

# introduction

## Revolution as Lived Contingency

I landed in Cairo, Egypt, in the early morning of February 4, 2011. The trip to Cairo had taken almost forty-eight hours because of a curfew imposed by the military. My parents were surprised to see me: I had been in Cairo only three weeks earlier and had not told them I was returning so soon. I worried that my parents, who are not particularly political, would urge me to stay away from the protests in Tahrir Square. As I expected, they were quite upset when I told them I was headed there. For them, Tahrir meant nothing but trouble, violence, possibly even death.

Around eight o'clock in the evening of January 28, 2011, the military had deployed throughout most of the nation's urban centers. The police force had broken down after days of sustained clashes with protesters. At that point, my parents and most Egyptians were subjected to government propaganda telling them there were foreigners and spies amid the wild-headed kids in Tahrir, and all of them were hell-bent on destroying the nation and its stability. I stammered as I made up a story for my anxious parents: "I am not going to Tahrir Square, I am only going to the area near Tahrir, to interview folks from the protest. I have to do this for my PhD research with my adviser." I was lying. I did not know exactly what I was doing. I only knew that I wanted to witness, to take part in what felt, even then, like history in the making. Thinking of their fear and of my spouse and four-year-old child back in the United States, I promised I'd come back and sleep at home every night.

As the days wore on, my parents' reluctance to let me go to Tahrir dissipated. They grew more sympathetic, asking questions about developments in the square. But I felt twinges of shame about returning home every night. I had been a socialist and a human rights activist and knew that important work happens after dark. That's when the serious conversations began, or so I naively believed at the time. At night, when there were fewer protesters, the camp needed the most support. I chastised myself that even though I spent every day in Tahrir, I was not brave enough to be part of the camp at night. Nevertheless, my time near my parents' home allowed me to participate in the interesting workings of what Egyptians called the "popular committees" (*legan shaabiyya*).<sup>1</sup> Egypt was in a security crisis, and the military was ill equipped to take over policing. So while the armed forces focused on hot spots, citizens spontaneously and brilliantly organized neighborhood committees for security. These spread everywhere. Lightly armed citizens stood along main streets and down smaller alleys, keeping a vigilant night watch over their neighborhoods. Citizens—revolutionaries and nonrevolutionaries alike—became both executive authorities and agents of revolution without realizing it. They established checkpoints, used barricades to control traffic, stopped suspicious-looking persons and cars, checked IDs, and, when the need arose, arrested and handed people over to the army. As they rested, committee members engaged in long discussions about these tumultuous days of upheaval.

And so at night I joined my siblings and neighbors in a committee near my parents' home in northeastern Cairo. We talked about Egypt after Hosni Mubarak, about the military and the chaos that seemed to have engulfed our country. They would ask me, the only one spending every day in Tahrir Square, "What happened in Tahrir, what happened with the revolution today?" Repeatedly, I would tell them, "You are part of the revolution," only to be dismissed. For these Egyptians, just like for the regime and millions of others, the revolution was "in Tahrir."

I grew physically and emotionally exhausted, torn between two places. The square was the site of the famous camp where an alternative republic was forming. Northeastern Cairo, about 12.5 miles from Tahrir, was becoming its own alternative government, no matter that most of the actors saw themselves not as revolutionaries but as a neighborhood watch. Both sites embodied astounding formulations and practices of power by everyday Egyptians in a time of revolutionary crisis, yet the global spotlight shone only on Tahrir.

At the time, I could not seem to reconcile the two places into one story. Even as I thought of myself as a bridge between the two, the events were

just too overwhelming. It was only in 2012, during the second phase of my research, that I noticed that activists had begun to critique Tahrir. The square was no longer the utopian space where united Egyptian revolutionaries were building an alternative society. Now it seemed that people had realized that the fixation on Tahrir was limiting, that it had obscured other developments during the uprising. New questions swirled: Was Tahrir Square a blessing or a curse for the revolution? Could it be both? Do revolutions have boundaries? What counts as a “revolutionary space,” especially in a moment of flux? If the revolution by definition is a moment of rupture, is there one rupture or many? I began to analyze the revolution by blending my ideas around the when and where of the revolution.

### This Book

*Revolution Squared* attempts to answer one key question: How are revolutions defined by their spatiotemporal contexts? I consider this question in relation to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution by asking: (1) How and why did the Egyptian Revolution become solely associated with and, in turn, reduced to the events in Tahrir Square? (2) How did this naming and narrowing affect the developing events? (3) How did all of these processes contribute to the dramatic expansion of political space in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, and the equally dramatic contraction of that space in the years that followed?<sup>2</sup>

I examine how Tahrir Square emerged as the central space and voice of the revolution, as well as how Tahrir related to important modes of action in Egypt’s other urban centers, such as labor strikes and popular committees. The revolution was constituted by multiple successes and defeats across numerous intersecting spatiotemporal sites, but I focus on three: the streets and squares, especially Tahrir; digital spaces; and formal political space. I trace how processes within each of these spaces shifted and changed across distinct periods, including the famous eighteen days that preceded Mubarak’s February 11, 2011, ouster; the transitional period of leadership by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) from 2011 through mid-2012; Mohamed Morsi’s presidency (June 30, 2012, to July 3, 2013); and the current military leadership of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (May 2014 to the present). Thus, the book includes a very close study of the period from 2011 to 2013, but I also situate this analysis in the context of the battles over political space and democracy in the decade prior to the uprising, the history of protest in Tahrir Square, and the events that followed the 2013 coup. Through a focused investigation

of the interconnected forces of space, class, and revolutionary momentum (or its waning), I show how the goals and demands of the revolution were distilled and, ultimately, defanged.

*Revolution Squared* is also a story about the power of Egyptians who did not fully grasp their immense clout during the days of the revolution. Three major contradictions conditioned how revolutionary actors conceived of their power across spaces and places: ambivalence toward the military and the state coupled with sharp critiques of what they saw as a decoupled Mubarak regime, as separate from the military and the state; the inherent tensions within the cross-class coalition that successfully toppled Mubarak but could not harness the potential social and radical grievances of the uprising; and the lack of unifying political revolutionary organization, despite the presence of an enormous, spontaneous revolutionary mobilization. Together, these tensions shaped the political geography of the revolution. The false impression that the uprising was happening only in Tahrir further aggravated these tensions. By centering and interrogating the revolutionary possibilities that existed during the uprising—even some that were ultimately “squared” by the necessary reduction of the revolution to a list of actionable demands—I demonstrate that the Egyptian Revolution was not doomed to defeat.

My analysis is based on three premises. First, any adequate account of a given revolution’s trajectory, especially one that ended poorly, must not overlook the role of counterrevolution. If we agree that every revolution entails two large processes—an expansion of possibilities and also projects of containment—it follows that any fair account of this revolution should include both. By “expansion of possibilities,” I mean that the struggle for sovereignty and governance becomes unlimited. And by “projects of containment,” I mean different dynamics and ways for counterrevolution to attack. Second, and relatedly, if we agree with what the established sociological and historical research says, namely, that revolutions are messy affairs, we must seriously take into account the perspectives and contradictions of revolutionary actors. Third, to better understand the trajectory of revolutions, specifically defeated ones, it is essential to closely examine what happened on the ground. Bearing these premises in mind, in the following pages I analyze how Egyptian revolutionaries practiced sovereignty and policed Egypt during the uprising, as well as how the revolutionaries ceded power and ultimately their voices in the years that followed.

*Squaring* can mean different things: to reshape something into a square, to multiply a number by itself, or to regulate or adjust to a standard or principle. The latter is the main connotation I am interested in here. In this book

I use the term to describe how the revolution was discursively reduced to the physical and symbolic boundary of Tahrir Square during the uprising, amplifying the revolution while eclipsing many other kinds of organizing, voices, and more radical possibilities. I also explore how the revolution was squared in the sense of being reduced to a project of elections without democratization. This second process came after Mubarak's ouster, when the counterrevolutionary forces (the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, aided by the complicity of liberal, nationalist, and political elites and the explicit intervention of regional and international powers) contained the revolution's outcomes. The revolution was, in this sense, reduced again—to a project of procedural democracy and free markets, under brutal security and intelligence apparatuses. These two squaring processes were not fated but historically contingent. We cannot understand how Egyptians experienced many cycles of immense outrage, hope, distress, and disappointment without considering possibility and containment (see also Elyachar 2014, 459).

### **Tahrir as Space, Tahrir as Repertoire**

Tahrir Square carries special meaning and symbolism. During the revolution it was described as a “liberated zone” (Holmes 2012), a “quasi-utopian community,” a “revolutionary space” (Gunning and Baron 2013), a “self-ruled community” or a “republic” (Van de Sande 2013), and a place that embodied a “time out of time” (Sabea 2013). Most analyses contain the unspoken assumption that the dynamics in and around Tahrir Square were metonymic of the dynamics of the revolution at large. But as Jessica Winegar (2012) suggested, the iconization of Tahrir during the uprising led many observers to overlook many critical components, such as the unequal gendered division of labor and class participation in the revolution.

Given the extraordinary weight of meanings ascribed to Tahrir, it is important to situate it and other key squares in the Egyptian Revolution more concretely, as well as the significance of Cairo as the capital city. Tahrir Square, Midan el-Tahrir in Arabic, is about 11.5 acres of open space in the heart of downtown Cairo, or twenty-two acres if we include its surroundings.<sup>3</sup> Khedive Ismail, the grandson of Mohamed Ali, founded the square around 1869 as a roundabout as part of his vision to modernize Cairo (Ismail had lived in Paris during Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's remake of that city). Thus, it was called Ismailia Square. Ismail's vision was to modernize Cairo and create a “Paris on the Nile.” (Paradoxically, the wide streets that

mimic Parisian squares made Tahrir one of the most policeable spaces in Cairo [Schwedler 2013, 231].) Near the heart of the square is Qasr El Nile Bridge. From 1882 to 1947, British barracks occupied the area near the bridge. Under King Farouk, a huge, all-in-one administrative building known as Mogamma (“the complex”) was built in 1951. The name Tahrir Square, meaning “Liberation Square” in Arabic, was first used informally in Egyptian mass protests against British rule in 1919. The name was made official when Egypt became independent and transitioned from a constitutional monarchy into a republic under Gamal Abdel Nasser (Farag 1999; A. Said 2015).

It would be hard to find a place that more neatly symbolizes Egypt’s colonial history, postcolonial state formation, and contemporary configurations of power. Jillian Schwedler writes:

Tahrir Square has long been dominated by the physical embodiments of state repressive capacities. The National Democratic Party headquarters towers over the square, literally and figuratively surveilling activity in all directions. The [Mogamma], a central administrative building that stands at the south of the square, has become such a symbol of impenetrable and crushing state bureaucracy that it has been featured in several films. The National Museum, and the state-sanctioned narrative of national triumph it tells, is located on the northside of the square. The Arab League headquarters, the US Embassy, several major international hotels (and symbols of international capital), and the Ministry of the Interior are all located nearby. As a topography of power, Tahrir Square embodied the oppressive script of Hosni Mubarak’s regime and a topographical node of power on constant display and legible to all who traversed the square. The weight of the regime was unmistakable in Tahrir, providing an intimidating environment but also an obvious symbolic location for challenging the regime and reclaiming public space. (2013, 231)

Proximal spaces that were important meeting and resting spaces during the uprising and in its aftermath include opposition-party headquarters, cafés, churches, and mosques. For example, between the Nile Hilton Hotel and the Qasr El Dohara is the Omar Makram Mosque. Named after one of Egypt’s revolutionaries during the French occupation (1798–1801), Omar Makram Mosque was, with the Qasr El Dohara, used as a field hospital during the violent clashes of late 2011 (A. Said 2015, 352–53).

I conducted research for this book in three other major Egyptian cities. Mahalla, or Al Mahalla Al Kubra in Arabic, is a large industrial and agricultural city in Gharbiya Governorate in the Nile delta, with more than half

a million residents as of 2012. Mahalla witnessed what many considered to be a true rehearsal for the revolution when, in 2008, its textile workers attempted a general strike. Forceful suppression sparked mass riots and later the April 6 Youth Movement, named for the date of the aborted uprising. Suez (as-Suways in Arabic) is located on the north coast of the Gulf of Suez in northeastern Egypt. The first death of a protester in the 2011 revolution (Mostafa Ragab) occurred during the intense clashes there between January 25 and 27. These events galvanized revolutionary anger across Egypt. The third city is Alexandria (al-'Iskandariyya in Arabic), a Mediterranean port city that boasts Egypt's second-highest urban population. Alexandria was key in that it was the home of Khaled Said, the young Egyptian blogger whose torture and death in June 2010 was one of the primary catalysts for the revolution.

In each of these cities, a public square was a significant site of protest (Arbaeen Square in Suez, el-Shone in Mahalla, and Al Qaid Ibrahim Square and mosque in Alexandria), yet at none of these locales did protesters successfully stage a full encampment. The only attempt happened in Alexandria, where a camp at Masr Station Square (the site of the city's central rail station) lasted about two days. In my interview with activist Mara Salim (December 19, 2012), she explained:

There were many reasons activists thought it does not make sense to stage a sit-in in Alexandria. The first of these is that we do not have the same concentration of government complexes like Tahrir. So if we stage a sit-in, there will be no disruption of the state. The second reason is the geography of Alex[andria]. We have some big squares, but rallies were more important in Alexandria. It is a coastal city, the streets are long next to the Corniche, and rallies are more effective, as they make the revolution reach wider populations. Also, at the time of the revolution Alexandria was way colder than Cairo. If we camped, we would have been simply soaking wet from the rain. Also, Alex[andria] is still, despite its size, a relatively small city. There is no real need for a sit-in. You can protest all day and simply go home in fifteen to twenty minutes, unlike in Cairo, where it is perhaps more convenient to stay in one place versus commuting in horrible traffic.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, sheer numbers are one reason Cairo's protests were so much more successful. Cairo is not only the political capital of Egypt but also its most populous city, with some 10 percent of Egypt's 2011 population clustered there (8.5 million in 2011).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, a mass protest in Cairo can have huge effects. In an unpublished paper, Ellis Goldberg proposes that in the Arab

uprisings, capitals that could be considered “primate” cities were crucial: “That the capital is a primate city matters because it allows the possibility of rapidly assembled immense protests that paralyze the administrative and political life of a country. Generally speaking, the primate city is the largest city in a country and frequently contains between 10 percent and 25 percent of a country’s population” (2013, 3). The population of Cairo and the concentration of government buildings and centers of power in Tahrir Square made them excellent possible sites of revolution. The so-called million-person rallies that garnered significant domestic and international attention reinforced their primacy. These specific aspects contributed to the contingent factors that made the Tahrir repertoire, or the larger revolutionary repertoire, possible (A. Said 2022, 223).

*The Tahrir repertoire* refers to a set of available means innovated during the revolution in 2011, including occupying public space, forming a minirepublic that required many forms of organization, keeping the social media focus on Tahrir, and erecting barricades to police the space and protect this republic, as well as planning marches and rallies that ended in Tahrir Square. The ease with which we can identify these aspects of the revolutionary repertoire does not mean that the coexistence of these elements emerged easily or automatically. Indeed, one of this book’s goals is to highlight the risk and contingency of this process and so many others in relation to the battle for sovereignty, especially from early 2011 until the military coup on July 3, 2013. The question is why the alternative state in Tahrir did not expand the practice of sovereignty and the enforcement of liberation logics throughout the entire Egyptian territory. Similarly, barricades are also exceptionally critical in revolutionary times. Why did the Egyptian revolutionaries not symbolically, if not physically, extend the barricades erected around Tahrir to those erected elsewhere? Why was the main square not connected to factories and neighborhoods?

There are more puzzling questions. When Egyptians celebrated Mubarak’s resignation on February 11, 2011, how could they have trusted the military in that moment? Vice President Omar Suleiman’s announcement that Mubarak was transferring power to the military was an odd outcome to hail as a “victory” for a revolution. The army, a significant component of the state, was to “administer” the transition away from the regime of which it was a part and against which the revolution took place. This paradox calls for closer examination. Even if the average Egyptian trusted the military in 2011, how do we explain the fact that revolutionaries in Egypt were “fooled” again and trusted the military in 2013?



## This Book's Approach

My approach is based on what I call *lived contingency*. Let me explain what this means by starting with something one of my interviewees told me. He was a middle-aged man and defined himself as an independent Islamist. We spoke on November 2, 2012, and when I told him that I was conducting research about Tahrir Square and the Egyptian Revolution, he responded, “You should know this: *Every inch of Tahrir has a story, even many stories* [emphasis mine]. Nobody can claim that she or he is capable of collecting all these stories and presenting an accurate account of what happened in Tahrir.” His words served as a reminder of the enormous challenge I was already confronting. Despite my best efforts as an ethnographer who was present in Tahrir Square every day from February 4 until Mubarak was deposed on February 11, 2011, I simply cannot do justice to all the stories of Tahrir. This informant's words were with me while I was doing my research in Egypt, and then when I began organizing and analyzing the data back in the United States, as well as when I was writing my dissertation (2013–14), and they remain with me now.

If we juxtapose this interviewee's compelling insight with the idea of revolution as a multifaceted phenomenon with several competing essences (or a peculiar ontology or ontologies), my task would be almost impossible. For example, Tahrir Square meant a myriad of things in the context of the revolution (a site for protest, a central area for mobilization, an icon, or an embodiment of the revolutionary demands), but, most important, some saw it as an embodiment of revolutionary aspiration (idealist view), while others considered it the place where the revolution occurred, reduced to a geographic location, in line with the dominant reformist view of the revolution (pragmatist view). As I collected as many stories as possible about the revolution, I discovered that many revolutionary actors had differing stories about what happened in Tahrir Square, or what happened to the protesters themselves before the revolution. Despite my presence in Tahrir between February 4 and February 11, 2011, I cannot claim that I am capable of generalizing about what happened within the square itself in relation to the revolution.

According to Charles Kurzman (2009, 5), it is critical for scholars of revolutions to incorporate unpredictability and confusion among key actors in the revolution. He states, “Anti-explanation is an attempt to understand the experience of the revolution in all its anomalous diversity and confusion, and to abandon the mirage of retroactive predictability. Anti-explanation begins

by comparing the lived experiences of the event with the main explanations offered by studies of revolution” (5–6).

To grapple with these challenges, I turned to one of the most magical terms in historical sociological research: *contingency*. Ivan Ermakoff put forward one of the most useful theoretical elaborations of the concept, suggesting that contingency is indeterminacy and that “indeterminacy is an endogenous property of [historical] processes and conjuncture” (2015, 66). Against accidental or negative perceptions about contingency, Ermakoff proposes that we have to think of contingency in positive and concrete terms in relation to human agency (66) and argues that one of the key dimensions in contingency is mutual uncertainty between actors (100).

To see how this is useful for my inquiry, let us apply notions of contingency as indeterminacy and mutual uncertainty to a very concrete, empirical example from the Egyptian Revolution. One of the critical elements of the revolutionary situation, which perhaps shaped the entire revolutionary trajectory in Egypt, was the interaction between protesters and the military. Neil Ketchley (2017a, 47) examines what he describes as the repertoire of fraternization between protesters and the military during the revolutionary situation. Through a rich analysis, he provides an incisive interrogation of the protesters’ use of the famous chant “The people and the army are one hand.” While most of Ketchley’s analysis of fraternization focused on its performative side, he did not overlook aspects of the political side of the story, namely, that from the protesters’ point of view, fraternization was a political move that aimed to win the sympathy of the military through actions such as welcoming the tanks (53). Such actions also had the immediate goal of neutralizing the army at that moment.

But fraternization was only one side of the story. Evidence demonstrates that the relationship between the protesters and the military was also characterized by power testing and was never static. As soon as they realized that the first armored military vehicles arriving at Tahrir, belonging to the Republican Guard, were carrying extra weaponry for the police and were intended to protect the Ministry of the Interior, protesters set them on fire. Protesters also drew graffiti on military tanks cursing the commander in chief, Mubarak, and slept under the tanks to stop them from encroaching on Tahrir. While it is accurate to suggest that protesters performed fraternization toward the military, the relationship between revolutionaries and the military on the ground was full of tension and constituted by mutual uncertainties. In my own ethnographic research in Tahrir, I heard again and again from my interlocutors that the military was like a black box, as they did not know what to expect from it during the uprising. Protesters’ speculations about

the army varied from day to day until the army clearly distanced itself from Mubarak on February 10, 2011, convening an emergency meeting of the high command without his presence as the ostensible commander in chief.<sup>6</sup> Before February 10, 2011, and especially in the first few days after January 28, 2011, soldiers around Tahrir were begging protesters to stop climbing on the military tanks. I saw this not as a simple practice of fraternization but also possibly as a symbolic power contest about who had ultimate sovereignty in Tahrir. Especially in chapters 2 and 3, I demonstrate how the relation between the two parties was characterized by mutual skepticism and testing of power, and intense and impromptu negotiations over zones of influence and the practice of sovereignty, especially in Tahrir Square but also around barricades in important neighborhoods in key urban centers.

Mutual uncertainty between protesters and the military is but one example of many such indeterminate interactions during the revolution. *Lived contingency* refers to how revolutionary actors practice and experience the revolution, particularly in terms of the actions they do or do not take in relation to the possibilities, unpredictabilities, and practices of power during the course of a revolution. One can argue that contingency only refers to uncertainties and unpredictabilities from the point of view of revolutionary actors. But as I demonstrate in the following pages, *contingency* has a positive connotation as well: experiencing a sense of open possibilities, even while being bold but naive about what is the right action to take in relation to these possibilities. Lived contingency is not limited to the context of a revolutionary crisis, when the revolution is at its peak, but is also relevant during the fluid postrevolutionary context, or the *revolutionary trajectory*, to use the terminology proposed by the authors of *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001a). I am proposing here that lived contingency matters throughout the entire revolutionary process, from the revolutionary crisis until a decisive outcome takes place, due to the fluctuating politics of this period before new revolutionary institutions are formed, including continuations of the struggle for sovereignty. I now elaborate on three critical aspects of lived contingency: *agential*, *spatial*, and *radical and/or uncalculated unbounding*.

### Agential Contingency

In revolutions many transformations happen in a short window of time, as vividly expressed in Vladimir Lenin's famous phrase "There are weeks when decades happen."<sup>7</sup> This puts revolutionary actors in challenging positions in

which they have to make choices. Actors have “inner states” to make sense of macro processes around them, as put powerfully by Charles Kurzman (2004). He proposes that these inner states include “the broadest possible range of mental structures and processes, among them preference structures, motivations, and emotions” (329). I examine how actors in the Egyptian Revolution made (or failed to make) choices during the course of the revolution.<sup>8</sup> One of the most puzzling stories that I aim to investigate is how Egyptian citizens—revolutionaries and nonrevolutionaries alike—became both executive authorities and agents of revolution without realizing it and how they experienced ambivalence about their role and about power during the revolution. I examine this closely in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

### Spatial Contingency

A key component of revolutionary agency is how actors experience, appropriate, and remake spaces. Two decades ago, leading scholars of contention such as William Sewell Jr. and Charles Tilly alerted us to attend to the salient meaning of spaces as well as the symbolic and material dimensions of spaces in movements and revolutions. As Sewell (2001, 65) suggests, “While insurgent movements make sure of the preexisting meanings of places, they can also—either intentionally or unintentionally—transform the significance of protest locations.” Tilly (2000, 135) has suggested that spaces of contention are textured. It follows, then, that revolutionary spaces are extraordinarily textured. Analyzing Tahrir Square during the revolution, anthropologist Hanan Sabea (2013) states that the everydayness of the revolution “was spatially marked by the carving out of the space of the ‘midan’ (the square) and the regulation of entry at its multiple check-points.” My interlocutors and interviewees shared numerous stories about particular places in Cairo and how they experienced them. Along with Tahrir, other sites gained symbolic status in the revolution and its aftermath. The Qasr El Nile Bridge was a symbol of revolutionary victory because a famous battle took place there on January 28, 2011. Cairo’s Zeinhom morgue, where martyrs were taken in many instances, became a symbol of the counterrevolution’s victory. Some places, like Abbāsīyah Square, were associated with revolution for some people, and for others with counterrevolution. Human agency always takes space personally, as Edward Soja (2009, 16) puts it. It follows, then, that spaces that connote things like hope, death, and despair are perhaps extraordinarily personal.

During a revolution the assumed difference between place, as a physical location, and space, as a meaning and an idea, no longer makes sense. Sociologists Frances Hasso and Zakia Salime demonstrate how the making and remaking of spaces in revolutions “occur through use (everyday and extraordinary encounters; barricades and checkpoints), memory (of massacres, street battles, sexual assaults, major mobilizations), representations (graffiti, aesthetics, poems, songs, sartorial practices), and Facebook and Twitter wars. This dynamism, emergence, and multiplicity are difficult to control” (2016, 6). Revolutionary actors give new meaning to spaces, such as associating them with victories or defeats, challenging established dichotomies between space and place, and navigating the overwhelming complexities and multiplicities of spaces and their meaning.

### Radical and/or Uncalculated Unbounding

Over and over again, my interlocutors shared with me that they were willing to die or felt they had only one choice: to continue their mission. Many told me that they felt like they were on a mythical and persistent mission but without any more specific purpose than achieving freedom or justice. I could not reckon with what this meant at the time, as I was overwhelmed myself. One interlocutor—a thirty-year-old male and self-identified Revolutionary Socialist—said:

When Tahrir protesters started the sit-in on January 28, 2011, at night, they did not have any other choice. At the time, there was the Mubarak regime and his security apparatus (which seemed to be defeated at the time) on one side, and protesters have this [liberated] square on the other. If we would have left the square, we would have been killed. The protesters will be repressed worse than they were before. We saw it very well in the days from January 25 to January 28 (until late afternoon), when Mubarak and his security apparatus did nothing but arrest leading activists and kill protesters. At the time, we could not think of any big strategies, we just tried to save ourselves and save the uprising. If we could die outside the square anyway, why not die here, for the sake of the uprising? (February 8, 2011)

Many others expressed this same kind of sentiment. One could argue that not all protesters were willing to die, of course, although it is a fact that official documentation suggests that about 846 protesters were killed during the uprising, and about 6,400 people were injured (BBC News 2011). This uprising

was deemed peaceful and nonviolent by most observers and analysts. But as I argue and demonstrate in the pages to come, Egyptian revolutionaries not only risked their lives during the revolution but engaged in many spontaneous and uncalculated radical actions that do not happen often in normal political circumstances. These included carrying weapons, even if these were light weaponry; arresting other citizens; arresting police officers; marching in rallies for several hours for distances of up to nine or more miles; storming the headquarters of the State Security Intelligence; resisting the formation of a constitutional assembly; launching a national campaign for citizens to directly draft the constitution; or marching to parliament and asking parliament members to seize power. In this spirit Kurzman suggests that all protests, particularly in revolutions, are “unruly,” or “collective actions that do not obey the rules of social behavior, and that do not obey the rules of social science” (2017, 185). He continues, “It is unruly to stand in front of armored personnel carriers and demand that the commander in chief resign? It is unruly to hold up a sign demanding freedom, in a place where people who have held up signs demanding freedom often lose their freedom as a result? These actions are not necessarily raucous or disruptive—although they may be—but they are unruly in the sense that they violate the norms of routine behavior” (185).

When I asked many of my interlocutors what happened to them during the revolution, several told me they were never political before but unexpectedly became radicalized because of specific things they witnessed or saw during these moments. A sixty-year-old mother told me, “The last thing I could have ever imagined is to be part of this, but because I knew that my twenty-year-old daughter was in danger, and I could not stop her, I went to check on her in Tahrir.” She continued, “In the early morning hours of what is now known as the Camel Battle [February 2] I became enraged. After that I started to go to Tahrir every day and bring cooked meals for protesters” (interview, October 12, 2012).<sup>9</sup> Another interlocutor I talked to several times during the revolution shared a similar story. He happened to be from Sinai but was living in Cairo. He was not political before the revolution, but something magical happened to him when he saw a specific scene on TV. The scene was aired on Al Jazeera and many other outlets, showing riot police directing water cannons at protesters at close range during what was later known as the Qasr El Nile Bridge battle, on January 28, 2011. During that intense battle, which lasted for more than two hours, protesters decided to pray in an attempt to take a breather, hoping that the riot police would stop shooting and beating them. Instead, the riot police opened heavy water cannons on them. My

interlocutor told me he became angry like never before and decided that he now had a new life (or death) mission, that he was following a calling. This idea of a calling was repeated by many of my interlocutors. One interviewee told me that since the revolution and what he experienced on January 28, 2011, he “felt like [he] was developing a new faith during the day, and its name was the revolution” (November 10, 2012).

In short, many told me that they were almost enchanted by the revolution. One other common sentiment I also kept hearing over and over was “Anything is better than what we have now.” It is difficult to reconcile that a person is willing to die for the revolution and at the same time not very worried about the revolution’s outcome, as they truly believe that nothing could be worse than the present. I tried to reframe this idea in concrete terms related to contingency, the role of agency, and collective action, as any good sociologist/ethnographer ought to do. A lazy critic would conclude that these people were stupid, as they did not care whether the revolution was successful. However, the revolutionary actors I talked to in Tahrir did not completely overlook the question of outcome. They cared quite a lot about the outcome, but they also believed that any outcome would be better than what they had at the time. They did not have any way to measure whether or not a revolution was successful.

I began this discussion to explain what I mean by the third element of living a revolutionary contingency. I describe this as a case of radical or uncalculated unbounding of revolutionary actors, by which I mean how revolutionary actors lose many commitments to the normal, everyday concerns of work, career, family, loved ones, and the future.<sup>10</sup> Or, rather, because of a very dear attachment to these issues, revolutionary actors become willing to take the highest risk of all, to die to make things better on these fronts.<sup>11</sup> In some sense, these issues take on some existential meaning and connotations. Radical or uncalculated unbounding means that an actor is willing to die, feeling that they are undertaking a mythical mission for freedom.<sup>12</sup>

In hindsight, it is clear that actors in the Egyptian Revolution made some major mistakes, such as not considering seizing power and not developing a clear plan for the transfer of power, among other things. After all, in the established literature, revolutions have to lead to complete transformations of state and society to earn this title. In the same vein, to be a revolutionary means one must be capable of and successful at making this transformation.

Throughout this book I demonstrate that it is conceptually accurate to stipulate that revolutionaries are those who claim and seize power to make change. But I also argue that it is equally fair and accurate to acknowledge

that part of being a revolutionary actor in the ethnographic sense is experiencing the revolution and taking part in it, with all its uncertainties, unpredictabilities, and unlimited possibilities. Perhaps Egyptian actors were not revolutionary enough, because their revolution did not succeed. This is the stance of the established, teleological meaning of being revolutionary. I propose that a revolutionary is someone who deeply cares about a successful outcome but also someone who lives and relishes, even if painfully, the process of the revolution.

Lived contingency is at the extreme end of a spectrum with teleological analysis at the other pole. The latter focuses on what seems to *happen finally*, discounting other happenings to focus on this sole outcome. The lived contingency approach investigates those happenings but situates them within other possibilities. Between these two approaches, one can imagine different degrees of empirical analysis that focus on what happened and why this happened. *Degrees* here refers to how thickly or poorly the collected data reflect what happened in a complex event such as a revolution, and how far the analysis is tied to theory and brings new findings, rather than focusing only on discrete one-sided data collection to prove a one-sided causal relation.

### Settling the Unsettled?

I now tackle how neither scholars nor Egyptians agree on a single narrative for the revolution and further discuss why attempting to present a single definition of revolution is perhaps not a viable project, as it imposes uniformity and coherence on an object that resists any standardization.

#### The Egyptian Revolution's Identity Crisis

Since the very first protest of January 25, 2011, Egyptians have not ceased debating and reflecting on the revolution. In 2016 the political writer Mohamed Naeem called on fellow Egyptian activists and revolutionaries to reflect on what had happened since 2011 but, most important, advised them to acknowledge that *there is no unifying narrative about the uprising*. This advice has been critical to me while writing these pages. Indeed, narratives about the uprising have been as diverse as the individuals and groups who participated in it, as Naeem writes, and the supposedly organized political forces were themselves



contradictory. Among the major challenges of assessing what happened in Egypt in 2011 and its aftermath are the intense and polarized debates around what the revolution was about in the first place. The revolutionaries disagree not only on the ultimate goals or the temporal boundaries of the revolution but also about where it took place, the critical spaces in which revolutionary or postrevolutionary actions unfolded—streets, ballots, negotiations behind closed doors, and digital spaces among them. What’s more, different groups have defined the counterrevolution differently, and key actors have constantly changed positions across revolutionary and counterrevolutionary coalitions.

Even if we agreed that political Islamists and liberals were coherent and had one static vision of the revolution, which is not the case, most of the leaders of both camps seemed to want only democratic reform (procedural democracy with free markets and free elections) with some facade of the state being identified as civil/secular or Islamic. Neither objected to the military’s control of events in Egypt (see chapter 5).<sup>13</sup>

Taking this wisdom into consideration, it is useful to dig deeper into what can be described as the Egyptian Revolution’s identity crisis. Leftist writer Hani Shukrallah (2017) superbly states that “among the shortcomings of the Egyptian revolution is a tendency to faulty self-perception caused by a certain color-blindness: a deeply red revolution that sees itself as orange.” The color red here indicates the radical social demands of the revolution, and the color orange indicates the dominance of limited democratic reforms—a formulation that ties the uprising to the revolutions of eastern Europe. Shukrallah clarifies that by “red” he does not mean a socialist revolution but rather the way the social composition of the uprising, as well as its demands for democracy, destined it to clash with the entire capitalist class in Egypt, which is neither capable of nor even interested in democracy. One might argue that Shukrallah, a leftist Marxist, believes that social or socialist revolutions are the only true revolutions. However, the meaning of a social revolution versus a political revolution has never been settled.

About three weeks after Mubarak was deposed, another political writer, Hosni Abdelrehim, wrote that “revolutions start with deposing a tyrant, but they never end until they establish a new order” (2011, 59–60). And only two days after Mubarak’s ouster, economic writer Wael Gamal (2011a) suggested that the consensus among the contradictory social forces—which made the revolution possible—was very limited and exceptional. Once Mubarak was ousted, “the social struggle between these forces was open.” Soon after ousting

Mubarak, the SCAF and its allies, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal elites, agreed that the social demands should be sidelined and the wheel of production should continue while institutional democracy making took place. Workers' protests did not stop until 2013, and workers' strikes were sometimes attacked with armored vehicles and military tanks.

While analyses were pronouncing that the revolution had already succeeded, or that it was over, Egyptian revolutionaries were still organizing in the streets and storming the headquarters of the State Security Intelligence in Alexandria and Cairo on March 3 and 5, respectively, of 2011 (El Raggal 2019). As I put it with Pete Moore elsewhere, "To the ears of a North American op-ed audience, Arabs waking up in 2011 to demand 'democracy' fit accepted Middle Eastern tropes," and "protesters have been asking for quite some time the important question: democracy for what and democracy for who?" (A. Said and Moore 2021). In short, as I show in chapters 4 and 5, social struggles were a central part of the story and of the momentum shifts throughout the period from 2011 to 2013.

Let me be guided by Naeem's caution while situating this study within the scholarship on the Egyptian Revolution, a literature so immense that it is impossible to cover in these pages. For the purposes of this book, however, it is important to discuss two key terms, *revolutionary situation* and *revolutionary outcome*, which recur throughout. Tilly (1993, 10) defines a revolutionary situation as a moment that has three elements:

1. Appearance of contenders, or coalitions of contenders, advancing exclusive competing claims to control of the state, or some segments of it,
2. Commitment to those claims by a significant segment of the citizenry, and
3. Incapacity or unwillingness of rulers to suppress the alternative coalition and/or commitment to its claims.

Later, Tilly added that a revolutionary situation requires that one of the new emerging centers of power commands "a significant coercive force." He states, "A full revolution combines two elements: a revolutionary situation and a revolutionary outcome. In a revolutionary situation, at least two centers of power emerge, each of them commanding significant coercive force and each of them claiming exclusive control over the state. In a revolutionary outcome, a transfer of power over the state occurs such that a largely new group of people begins to rule" (2008, 126–27). Jack Goldstone (2009) similarly argues for a disaggregated understanding of revolutions, coining the term *revolutionary*

*suite* to highlight the significance of three factors: (1) elite defection and the formation of opposition, (2) polarization and coalition building, and (3) mass mobilization. Where Goldstone puts more emphasis on elite defection and coalition building, Tilly stipulates that contenders must seize control of the state and command “significant coercive force.”

The case of the Egyptian Revolution is challenging when applying Tilly’s seemingly narrow definition of *revolutionary situation*. Egyptian revolutionaries did not seek to control the state, and while they did seem to command force (defined simply here as aspects of policing), this was limited to certain areas, such as Tahrir Square (and the barricades around it) and the neighborhood committees. The Egyptian Revolution may also fall short of Goldstone’s formula in terms of the presence of elite defection. If we interpret *elite* narrowly as referring to people working within the regime, then Egypt did not witness such defection. Others might argue that the military’s decision to distance itself from Mubarak was a major defection that weakened the regime and created its severe crisis. Goldstone himself defines *elite* broadly to include many members of the upper class such as politicians, intellectuals, and professionals, not just state officials and military leaders.

Combining elements of Tilly’s and Goldstone’s formulations, I suggest that Egypt did, indeed, constitute a revolutionary situation that presented the following:

1. Presence of an acute regime crisis, with some elite defection, along with the regime’s inability or unwillingness to control the state or suppress the opposition
2. Formation of an opposition with strong coalitions that challenged state power
3. Presence of mass mobilization that supported the revolutionary forces (the opposition)

What about the revolutionary outcome? Conceivably, political outcomes of revolution could include any of the following: a dictator flees; a dictator abdicates power; a new revolutionary government is formed; the military takes over; a presidential council is formed; revolutionary guards are formed, and/or a revolutionary militia rules for a while; and/or the state collapses, with or without plans by the revolutionaries to seize power and restructure the state.

The literature on revolution presumes that *outcome* refers mostly to the general cases of “success” (broadly speaking, the revolutionaries take over) or “failure” (failing to do so) (see Foran and Goodwin 1993). A significant part of the challenge in analyzing the Egyptian case through these terms is that it has

been messy: not only did the revolutionaries fail to take power, but the military acted as if it was siding with the revolution, albeit with counterrevolutionary aims. There were also a number of tricky issues, such as the military coup in 2013. The latter is at once interesting and confusing because it seemed like a popularly supported coup, which the military and counterrevolutionary forces dared to call a new revolution. These are all examples of specific empirical challenges in analyzing the Egyptian case.

Now let us see how some notable works have dealt with these issues in the Egyptian case. At the risk of some simplification, one could argue that there are three camps. The first camp favors a narrow definition of the revolutionary situation, defined here as the period of the revolutionary crisis and understood as the eighteen days of the revolution, from January 25 to February 11. A key example here is Ketchley (2017a). Asef Bayat's "refolution" thesis would also fit here, even though he does not use the term *revolutionary situation*. He prefers the notion of revolution as movement, in contrast to revolutionary change, which is analogous to the outcome in the standard literature.<sup>14</sup>

The second camp could be described as analyzing an extended revolutionary situation or long revolutionary situation (e.g., El-Ghobashy 2021; Holmes 2019). In her important analysis of the Egyptian Revolution, Mona El-Ghobashy thoughtfully suggested that the revolutionary situation in Egypt lasted until the coup in 2013 or perhaps until January 2014, when the military decided to explicitly back Sisi's candidacy for presidency. The reason is that this three-year period witnessed a continued struggle for sovereignty. This is an insightful and persuasive claim. Holmes argued that Egypt's revolution went through three major waves of mobilization: against Mubarak in 2011, against the SCAF with a peak of mobilization in January 2012 and throughout 2012, and against Morsi in 2013.<sup>15</sup> This thoughtful formulation has been popular among many Egyptian revolutionaries—including myself—and I only later realized my mistake. I was mistaken, as I demonstrate in chapter 5, because the mobilization for the coup included two contradictory forces: actors from the January Revolution who thought that this new wave of mobilization was an extension of the original revolution and would end up building a new civil republic, and some forces from the old regime. The military and the deep state were part of manipulating the events, as proven later.

The third camp is best exemplified by the works of Gilbert Achcar (2013) and Maha Abdelrahman (2014), who both suggest that the Egyptian case is a long revolutionary process. Not only do they both rightly suggest that it is impossible to separate the social from the political in the Egyptian case—with

which I fully agree—but they also suggest that these tensions would not be resolved in the short term. I believe that the latter makes good sense as well because it takes into account how the revolution was a series of contentious conflicts and revolved around the entanglement of political and social issues, which have been decisive factors in shaping the troubled revolutionary trajectory.

My analysis in the pages to follow is closer to the second and the third camps. It is closer to the second (extended revolutionary situation) because that camp rightly highlights the fluid political struggle for sovereignty over a long period from 2011 to 2013, and perhaps shortly afterward (El-Ghobashy 2021). It is also close to and overlaps with the third camp (long revolutionary process) in its affirmation that it is a major mistake to overlook the social grievances underpinning the political struggle in Egypt's revolution. My own research has been enlightened by the work of these respected scholars. Yet it also differs from theirs in various respects. First, it centers revolutionary actors' role and experience, on the ground, and how they thought about matters such as the struggle to seize power and viewed the state and the regime as they evolved over time (specifically from 2011 to 2013). My approach, guided by the notion of lived contingency, demonstrates how those actors experienced a long chain of indeterminacies and unpredictabilities and made sense of possibilities and containments throughout this period. Second, it provides a temporally sensitive account of the counterrevolution in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Third, it provides a grounded historicization of the revolution over a long span (from 2000 to 2015).

I interrogate four phases of the revolution: the decade prior to the revolution (prelude to revolutionary possibilities), the period of the revolutionary crisis (peak revolutionary possibilities), the so-called transition to democracy (the waning of revolutionary possibilities, combined with counterrevolutionary coercion), and the events of the military coup in July 2013 (which I describe as the destitution of revolutionary possibilities). I argue that each phase was characterized by unique conjunctures of indeterminacies, mutual uncertainties, and sometimes crisscrossing and overlapping uncertainties between the pro-democracy opposition and the Mubarak regime, followed by the intervening political regimes in the postrevolutionary period, until the military takeover in 2013. I argue that indeterminacies and mutual uncertainties have been *spatialized*. These uncertainties created a dialectical leverage for both the regimes and the opposition, where each party could claim political gravity/sovereign control in the form of temporarily seizing

the upper hand in one or more of these spaces: formal political space, street political space, and digital space. Through an analysis that centers lived contingency, I argue that a true understanding of indeterminacies insinuates that revolutionary actors are open to different possibilities and outcomes and not preoccupied with certain outcomes.

To demonstrate briefly why an approach that centers contingency is needed in this messy case, let us see how this analysis differs from the first camp, which is the one that I diverge from the most. I will start with Ketchley, who provides a rich event analysis of the revolution and its aftermath. He describes his approach as follows: “a conjunctural and interactive account of the 25th January Revolution and the post-Mubarak political process, grounding my explanation in a series of relationships: between collective violence and nonviolent activism, protestors and security forces, elections and contentious collective action, elites and street protest movements, and repression and mass mobilization. In doing so, I show how a relational ontology can be employed to interrogate several key assumptions of the literature on civil resistance, emotions, democratization, authoritarian retrenchment, and repression” (2017a, 9).

Ketchley’s engagement with the literature is very clever, especially in relation to issues of violence/nonviolence and coalitions during elections in the aftermath of the revolution. But the most interesting and novel contribution is his thesis of fraternization between the military and protesters. Ketchley also provides many sharp observations, such as how “revolutionary aspirations were efficiently harnessed and redeployed on 30 June 2013” (2017a, 6). In spite of all these strengths, one of the key problems in this analysis is the examination of these contentious episodes from 2011 to 2013 separately from one another but also frequently separate from the revolution itself. Most important, despite the rich event analysis of the revolution and the political process in its aftermath, including a series of mobilizations and countermobilizations, one cannot see where these (seemingly) isolated events fit within the contingencies of revolution *and* counterrevolution. In short, many of these events are ambiguous in relation to the original eighteen days.

I turn now to Bayat, giving his argument more attention because of its sophistication. Bayat suggests that the Egyptian Revolution was neither “revolution in the sense of the twentieth-century experiences (i.e., rapid and radical transformation of the state pushed by popular movements from below) nor simply reform (i.e., gradual and managed change carried out often from above and within the existing structural arrangements)” (2017, 17–18). The Egyptian Revolution—like the Tunisian and Yemeni uprisings—was,

according to Bayat, a “refolution,” which refers to “revolutionary movements that emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves, to carry out meaningful reform on behalf of the revolution” (18).

The term *refolution* was coined by British historian Timothy Garton Ash in his analysis of the events in Hungary and Poland in 1989.<sup>17</sup> The notion of refolution has been taken up and variously defined by a number of authors. Goldstone (2009, 19) emphasizes that it is a type of democratic revolution in which changes are limited to electoral reforms, while Jeff Goodwin (2001, 260) defines refolution as negotiated reform and specifically suggests that refolutions result from collaboration between reformist movements and factions of old Communist parties (see also Lawson 2017). Both specifically discuss the concept in relation to the eastern European revolutions of 1989. Bayat (2017), in contrast, discusses the concept in the context of the Arab uprisings.

Thus, it seems that there is no consensus about what *refolution* means. I propose that it is crucial to distinguish between three different definitions of a refolution: (1) a revolt that is motivated by and includes calls for political and electoral reform, (2) a revolt that is based on negotiated reform that mostly takes place between reformist movements and factions of the old regime, and (3) a revolt that ends with factions of the old regime leading the transition. These subtle differences can have huge impacts on the outcomes of a given uprising. Some of the three criteria existed in Egypt, with notable variance. For instance, there was no negotiated reform; perhaps only the Muslim Brotherhood was seriously engaged in negotiations with Mubarak during the uprising. But the most important element was that the uprising ended with the military seizing power. People celebrated after Mubarak’s resignation speech, delivered by his vice president, Omar Suleiman. In some sense, February 11 was both a military coup and a transition imposed by the military (with international support). That it was celebrated by Egyptians as a revolutionary victory complicates the picture.

Bayat’s take on refolution is useful in certain aspects. First, it accurately points to the most central paradox of the revolution: having a force of the old regime managing the transition to “democracy.”<sup>18</sup> Second, it highlights some of the structural limitations of the uprising, including an essentially conservative global context that opposed radical change, and the ways that most revolutionaries in the Arab Spring “were rich in tactics of mobilization but poor in vision and strategy of transformation; they adopted loose, flexible, and horizontal organization but one that suffered from fragmentation; they espoused civil opposition but overlooked the danger of restoration; they

were concerned more with democracy, human rights, and rule of law than reallocation of property and distributive justice” (Bayat 2017, 18).

However, my twofold critique of Bayat is not only of his forceful claim that the Egyptian Revolution was about recognition more than redistribution (something I critique in chapter 4) but also of the teleological nature of his argument—limiting his analysis to what happened on February 11, 2011—in addition to the fact that he downplays the role of counterrevolutions. From the perspective of contingency, Bayat seems to present a case of predestined outcome (what happened on February 11) and ignores the possibilities that presumably existed before this date. Put differently, it is not clear whether the Egyptian revolution was born as a revolution or became one on February 11, 2011. Both cases are problematic. The first is problematic because it ignores the possibilities that existed during the uprising but also seemingly presumes the homogeneity of revolutionary actors: they are all “revolutionaries” in this case, perhaps. But Bayat (2017, 25) himself was explicit about the variety of classes that participated in the revolution. But through the focus on the idea that the uprising “emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves” (18), it seems that Bayat is indicating that Egyptian revolution became such on February 11, 2011. This is problematic because it assumes a final closure of the events on that day. Bayat also does not explain why the state (the military) decided to make reforms, if the uprising did not reach a revolutionary situation in the first place and was only a movement. According to his analysis, events in Egypt in 2011, 2012, and 2013 all were revolutions, without any difference. In short, Bayat’s analysis is rich in discussing the limits of the revolution, while not giving proper attention to its possibilities. Most important, he downplays the role of counterrevolution. Bayat states, “The question is not whether the counterrevolution was responsible for stalling or hijacking the Arab revolutions; all revolutions carry within themselves the germs of counterrevolutionary intrigues. The question is whether the revolutions were revolutionary enough to offset the perils of restoration” (16).

Not only does Bayat not provide us with any satisfactory analysis of counterrevolution, but he also assumes that it is a given or static thing, born within the revolution with the goals of restoration.<sup>19</sup> One cannot deny that Egyptian revolutionaries made many mistakes, including overlooking the vicious nature of counterrevolution and being naive about the true aims of the military. However, the key problem here is not that he puts the blame mainly on the side of the revolutionaries but that he assumes that the relation between revolution and counterrevolution is static and happens in a vacuum, and the question of momentum almost does not exist.



## Defining Revolutions?

A challenging anonymous reviewer asked me to define *revolution*. That has proven to be an extremely difficult and interesting task, as one cannot separate the definition of *revolution* from the changing knowledge about the concept. Yet this question has helped me to clarify how I approached the Egyptian Revolution. There are at least two reasons it is extremely difficult to define *revolution*, despite the bounty of definitions in the scholarly library. The first is what I describe as the problem of the peculiar ontology (or ontologies) of revolution, meaning the fact that revolution has many competing essences. Scholars and theorists have attempted to answer the question of revolution's essence by suggesting that revolutions should be understood in terms of dualities. One way is to look at revolutions as aspirations (for a desired ideal or better society by idealists) and as reality (how it actually happened or how pragmatist actors made it work). In this duality, there would be a tension between idealistic revolutionary actors and pragmatic revolution actors. Another duality is looking at revolution as an emancipatory project, or liberatory experience, and as a totalizing experience (Lawson 2019, 16). In this sense, successful revolutions can lead to an emancipatory society, but they also have the potential to pave the way to an autocratic regime (such as in France in the early 1800s and possibly Iran a few years after the Iranian Revolution in 1979). A third way is to look at revolution as a movement or as a change (Bayat 2017, 15), which speaks, with some slight difference, to the established terminology of *revolutionary situation* and *revolutionary outcome*. Of course, these dualities overlap in any given revolution. In reality, certain actors who seem to adopt one perspective may change their position over time. I argue that these multifaceted realities of revolutions create tensions that could coexist, overlap, and change all the time. This creates an enormous challenge for scholars of revolutions, for all these dimensions matter and shape the making and the trajectory of revolutions. No matter how sophisticated one scholar's analysis is, they will never be able to present a comprehensive account of what happened or what is relevant in a revolution.<sup>20</sup> The peculiar ontology (or ontologies) of revolution is the first main challenge of defining revolutions.

The second is the continual change in the meaning and practice of revolutions, leading to new paradigms to make sense of them and their changes. Revolutions have happened throughout history, and they continue to happen. The production of knowledge around revolutions is constantly trying to keep

up with revolutions (see Beck 2018; Goldstone 2003; Kumar 2007). Scholars have distinguished among premodern revolts, revolutions that created what we describe as modernity, and revolutions in the postmodern world. Other distinctions have included social/classical or political and anticolonialist or third world revolutions and revolutions in the late-capitalist or neoliberal era. Thus, we are dealing with a moving object. Indeed, some major claims are made in the literature, for example, that the age of social/classical revolutions is over. While this is a reasonable claim that could be supported by evidence, it is also problematic because it presumes some primacy of classical revolutions as a category, and it also implicitly invokes end-of-history arguments. In today's world, more than at any previous time in history, revolutions and counterrevolutions have become a global phenomenon. Thus, a more reasonable concept that exists in the literature today is that revolutions have not become obsolete, yet their meaning is changing.

This is why I argue that it is not easy or even viable to present a new definition of revolutions. Yet I believe that the classic definition proposed by Theda Skocpol is still relevant and useful insofar as it rightly highlights that the real issues at stake in revolutions are states and classes. Skocpol defines social revolutions as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below” (1979, 4). Skocpol famously distinguished between political revolutions, which entail a change in state institutions, and social revolutions, which entail a change in both state institutions and social structure. If defining revolutions today is an impossible task, a more feasible one is to present some parameters or theses about understanding revolutions today. The following are four theses that guided my thinking in this book.

The first is that the terms *revolutionary situation* and *revolutionary outcome* are critical and still matter in our understanding of revolutions. They matter because they tell us about the moment of revolutionary explosion and about the revolution’s supposed fate, or, to use the positivist terminology, the origins or causes and outcomes of revolutions. But while these remain critical, it is important not to treat them as technical jargon, without giving sufficient attention to why a certain situation would lead to an outcome. Indeed, there seems to be a problem in the canonical literature, which emphasizes successful revolutions. As Goldstone (1998a) and the authors of *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001b) famously argue, there are many overlaps among collective action, social movements, and revolutions: “Successful revolutions share some characteristics with social movements, rebellions, failed revolutions and cycles of protest” (194).

The second thesis relates to the broader context of the current neoliberal global order or neoliberal capitalism. It is impossible to do justice to this broad context in a brief discussion like this, but I echo scholars (Armbrust 2018; Bayat 2017, 20; Kutay 2022) who maintain that neoliberal capitalism has contradictory effects on revolutions. By *contradictory effects*, I mean that neoliberal capitalism enables revolutions and also works to contain them. On the one hand, neoliberal globalization increases poverty and inequality, enables corruption and cronyism, and sponsors police brutality and racism. Thus, it motivates revolts. On the other hand, neoliberal globalization is complex, cutting through many levels in any given society and worldwide. It appropriates radical thinking and action, commodifies revolutionary ideas, and has been internalized by neoliberal subjects. It is important to attend to both dimensions—the enabling and the limiting—in our analyses and not to focus on one at the expense of the other. I also argue it is almost analytically impossible to compare the enabling factors of neoliberalism with its appropriating and damaging effects when one is studying revolutions. Yet we must acknowledge both effects in our research and do our best to attend to both aspects in our analysis.

The third thesis relates to the established wisdom in the literature about the dichotomy of social revolution and political revolution. Whether we agree with the statement that the age of great social revolutions is over (Drescher 1992)—a statement that I see as laden with modernization theory thinking and perhaps entailing an underlying acquiescence to the end-of-history thesis—and regardless of why we have taken this established dichotomy for granted for years, I argue that the social dimensions of revolutions and their political aspects have become more intertwined than ever, because neoliberalism does not work without the facilitation and support of political regimes. The very idea of the disappearance of the role of the state under free markets is erroneous. The state regulates and/or deregulates, and enables heavy policing and repression, for the sake of the markets and profits. This has been the case with the Mubarak regime and continues to be the case under the current military rule in Egypt. The social and political aspects have been more intertwined than ever because revolutions and counterrevolutions have become transnational processes in which many global actors are involved, reflecting arrays of politics, economies, and conflicts about social ways of living. One good example of these issues is transnational repression and the way counterrevolutions became regional and transnational in the context of the Arab Spring (see Allinson 2022; Lawson 2015b; Moss 2016). Recent critical democratization analy-

ses affirm that democratization won't work or succeed without categorical equality. It is also not possible to progress without a global environment that supports and contributes to sustaining democracy, not containing or limiting it to the most superficial levels of procedural democracy under a free market. In the context of the erosion of liberal democracy as we know it (see Brown 2015; Castells 2018), even in the most established democratic nations, it becomes all the more difficult to conceive of a successful democratization process in developing nations.

The fourth and last thesis is that revolutions do not follow paradigms but contribute to creating new paradigms, waiting for this newly created paradigm to be dismantled. By *paradigms*, I refer to theoretical and analytical frameworks that are used in scholarly disciplines to analyze social phenomena. One could argue that only a successful revolution can earn this name and can create a paradigm, an important discussion that I cannot resolve in these pages. Here I agree with Mohammed Bamyeh and Sari Hanafi, who remind us that “revolutions are opportunities to learn something new. The worst analytical insult to a revolution is to use it as an opportunity to apply mechanically an existing theory or model” (2015, 343). Similarly, sociologists Frances Hasso and Zakia Salime observe that “revolutions fit uneasily within totalizing ideology, strategy, theory or method” (2016, 6). Charles Kurzman (2009, 5) famously argued against explanations, calling them retroactive predictions. Jack Goldstone (2014, 6) notably suggests that revolutions are like earthquakes—we cannot predict them with any precision. The only thing social scientists can do is to gain new knowledge and improve their analyses for the future. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the age of volcanic or explosive and radical revolutions is over. The idea here is that classical revolutions are radical and violent (and explosive) and postmodern or contemporary revolutions are not. Yet I would like to distinguish between the idea of revolutions being explosive as an analytic model and the description of revolutions being explosive as a historical argument.<sup>21</sup> The distinction is useful analytically. Nevertheless, given the excessive global militarization and the police violence that has become almost a global norm, it is difficult to imagine that at least some future revolutions won't happen without profound eruptions, possibly radical violence. This is also a great example of the complex relation between revolutions and paradigm making, neither of which is settled. Even within the same categories, such as anticolonial revolutions, or even in the same context, revolts have different characteristics, despite scholars' effort to establish commonalities and laws.

## What Lies Ahead

Historical ethnography, which employs archival and ethnographic research simultaneously and in conversation, is at the core of my interdisciplinary approach. Throughout, I sought to produce not only a rigorous account of the famous eighteen days of the revolution but also an analysis attentive to the historical context and the constantly shifting spatial and social dynamics. I explain in detail how this worked in appendix 3, which includes a detailed description of my interviews and the informants' demographics, as well as information on my historical and documentary research.

In chapter 1 I present a historical overview of the politics of street protest in Egypt, especially in the decade before the revolution, along with an overview of previous protests in Tahrir Square in relation to the evolution of neopatrimonial police state in Egypt. I also demonstrate how this history informed the 2011 revolution and discuss the rise of social media in political dissent, particularly in the decade before the uprising. In chapter 2 I examine the rise of Tahrir's revolutionary repertoire and consider how and why Tahrir constituted a physical and symbolic boundary of the Egyptian Revolution. More specifically, I examine how specific processes drove the squaring of the revolution in Tahrir, such as the physical sites of battles and clashes near Tahrir, the "virtual" making of Tahrir through social media, the establishment of the Tahrir camp, and the mutual recognition by the regime and the protesters. In chapter 3 I investigate key modes of action outside Tahrir, especially the popular committees. I provide an anatomy of the popular committees in Egypt and situate these committees within a triangle of power that existed in Egypt at the time: the military, Tahrir revolutionaries, and the popular committees. In chapters 4 and 5, respectively, I present and investigate my claim that the Egyptian Revolution had two sets of demands, or souls: political and social, analyzing why the former became more visible and eclipsed the latter. The tension between the revolution's two souls impacted the trajectory of the uprising, especially in the transitional period. Specifically, in chapter 4 I provide a historicization of how the democratic reformist demands became dominant in the revolution but also demonstrate how radical social demands and grievances existed during the revolution. I present key pieces of evidence to demonstrate the existence of the latter (the radical soul), such as working-class strikes, and present new data on the demographics of the martyrs and the injured of the revolution. And in chapter 5 I examine Egypt's troubled transition to democracy, which involved, I argue,

elections without democratization. I provide a short and close historization of the period from 2011 to 2015 in Egypt with a focus on the intersection of revolutionary mobilization and electoral and constitutional politics.

Finally, in chapter 6 I analyze the dramatic closure of political space in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup—a moment seen by many as the death of the revolution. I present a historically sensitive and disaggregated account of the counterrevolution in Egypt. I examine Sisi’s rise to power, and I propose the notion of the paranoid regime to make sense of Egypt’s new authoritarianism today. I also demonstrate that activists chose to withdraw and did not give up their agency despite the unlimited repression in Egypt today.

Ultimately, *Revolution Squared* is a story about the power of Egyptians—both the power they had and their inability to recognize its vastness in the moment. One sentiment that pervades the book is that the praxis of revolution is like love. Egyptians have a proverb “Ein el hobb amiyah.” It’s a bit like saying “Love is blind.” This book is about how much we loved the revolution, as well as how blinded we were to the ways power, including our own, was even then met by the dynamism and the viciousness of counterrevolutionary forces. Revolution moves forward, and the outcome is never certain. It is action, with all the upheaval and uncertainty and possibility one can imagine.