projects Dalila Ghodbane (2021) studied in Cairo frequently spoke of *al-mafrūd*, ‘required’, or ‘how it ought to be’ to address the disconnection between ‘what is meant to be good for the city and its people and what ends up materializing’ (Ghodbane 2021:186). Our own interlocutors too, when describing their ideas of a good life, often evoked *ḥayā tabī‘iyya* (normal/natural life), *ḥayā ‘ādiyya* (normal/ordinary life), or *ḥayāt banī ‘ādamīn* (a life worthy of humans) as something that is *al-mafrūd* but not realized in the here and now.

The use of these and other terms thrives on different configurations of the tension between ‘the “is” and the “ought”’ (Kelly 2008:353-354), which is inherent in the idea of normality. This echoes theoretical proposals by other anthropologists.

Writing on the aftermath of violence in India, Veena Das (2007) argues that people who survived experiences of extreme violence did not seek to transcend their experience by speaking the truth, nor were they able to resort to conventional normative ideals once their very grammar of a good life (such as what is family or kin, or how one can live with them) had been unsettled. Instead, the violence they experienced became an indistinguishable part of their social lives after the event in what Das calls the ‘descent into the ordinary’ – a cautious process of minor repairs that allowed for the reconstitution of everyday lives. Her approach resonates with the time when inhabitants of the alley where Aymon lived kept the coffee shop open and avoided talking about politics during the summer of 2013, and also Zāhir’s choice for compliance in 2014, when revolution was no longer an option. We argue that this is the first of three dimensions of normality: that of *an ordinary recurring reality that may be actively performed and produced* (as if everything was all right) or *pragmatically adapted to* (even while it is not all right at all). Such ordinary normality foregrounds ‘what is’ as feasible and necessary even when it is opposed to ‘what ought to be’, as was argued by the tattooed man who preferred tyranny to anarchy. One may make oneself comfortable in it while finding it non-normative. The price of such adaptation, as Daniel M. Knight (2019) argues in his ethnography of the economic crisis in Greece, is the emptying of hope for a normative improvement, which makes it an unsatisfactory definition of normality if taken on its own.

In their critique of anthropologies of Islam that foreground the non-normative dimension of everyday life and the ordinary, Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando (2015) insist that normality is inseparable from normative discourse. They also challenge the distinction between aims and actuality, promoting instead a focus on projects of striving to fulfil a norm which, by being pursued, effectively constitute and structure everyday life. This second dimension of *normality as the naturalization of norms and relations of power as self-evident through the combined effect of normative discourses and everyday practice* resonates with some of our fieldwork experience. The policeman’s ideal of everybody having to keep to their own place and al-Hāgg Muḥammad’s expectation of the return of the state unite a normative and naturalizing discourse on what ought to be with the work of making it be. Also, the sense of ordinary life provided by the maintenance of daily routines in the alley during the curfew in

2013 had a normative, naturalizing aspect. And yet the equation of normality with the naturalization of norms in discourse and practice cannot provide a satisfactory account if taken on its own (Abenante 2014). Its limits are evident in Zāhir's grudging participation in political normalization in 2014, and in the frustration of architects and builders about the unbridgeable gap between ordinary reality and *al-mafrūd* (required), how things ought to be. While the coffee house remained open for the inhabitants of the alley, only a short distance away exceptional and extreme acts of violence were taking place. And while the institutions of the state that al-Hāgg Muḥammad longed for eventually did return, Lake Burullus did not return to the orderly state he once took for granted.

Writing about Northern Cyprus, Rebecca Bryant distinguishes between two senses of normality that she encountered: the status quo, which meant the unsolved but persistent division of the island; and normalization (*normalleşme* in Turkish) as what 'should happen after The Solution'. Normalization was both normative and highly unlikely in a 'situation that *should* change yet *cannot*' (Bryant 2019). Writing on Sarajevo, Stef Jansen describes an unsatisfactory status quo against which people evoked 'normal lives' located in a pre-war past. Rather than the feasible object of a striving for the future, 'normal lives' were the object of a 'yearning', a longing that is further out of reach than hope (Jansen 2015). This third dimension of *normality as a desired but not (not yet, or no longer) realized unproblematic good life* is pronounced in Egyptian social media sites dedicated to the 'good old days' (*al-zamān al-gamīl*) with their conservative anti-political utopia of a golden past (Elsherif 2023). It also resonates with many occasions in our fieldwork where a normal life appears out of reach in spite of its seeming necessity: for example, in Zāhir's urge to find a path of permanent emigration which he, by the time of writing this in 2023, has not yet found; and in al-Hajj Muhammad's idealization of a here and now that he knows from his youth but of which increasingly little remains, such as a traditional fishery that is becoming increasingly insufficient for a man to perform the role of a patriarchal provider, and the charismatic leadership of Nasser whom el-Sisi has successfully imitated on occasions, but whose policies of redistribution the latter has not revived.

We propose that, to understand claims and strivings for normality and their underlying commitments to reality, such as those that enabled the success of the counterrevolutionary trends in Egypt, it is helpful to think of them in terms of a mutually constitutive coexistence of three dimensions. They are involved in different degrees when people work on having an orderly and predictable life, function as members of their family and society, call for a return of law and order, make themselves comfortable in the status quo, seek to transcend the status quo, long for an unrealized life in comfort and safety, and want to kill those who threaten their sense of an orderly ordinary life. They are: (1) *what is*, that is, an ordinary recurring reality that may or may not be normative; (2) *what is and ought to be*, that is, what is naturalized and pursued as normative and necessary; and (3) *what ought to be but is not*, that is, an expectation of what ought to be unproblematic and self-evident, yet is not within reach in the here and now.

While for analytical purposes it is useful to be aware of these different dimensions, as an essentially contested concept with a social and political life, normality thrives on ambiguity. It allows the here and now to be evoked in different capacities at different times, and sometimes at the same time: as something to accommodate, restore, and transcend. It allows to restore order and put an end to a revolution while citing revolutionary aims and employing revolutionary affects as in June 2013. But this does not mean that things remain the same: claims and strivings for normality also allow for major transformations to take place in the name of order, stability and ‘the wheel of production’ that became proverbial in Egypt in 2011.

Epistemologically the unstable relation between the three dimensions of normality hints at a fundamental difficulty in knowing what the reality we need to adapt to or to strive for actually is. The uncertainty about what is and what ought to be is particularly tangible during crises. Whereas anthropology’s goal, according to Marc Augé (1987), is to retrieve a sense of the unusual in the taken-for-granted, we have observed among many people in Egypt the contrary move of trying to restore a taken-for-granted reality against the odds of unsettling circumstances. Taking people seriously in the spirit of the ‘ontological turn’ means, in this context, acknowledging both that the reality they refer to is uncertain, contested and rarely conclusive, as David Graeber (2015) has argued, and also that many seek to comply with it, despite its undecidedness. We as anthropologists may be politically and epistemologically at odds with some such strivings, and yet we need to engage with them, seeking to understand how they make sense to those who hold them, as well as critically inquiring into their underpinnings and consequences.

## The Wheel of Production: Order and Transformation

People who expressed scepticism regarding the upheaval in 2011 often complained about its danger to the economy. Their demand was that ‘the wheel of production needs to turn’. The metaphor of a wheel in a machine that turns and remains on the same spot evokes recurrence and circularity in combination with forward movement. This is a prime case of the simultaneously here-and-now and future-bound orientation of commitments to reality that are articulated in terms of normality.

It appears that Egypt’s current rulers have successfully delivered their main promise of political stability, at least provisionally. In our fieldwork encounters, those who oppose the current president have accused him of injustice, violence and of bad economic policies, but not of causing chaos. Although Egypt’s economy remains in crisis, the wheel of production is indeed turning. It has not brought better economic conditions to most Egyptians: Egypt’s real GDP per capita has in fact declined since 2012 because moderate economic growth has been counteracted by devaluations of the Egyptian pound, new taxes and fees, and the scrapping of subsidies (*Our World in Data* 2022). Yet, a con-

struction boom of roads, bridges and new cities is transforming rural and urban spaces, with substantial involvement by the military establishment. Recent years have witnessed a tangible drive towards more centralized control over politics, society and housing (El Raggal, 2020). The same president who promised to restore normality has also promised to change Egypt beyond recognition through spectacular development projects.

In Egypt since the 1970s, population expansion and incomes generated through urban careers and international migration have resulted in the transformation of rural areas into a rural-urban conglomerate in which the ideals of a good life fluctuate between rootedness in a village community and the status and comfort of urban living (Giangrande and De Bonis 2018). Inhabitants of rural areas have described to Samuli this experience as both an improvement – of living conditions and the prospects of social mobility – and a loss, of communal ties, traditional livelihoods and an intact environment. Some of the disruptive effects, such as the decline of traditional fishery in Lake Burullus, have already occurred. Others can be projected with some certainty. The northern Nile Delta region of Egypt will likely become uninhabitable before the end of the twenty-first century, due to sea levels rising because of climate change. Millions of people will be displaced (Link, Kominek and Scheffran 2013). Yet today, houses are built, and roads constructed on lands that soon risk submersion, and institutions of the state and family units alike are actively crafting a better version of the here and now at these very same places.

This is a fundamental social paradox of the utopia of the here and now. A future-oriented search for a normal life at a safe distance from unsettling moments of contingency is occurring today under conditions of a constant process of unsettling: globalization, mobility and the growth-based economy. More than that, these unsettling processes have become hallmarks of stable normality and the effective means to pursue a normal life. The striving for normality is a commitment to a self-evident reality, and yet that reality is also uncertain and changing, partly as a consequence of attempts to restore normality.

This is a global condition. Much of what we have learned from our Egyptian interlocutors reminds us of the waves of denial and hostility to change that continue to arise in the wake of other recent crises of our time, such as climate change, pandemics and the sharpening of inequalities. In a world increasingly moved by identitarian movements and authoritarian regimes that promise a return to an ideal here-and-now that will make ‘us’ ‘great again,’ it is important to understand conservative strivings for normality without hurrying either to denounce them as morally wrong (as may happen when we write about our immediate political opponents), or to romanticize them as radical counter-positions to a neoliberal hegemony or colonial ontology (as may happen when we write about people who are distant enough that we can view them through the lens of alterity). We suggest that such strivings may be understood within the productive tension of uncertainty and utopian desire on the one hand, and pragmatic anti-idealism on the other hand, which come together in the commitment to a normal reality.

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