Introduction

Le quotidien, c’est ce qui nous est donné chaque jour (ou nous vient en partage), ce qui nous presse chaque jour, et même nous opprime, car il y a une oppression du présent. Chaque matin, ce que nous reprenons en charge au réveil, c’est le poids de la vie, la difficulté de vivre dans telle ou telle condition, avec telle fatigue, tel désir. Le quotidien, c’est ce qui nous tient intimement, de l’intérieur.


(The everyday is what is given to us each day (or comes to us as a shared gift), which urges us every day, and even oppresses us, because there is this oppression of the present. Each morning when we wake up, we take up again the weight of life, the difficulty of living in this or that condition, with such fatigue, such a desire. The everyday is what sustains us intimately, from the inside. It’s a story halfway within ourselves, almost withdrawn, sometimes veiled: we must not forget this ‘world memory’, in the words of Péguy. Such a world holds us close to its heart, the olfactory memory, memory of childhood places, body memory, childhood gestures, pleasures. Perhaps it is worth emphasising the importance of this realm of ‘irrational’ history or the ‘non-history’ as A. Dupront called it. The history of everyday life is about the invisible.)

Why write a book?

The original idea of this book started – like the countless citizens who witnessed the January 2011 revolution – with an unrelenting urge to document the fast-unfolding events that were transforming the urban life of Cairo. Alas, coincidentally, the path of this work took on an entirely different and unexpected course. As time went on, publications on Tahrir flooded the market, and my reluctance to write yet another account of the Egyptian revolution grew by the day. Yet what kept me going at the beginning of the events, when adrenaline was high and emotions unsettled, was the instant and quick writing I did in the form of short photojournalism articles that allowed me
to maintain a chronology of sorts about particular moments and situations experienced in the streets of Cairo. I clearly recall that after January 2011, the velocity of the successive incidents made me feel deeply defenceless, and often even unaware of what sequences of events were a priority, as I was unable to construct any holistic vision of what was to come. This particular temperament, though, allowed me to write in more spontaneous eruptions, which in the final instance hampered me from bringing into being any extensive analytical work on the grand narrative of the revolution.

As time passed, in particular in the run-up to the summer of 2013 when the military seized overt power under General Sisi, I ended up, like many, grieving over what became apparent then, even though I was amongst those who unambiguously opposed the short rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, which differed little in its authoritarianism from the previous regimes. Perhaps, too, some of the people who share my political affiliations have also come to miss, since Morsi’s removal, the euphoric collective temperament of dissent, the biting satire against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the mesmerising explosion of artistic expressions that paradoxically thrived during their short and much contested reign. Nonetheless, many felt powerless in the overwhelming apolitical, traumatic moment after the killings in Rabe’a al-Adawayya Square and the military takeover. In retrospect, I believe that the aftermath of 2013 was a watershed moment of descent into the grave for the spirit of Egypt’s 2011 revolution, and also into a collective state of mental...
depression, combined with a devastating sentiment of failure, not to mention
disappointment with the politics dominating the scene. Those who stood in
the grey zone of neutrality – who supported neither the Muslim Brotherhood
nor the military rule – had no place within the dominant rising populism,
which was spurred on by the shrill tone of state propaganda.

On a personal level, this stage was followed by a prolonged period of
illness when, in December 2016, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The
years between 2011 and 2014, years that marked the lives of millions of
Egyptians for life, were highly emotional, volatile, and yes, quite exciting,
but certainly emotionally exhausting. Expectations and dreams for a better
life, and especially high aspirations for change, arose with the events of 2011,
only to be quickly and violently crushed. Evidently, I was not the sole person
who suffered after the event from illness or depression, as so many of my
friends, acquaintances, and even strangers I have met seemed to have
experienced a similar nemesis. This coincided with a certain set of adverse
conditions that forced me to move from a flat I had lived in for seventeen
years to the residential island of Zamalek.

**Everyday life and resilience after 2013**

Consequently, instead of writing about the grand chronicle of Tahrir, not-
withstanding the bloody incidents of Mohamed Mahmud Street in November
and December 2011 and 2012, which remain insufficiently documented to
this day, I ended up, like millions of others, being swallowed by the draining
and exhausting daily life of a city caught up in the aftermath of revolt. Draining
but triumphant – a daily life that transformed countless people into all-
embracing apolitical subjects. A daily life that turned me into an incessant
jongleur in trying to manoeuvre the chaos, the constant noise, and the air
pollution, all of which resulted in extreme exhaustion, recurrent lung infections,
prolonged colds, the impossibly long hours wasted in the daily commute to
my work, and the encounters with Herculean bureaucracies requiring infinite,
useless streams of paperwork in order to obtain vital documents. It should
astonish no one that Cairo recently claimed the status of the second most
polluted city in the world, after New Delhi. Not only that, it is the second
worst city on the planet for noise pollution. Cairo’s Bad Breath is the title of
one of the most recent and alarming UN environment reports, with its bleak
perspective on the way the Government refuses to deal with the aggravating
air pollution (Cairoscape Team 2018; CEDEJ 2018). It was no coincidence,
then, that I found myself caught up in – or, rather, obsessed about – docu-
menting and recording the everyday forms of assault of the nasty soundscape
of the street as a personal therapy to overcome a growing and exasperating
melancholy.

As time went by, I repeatedly asked myself why I ended up writing about
the ‘little story’, narrating the quotidian of an unnoticed, degenerating,
middle-class building in Cairo. Why was I keen on documenting tedious and fairly ‘boring’ and ‘uninteresting’ details about rubbish collection and sewage pipelines at a time when I was caught in a mental paralysis, when work on the grander narrative of the revolution was more urgent? And why was I overwhelmed for so long by an intense panic of failure, exhaustion, and disappointment, not only with politics but precisely with existential questions of an uncontrolled feeling of precariousness?

Here I would like to express gratitude to my friend, the anthropologist Leila Zaki Chakravarti, who, after thoroughly reading and commenting on the first draft of the manuscript, made me realise the fact that my erratic psychological state of mind finds intellectual resonance in the field of anthropology of ethics. Leila astutely contextualised the meaning of my obsession with the ‘little story’ as a kind of an instinctive and logical reaction to post-traumatic syndrome, a longing for ‘normalcy’ and ‘routine’ precisely after the tumultuous years that followed 2011. Leila offered me an extensive list of readings, amongst them the prominent and inspiring works of Veena Das, followed by the work of Stef Jansen, who both reflect upon the functionality, indeed the instrumentality, of longing for ordinary daily life in the wake of wars and disasters. In the introduction to her work on violence in India after its partition, Das contemplates the multiple meanings of violence in relationship to the ‘event and the everyday’ as follows:

But my engagement with the survivors of riots also showed me that life was recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary. There was, I argue, a mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary so that I end up by thinking of the event as always attached to the ordinary as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways. (Das 2007: 7)

Das’s meditation confirms that the process of the ‘descent into the ordinary’ is exactly what I was experiencing, even if on a smaller scale, by developing an obsession with accumulating details, connected with an urgency to record, as a sort of lifebelt, to survive the feeling of disappointment that overtook me after 2013.

Stef Jansen (2015) bases his theoretical framework largely upon Das’s work. His book on the daily life of an apartment complex in Sarajevo was equally enlightening for me in the way he depicted the residents’ longing for ‘normalcy’ and ‘routine’ during and after the disrupting moments of a prolonged war in the former Yugoslavia. An intriguing section in Jensen’s book, titled ‘When buses do not arrive’, skilfully describes citizens’ reactions to the eternal delays of waiting for the bus to make an appearance. Although they complain about the unaccounted and wasted hours waiting for things to happen, the situation reveals not only their daily endurance in commuting, but also the complex relationship which the unsatisfied citizens maintain with the omnipotent but dysfunctional state that fails to deliver goods to its citizens. Jansen’s main concern here is to focus on the question of people’s
governmentality. He first refers to Sartre’s reflections on people waiting for a bus in Paris, which Sartre calls ‘séries’, meaning an agglomeration of people representing a plurality of solitudes (Jansen 2015: 65). Then, referring to Alain Badiou, Jansen argues that in theory the séries could be turned into a positive and more constructive act of political dissent. This would occur when the bus did not arrive and people would almost console each other about the unbearable state of affairs. Eventually, through the exchange of information at the bus station, they would join forces in a collective act of protest. However, Jansen reverses Badiou’s argument to further propose one alternative possibility. He argues that under today’s crises, endurance and silence seem to be the main resort for citizens. He seems to be arguing that in the end, in Sarajevo, neither the celebration of endurance nor the muttering of complaints while waiting for the bus would generate any rebellious forms of reciprocity. In reality, what counts most is ‘the calibration of routines through city transport – the ways in which it orders everyday lives in particular ways’ (Jansen 2015: 70). Oddly enough, my own chapter on the commute to the American University in Cairo, which I had already written prior to reading Jansen’s book, conveys a similar exasperated state of mind through personal ruminations, even though the long road to Cairo’s Eastern Desert landscape bears little resemblance to Sarajevo’s post-war reconstruction.

My yearning for trying to institute a kind of normality in my quotidian life, or even the ‘semblance of ordinary life’ – as Jansen articulated it and juxtaposed to the violent state of ‘abnormality’ that various societies experienced in wars like in the former Yugoslavia, or the case of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation – made a lot of sense in view of the conditions of everyday life in Cairo after the ‘event’. Deriving inspiration from Das and Jansen, I have concluded that the longing for a kind of normalcy in everyday life can itself turn into a survival strategy. Jansen’s interpretation of resilience as a quest for normalcy in daily life could perhaps explain why the text culminated in an exercise in the tedious, even in the ‘boring’ and the ‘non-spectacular’ (Jansen’s words), as a piece of documentation of a daily routine in my building. Perhaps, too, it was a way of trying to keep sane vis-à-vis a Kafkaesque political situation under an overwhelming military presence in civil life.

Strangely enough, it can be argued that accepting the state of collective amnesia might not be the worst-case scenario, as has previously been suggested. Many Egyptians have turned into apolitical beings in the aftermath of the turmoil of 2011. Many have already withdrawn into an ‘inner migration’, a kind of enforced ‘internal exile’ that has metamorphosed us into obedient but self-absorbed beings. On the other hand, a sense of desolation and angst has visibly distracted us, as colleagues leave the country with no intention of returning and friends seize any opportunity to find a job overseas and disappear for good and almost without trace. If they can’t make it to the United States or Europe, then hopefully Dubai, Bahrain, or Qatar could become their next lifebelt.
Taking to the streets has become a risky enterprise after 2014, in view of the forced disappearances and massive jailings – unspoken subjects. In what way would resilience be different, then? This question leads me to reflect upon the limits of the performative and theatrical euphoric aspect of the revolution, which mesmerised the world precisely because of its innovative satirical element. While this particular moment in history enriched the image of Cairo’s creative chaos as if it were a surreal Bruegelian tableau, how long could a revolutionary liminal moment last? For how long could the power of the street have survived? What timeline can we estimate was needed for the power of mass demonstrations to stand a chance against the violent confrontations and the mounting toll of deaths by the day? How long could the oft-repeated slogan heard in the street have helped keep the revolution alive: ‘More blood ought to be spilled in the streets and more martyrs are needed to complete the revolution’? These questions are speculations that attempt to challenge, or even provoke, the issue of the longevity attached to the revolution and the precariousness of the modes of resistance of the recent performative ‘Occupy’ movements on the global scale. However, while they are certainly unique, these movements have proved ephemeral. Therefore, Tahrir will likely not be duplicated, and even if it were, the fear of unleashing violence from the military against any contemplated insurrection can be clearly foreseen.

Sherry B. Ortner’s extensive critique of ethnographic ‘thinness’, as a counterweight to Clifford Geertz’s concept of ‘thickness’ (meaning ‘understanding through richness, texture and detail’) as applied to the notion of resistance (Ortner 1995: 174), was another helpful work in deciphering the post-2011 Egyptian context. Ortner reflects upon the complexity, subtlety, and various forms of resistance, when reviewing multiple accounts excavated from the long history of anthropology. She focuses on the diverse interpretations of what is defined as the ‘political’ in various cultures, in particular in colonial, pre-industrial, and peasant societies. Her aim is to critique the inadequate and conflicting readings of individual and collective forms of resistance under colonial subjugation. She also addresses the question of the resilience of the silent subalterns and how a reconceptualisation of the notion of culture and religion in peasant rebellions implies multifaceted readings in the subtle and variegated exercises of resistance. Ortner also identifies political and cultural authenticity as becoming the major elements in Indian subaltern studies, emphasising that this is ‘a major part of its effort to recognize the authentic cultural universe of subalterns, from which their acts of resistance grew’ (Ortner 1995: 180–1).

Ortner’s reflections on resistance inspire speculation that perhaps heroism persists in the enduring banality of daily life under military authoritarianism – an authoritarianism that parallels the grandiose, inflated neo-liberal urban schemes that address solely the interests of the rich and powerful. One might even dare say that after 2013, the militarisation of everyday life became far
more tactile than during the previous and highly contested eras of the Sadat and Mubarak regimes. The military takeover has clearly brought a decisive end to the budding, but weak, constituents of civil society and the dreams of possible change. All oppositional forces and activists were violently crushed; many were sentenced to years of imprisonment; countless young activists, writers, and academics have left the country as exiles as a result. The feeling of moral panic mixed with defeat compelled me, along with other Egyptians who experienced 2011 and its aftermath, to voluntarily ‘hibernate’ and become part of a passive, submissive, apolitical being.

Yet, if for some people exile meant mental depression and ending up working overseas in poorly paid restaurants for sheer survival, there is a reverse side to the story that still needs to be narrated. For quite a number of activists, the aftermath of 2011 has also meant novel ways of recognition through both Western and Arab media that have focused attention on their biographies and activism. Similarly, a number of graffiti artists became ‘stars’ to be celebrated by both local and international media, showered with invitations to numerous international forums and exhibitions, and invited to paint murals in a number of European cities in prestigious neighbourhoods and institutions (Abaza 2017). One has to admit that, for quite a number of young activists, the theme of the Arab Spring opened new job markets, participation in endless forums and conferences overseas, and publication outlets not only in the Arab world, in particular Lebanon, but mainly in Europe and the United States. This resulted in an unprecedented international recognition of Egyptian ‘activists’, such as television satirist Bassem Yussuf, who now lives in the United States, and the numerous scholarships and residencies in academia that were given to activists such as Wael Ghoneim, who obtained a scholarship to Harvard (Ghoneim 2018). A significant number of Egyptian activists have landed in Berlin as PhD candidates at the Free University of Berlin, while the city has become an emerging important hub for Egyptian emigrés. The ‘singer of the revolution’, Ramy Essam, was granted a scholarship in Malmö, which transformed his habitus and persona. It is interesting how the status of the ‘revolutionary in exile’ metamorphosed Essam’s physique in Sweden into a mimicry of the 1960s, hippie, long-hair type. Even as the multiplication of writings on the Arab revolutions became the entrance ticket for an academic career, the intriguing question persists: how would those who remained in Egypt (in particular the ones imprisoned, or impeded from leaving the country) feel about those who left? Resentment, or only envy?

City of exhaustion

Today’s urban momentum might perhaps be described as a post-euphoric Bakhtinian collective trauma: Cairo the inferno, Cairo the city of collective exhaustion (Abaza 2011a). These observations have been expressed since the notorious Maspero massacre in October 2011, and it continues until the
current moment. This ongoing claustrophobic collective sentiment emerges once again in Ian Alan Paul’s article on the Jadaliyya website (Paul 2015) on the way in which Cairo’s street confrontations in January 2015 created a concrete physical as well as mental state of ‘asphyxia’, if not a continuous ‘endurance’. This *mal de vivre*, or *le spleen*, as a collective depression, translates into the unspoken phenomenon of suicide. Some human rights organisations have pointed to the rising suicide rates in 2018, which they seem to attribute to unprecedented and unbearable economic hardship for the poor (Arab Network for Human Rights 2018). In 2015, for instance, according to Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics, the number of suicides had already reached some half a million (‘Metro is not a suicidal destination’, 2018). One of the most poignant incidents, which went viral just five days before the fourth anniversary of the January revolution in 2015, was the circulation in the media of a picture of a driver who hanged himself out of despair from a large billboard on the Ismailiyaa desert highway (Tarek 2015). The aggressive advertisements of luxurious villas and compounds on billboards along the highway epitomise the symbols of the dramatic class cleavages in Cairo today. Obtaining accurate numbers of suicides is practically impossible, as suicide is condemned in both the Islamic and Christian faiths, so the true cause of death often goes unreported by the families of the deceased. However, the phenomenon has recently caught much attention from human rights
organisations as clear evidence of the rapid, material deterioration that is affecting a silent majority (Hashem 2018).

‘The Metro is not a suicidal destination; this phenomenon incurs losses after each case of suicide.’ This sentence showcases the official statement issued by the Cairo Metro company after several suicide attempts in the system in summer 2018 (‘Metro is not a suicidal destination’, 2018), involving mostly very young men and women barely in their twenties. It has been extensively commented upon in sardonic tones in the increasingly silenced alternative social media. The public discussions on suicide in the official press have revealed, not by coincidence, that the prioritisation of law and order, and most of all, the Government’s main focus on the flow of traffic, outrank the gravity of the loss of human lives, which, to no one’s astonishment, remains trivial and ‘unimportant’. Is it a coincidence then that earlier this year, the Metro ticket prices were increased for the second time in a year, from two to seven Egyptian pounds, depending on the length of the commute? Just a year earlier, a ticket cost one pound regardless of the length of the trip (Ismail 2018).

On the other hand, this act of enduring seems to produce remarkably inventive forms of solidarity amongst the poor – to survive, circumvent state authoritarianism, and reshape their unbearable daily lives. Endurance itself is becoming a genuine form, if not an art of resistance (Paul 2015). It is an idea that merges with the notion of ‘assemblages’ and the emerging new fluidities and blurring of spatial borders in the cities of the global South, which, as AbdouMaliq Simone argues, address the notion of ‘uncertainty’ as the core problematic of contemporary urbanism (Simone 2013: 245). It may be noted here that ‘endurance’ is equally a concept that Simone developed in analysing how Jakartans negotiated their daily lives (Simone 2015). I see more affinities between Cairo and Jakarta when I read the work of Simone on the dilemma of the descending/declining middle classes, marked by ill-defined and poorly remunerated daily informal economic practices that are quite often labelled as ‘bizarre’. Cairo and Jakarta are becoming cities of ‘assemblages’ of collective endurance (Simone 2013), defined by precariousness in habitat (even for the middle classes), and by precarious life histories as a collective trait of the floating masses.

Discovering Jessica Greenberg’s After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia (Greenberg 2011) was one more consolation, as it provided a convincing explanation for what I perceived as a collective depressed mental state in Egypt. Greenberg bases her theoretical framework on the inspiring concept of the ‘politics of disappointment’, which was developed by the Serbian student activists who were faced with an unmanageable, incoherent set of practices after the event. Greenberg addresses the issue of how chaotic and emotionally exhausting revolutions are, and how the high aspirations for utopia, which are impossible to achieve, lead to what she describes as a kind of ‘contingency of action’ (Greenberg 2011: 8).
In fact, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring the discussion of the works of Hannah Arendt and Franz Fanon in Egyptian intellectual milieux raised questions and doubts regarding the linearity of revolutions and resistance, since they seem so often to turn unavoidably to violence. It was often proposed that almost all revolutions were doomed to fail, if failure means that those who rebelled failed to reach power. Meanwhile, it usually takes long decades to seriously evaluate any positive transformations that the revolution might have brought about. This sad path justifies and explains the traumatic move from euphoric utopian dreams to the current dystopian reality.

Failed state housing policies

More than 12 million people live in Egypt’s sprawling informal settlements (slums), over half of them in the Greater Cairo region. Driven into these settlements by an acute lack of affordable housing in the cities, they find themselves in homes unsuitable for human habitation or at grave risk because of rockslides, floods, fires, railways, high-voltage wires, open sewerage systems and other threats to their lives and health. Despite daily reminders of the perils, most of them remain where they are, waiting for an alternative they can afford or for the authorities to make sure their homes are safe and adequate through slum upgrading projects. Meanwhile, they strive to connect their homes to water, sewerage and electricity networks and to secure their tenure. (Amnesty International 2011: 1)

So why zoom into the microscopic world of a building into which I had just moved in the Doqi neighbourhood in 2016, if it was not a move in accordance with the major urban reshuffles that the city was undergoing, bringing about devastating and violent transformations? Perhaps what caught my attention was that, although Doqi is still regarded as a middle-class quarter, a significant portion of its middle-class residents who did not manage to leave for more affluent areas are clearly still there because they have experienced a descent in status into ‘neither middle class nor poor’, a status that Simone and Rao have defined as the new ‘in betweens’. They were speaking of recent transformations in Jakarta, but the phenomenon certainly applies to Cairo as well (Simone and Rao 2011: 4). These descending middle classes have become much more vulnerable to precarity and uncertainty in their daily lives since 2011. Like the residents of Jakarta, they have been under pressure to reinvent ways of generating income through informal activities, such as renting out their own spaces as commercial space and furnished flats to foreigners. Unfortunately, however, a large number of foreigners have left the country and prices have fallen.

Perhaps, too, this tale of mine has turned into an exercise in struggling to address the flagrant paradox of the housing problem in Egypt, as a dynamic example of the process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ that David Harvey convincingly demonstrates on the global scale (Harvey 2008: 34). Like never
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before, Cairo abounds with surreal landscapes of unfinished ghost satellite cities and endless deserted cement towers as a symptom of frenetic real-estate speculation, while densely populated, nightmarish ‘slums’ continue to sprawl, housing not only the deprived, but also a large segment of the educated and professional middle classes including medical doctors, engineers, and professionals. The two landscapes are juxtaposed at the heart of the city. And yet, as Simone and Rao argue, the script that reads the juxtaposition of the ‘slum’ versus the ‘superblock’ as a simplistic landscaping of the megacities of the

Figure 3  Deserted construction opposite my building, Doqi, 23 December 2017.
global South has provided policy makers, urban planners, and governments, in some way, with a ready-made comparative narrative, either for nationalist agendas, or for the integration of the city into global markets, or for the need to establish order (Simone and Rao 2011: 3, 4).

The label ‘informal settlements’, obviously preferred by ‘experts’ on Egypt instead of the negative connotation of the ‘slum’, is applied mostly to red-brick high-rise constructions on former agricultural land, which today encompass over 65 per cent of Cairo’s population. These informal settlements expose the long years of the State’s failure to develop an equitable public housing policy (Séjourné 2009). As the research of Salma Shukrallah and Yahia Shawkat on the ongoing uncontrolled commodification of housing shows, there are in today’s ‘modern’ Egypt some 11.7 million empty apartments that could in principle be occupied by some 50 million people, or more than half of Egypt’s population, while in 2016 almost half of Egyptian households were unable to purchase what the authors labelled as ‘median priced homes’ (Shukrallah and Shawkat 2017).

The story of my building, witnessing at that juncture a massive exodus by a number of its original residents, meant that almost half of the flats were deserted; this presents an account that closely follows these grander lines, narrating the flagrant urban inequalities in post-January 2011 Cairo. Farouq Guweida’s article in the semi-official newspaper al-Ahram (Guweida 2017: 13) points out the fact that the unprecedented wild competition in real-estate speculation seems to be working as a fortunate entente, as this highly lucrative business is shared between the Government and the private sector controlled by a number of established tycoons. This seems to be one main reason why real-estate prices have soared as they have, reaching surreal figures, far surpassing the markets in metropolises like New York, London, and Paris. The happy few would argue that the hyperbole generated by these replicable global ‘evil paradises’ (Davis and Monk 2007) for the super-rich, which Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk have focused on, is far from worrying, since the crash that should follow the hyper-inflated real-estate bubble has not yet occurred and perhaps never will, because this non-productive sector has been booming in Egypt for almost three decades now. Still, Egypt has not yet reached the incredible price of US$90 million for a beach house in the Hamptons (Davis and Monk 2007: 13), so one should remain optimistic.

Guweida begins his article by commenting on the circulating news that some villas in the exclusive resorts of the North Coast of the Mediterranean have recently been purchased for the astronomical price of 110 million Egyptian pounds (L.E.) (roughly US$6 million, at the September 2018 exchange rate), while the cheapest variety within the same compound were sold for 37 million L.E. (roughly US$2 million). In dismay, Guweida laments the fact that almost all of these villas, used for just a couple of months a year as secondary summer residences, are already sold out. When the large majority of the
middle classes remains unable to purchase the cheapest public housing flats, at prices that begin at 600,000 L.E., one is led to wonder whether housing should not be a human rights concern for the Government under these acutely degenerating circumstances.

Guweida astutely observes the amazing continuity of the identical neo-liberal policies set in motion by the two previous regimes of Sadat and Mubarak, and which continue unchecked under the current military regime. This is because, if one were to decode post-January 2011 Cairo with the lens of David Harvey’s reading of the ‘right to the city’ or impediments to it (Harvey 2008) – i.e. through the capitalist monopoly of private property that appropriates surplus production – and regarding housing as one main urban resource that needs to be reconsidered in transforming the city we live in, it could be argued that the 2011 revolution has had no real impact on transforming the blatant inequalities in Egyptian urban life. It is surprising, for example, that in spite of the political turmoil the country experienced, specifically the escalating violence and instability in the streets, the real-estate market never collapsed. To the contrary, even during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood from 2012 to 2013, an unprecedented boom in land speculation was observed. After June 2013 and the massacre in Rabe’a al-‘Adawyya Square, advertisements for villas and flats in gated communities and sea resorts flooded the market. Sea resorts continue to multiply wildly all along the North Coast and the Red Sea, in spite of the unprecedented scale of run-down, failed resorts constructed during the 1990s that resemble war ruins. Except that, in contrast to David Harvey, who argues convincingly that bank credits and the expanding mortgage market turned out to be the two key stabilisers of global capitalism, the problem in Egypt is that no established mortgage and credit systems to finance real estate were developed – thus raising the unanswered question of how such an extravagant real-estate explosion has remained sustainable for such a long time.

We are told that, since not all the rich could move their cash abroad, real estate remains the most lucrative, secure, and quick-profit investment in Egypt. With the sharp devaluation of the Egyptian pound against the US dollar in March 2016, the media have repeatedly pointed to the alarming rocketing real-estate investments. The mega-satellite walled cities ‘Dreamland’ (Mitchell 2002: 272–304) and ‘Utopic’, noted by several observers over the past three decades (Mitchell 2002; Kuppinger 2004; Denis 2006: 47–72), continue to boom, supported by aggressive advertising, on endless billboards and TV screens, of virtual landscapes yet to come.

Not only that, but some of the forthcoming gated communities and highly luxurious cities have recently been advertised with the subversive symbols and language of January 2011. ‘Join the lifestyle of the revolution’ is the advertising catchphrase for the desert satellite Taj City, accompanied by a glamorous picture of a rich young couple in a tango pose, in a pseudo-Versailles setting (‘Taj City’, 2015).
Various urban experts have pointed to the deregulations through privatisation that are to be expected in the neo-liberal city, and which have mainly disenfranchised the destitute (Davis 2006a; Harvey 2008; Bayat 2012), and Cairo is no exception. It is evident that Cairo witnessed an unprecedented conquest of the streets and public spaces through the rampant ‘passive encroachment’ of the destitute classes (Bayat 2012). Since 2011, a pervasive and unprecedented public visibility of the subaltern poor has been witnessed in the various neighbourhoods in the centre of the city. The poor, barely surviving through informal-sector activities such as mobile food carts, stalls or spaces for selling drinks, car parking, or simply street vending, have invaded numerous old residential quarters and are to be seen everywhere, with the exception, of course, of the walled, segregated spaces. But that is not the only reason why the rich are leaving the centre. The unresolved antiquated rental laws, the intrusion of offices, businesses, and cafés into residential spaces, the massive high-rise buildings that mushroomed after 2011 because of unregulated construction, destroying countless classified historical buildings – all add to the obvious visual chaos that had already existed for many decades. It would seem that the post-January 2011 urban reshaping of Cairo translates today into an unparalleled massive exodus of the well-to-do to the desert cities, intensifying the process of ‘de-densification of the urban center’ (Denis 2006). The heart of the city of Cairo (with the exception of the project of renovating the Belle Epoque Downtown) is falling into a rapid and unmanageable state of decay.

**Figure 4** Panorama of Mohamed Mahmud Street, 22 February 2013.
In the end, the exercise of focussing on the microcosmic world of my building became an involuntary step to shield myself from an alienating everyday life. Perhaps, too, right after the eighteen days of occupying Tahrir Square, there was a momentum, or more precisely a popular sentiment, that correlated with the images that travelled around the world: images of the protesters sweeping and cleaning Tahrir Square, the Kasr Al Nil Bridge, and the streets around the square. The public act of cleaning the streets was powerful symbolically. It succeeded in conveying collective dreams of genuine change by starting with small-scale local interventions.

It is important to recall the intense public discussions and meetings after Mubarak was ousted. A number of lively committees were created to focus on activism and collective work on the micro level of neighbourhoods and local communities. The obvious retreat of the State from welfare responsibilities dates back several decades and is not new. It triggered in its wake an unbridled informal sector, clearly observable on all levels of life. ‘What is to be done?’ was the basic challenge of the activists during the period of the post-January momentum. A number of those who participated in Tahrir struggled to find answers to the failing and impotent role of the State. It paradoxically produced a parallel collective sentiment of empowerment on the local and communal level in the early days of 2011 and 2012, exemplified in the innumerable meetings for founding new parties and the active role of the human rights organisations that monitored the despicable situation in jails. Numerous youth initiatives for creating new job markets grew more assertive. Voluntary associations for assisting the families of the victims, the blinded and the injured of the revolution, and associations to provide services in poor quarters flourished. All these activities channelled the spirit of the uprising during the early days of the revolution. Also, numerous debates triggered by the public visibility of the young activists in the media and television targeted issues connected to the reasons that inspired change. Reforming the police system, keeping checks and balances in the pervasive internal security apparatus, sexual harassment, repression and the authoritarian character, and a number of other acute social and economic problems were openly addressed. But unfortunately this burst of freedom of expression did not last long, giving rise to a long stream of doubts about whether the 2011 revolution had been merely a short-lived upheaval. Even if this were the case, as Paul Amar speculates, even if it was vehemently aborted as a ‘social revolution’ that was hampered from overthrowing class hierarchies or fostering social equality, it did succeed in instigating change in the political sphere. It did to some extent accomplish a ‘revolution in consciousness’ (Amar 2013a), which was outlined by a number of specialists such as Sari Hanafi, Mohamed Bamyeh, and Benoit Challand. Each of these scholars articulated this genesis differently, while arriving at similar conclusions: that, in the end, the revolution did instigate an emerging ‘new political subjectivity’.
In contrast, the Zamalek Association was created just after 2011 and became a highly active organisation on the neighbourhood level, launching campaigns for collective clearing of rubbish, cleaning streets, trimming trees, closing down illegal cafés, and protesting against the large restaurant boats polluting the Nile. Is it because Zamalek is the island of the rich that this association has shown resilience, success, and continuity in its activities even after 2014?

On the other hand, just after 2011 the poor residents of the slums communally constructed stairways, ramps, and exit roads from the ring road (Nagati and Stryker 2013: 52–3), to which they had previously had no access. Numerous other initiatives were witnessed, including campaigns by architects, urban planners, and historians for public awareness of the urban problems, the systematic pillage of antiquities, and the destruction of the historic sites, parks, monuments, and Belle Epoque villas of Egyptian cities. But whether these initiatives and information campaigns were successful in preventing the devastating demolition of historic landmarks is another question. The area of Ramlat Bulaq and the Maspero Triangle were thoroughly cleared in 2018 and Bulaq’s historic Belle Epoque buildings were demolished, because the area has been under close scrutiny since the Mubarak era in the interest of financial speculators, who would like to transform it into one more mini-Dubai.11 In effect, this was the second time that evictions in the area of Maspero were undertaken by the State. The first eviction was in the seventies during Sadat’s rule, when the ‘Ishash al-turguman slum was cleared by brute force. Further attempts to clear up slums (or, more accurately, ‘disfavoured quarters’) for speculative neo-liberal investors were repeated on the islands of Warraq and Qursaya in recent years, stirring much resistance among the residents and launching heated debates in the press and social media. It was even argued (Shakran 2016) that these ongoing confrontations with the State created new forms of ‘insurgent planning’, political action, and growing social awareness against evictions, as well as instigation to violent retaliations from the residents against the police forces. This was after one police officer had shot dead a resident in 2012 in the car park of the Nile Towers on the Corniche. This incident led to further violence when the officer refused to take the wounded person to the hospital while he shot yet another resident. As a result, a large number of men from the quarter attacked the front of the Fairmont Hotel, which is located at the Nile Corniche and set fire to a number of parked cars. From the official side, this incident resulted in criminalising and collectively tagging the entire quarter for thuggery (Shakran 2016: 26).

This was not the first time that Qursaya Island witnessed violent attempts at evicting its poor residents for lucrative neo-liberal urban projects. The first occurrence was in 2007 under the reign of Mubarak. However, when evictions by the military police occurred for the second time in November 2012, the military’s contention was that the island belonged to the army, even though a previous court ruling had refused the army’s right to evict the residents
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by granting them the right to reside and work there (Chams El-Dine 2016: 196–7). Although there has been considerable debate over the success or failure of the 2011 insurrection, the failed evictions from Qursaya Island on the part of the regime proved that citizens have learned new forms of collective mobilisation, exemplified in the collaborative work between human rights organisations (like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights) and the activists, journalists, and film-makers who drew intensive public attention (Rennick 2018) to the ‘illegitimate’ violence of the State in connection with evictions. The final result was one more court decision ordering the military to leave, and arguing in favour of the residents’ rights to remain on the island (Aswat Masreya 2013).

It was in that particular spirit of post-2011 momentum that I found myself driven by two simultaneous objectives. First, because I was moving into a new place, I wanted to mobilise the tiny local community of my building to save it from its collapsing state of affairs. At that juncture, the micro-sociology of an intimate space became interwoven with the theoretical questions that I teach in my classes on urban sociology, in my course entitled ‘Cairo Collages’. At the risk of sounding pretentious, the display of my emotions and reactions to the changing urban conditions was an attempt to engage in a dialogue with the literature on the megacities of the South.

I started documenting my building in Doqi, creating a bookkeeping system to keep track of my own spending for renovating the flat I was moving into. The process of documenting the spending went together with my desperate attempts to arrange repairs of the communal sewage system, the water pump, and the electrical wiring, all work that had to be done before I moved into the flat. Although I did not move to Doqi until February 2016, I had already started in 2015 to contact my neighbours face to face to organise a building residents’ association that would defend the residents’ rights. The continual and extensive negotiations, exchange of information, and chit-chat about the neighbourhood with the neighbours, the doorkeeper, and the downstairs shopkeepers in the building took tremendous energy and time on my part. Accordingly, my chronology of the building started during the second half of 2015, but stories and unfolding events continued until summer 2018. This explains the time lag between some of the stories, as I recounted the thread of events in certain passages that went on for three years, while I moved meanwhile into other passages. Having said that, the book should read as a collage of landscapes, striving to weave together the transmutations happening in the various Cairene geographies, moving between the Belle Epoque centre of town, the gated communities, and the psychological and socio-political effects of the momentum of Tahrir. It is written like a puzzle in a way, in four separate tales. These are made up of perhaps apparently disconnected segments, but they are overlapping stories about the city of Cairo, constituting the prelude to narrating the complexities of its microcosmic world.
Notes

1 Some of these articles have appeared in *Theory, Culture and Society*, and on the *Jadaliyya* website.

2 I am well aware that the horrific scale of violence enacted at India’s partition, leading to the displacement of some 14 million people, violence that produced a disputed number of victims estimated between several hundred thousand and 2 million, is certainly not comparable to the sporadic acts of violence perpetrated during the period of 2011–13 on demonstrators in Egypt. Still, violence during the revolution was no triviality, as it left over 8,48 dead and over 3,000 injured in just the first three weeks (‘Egyptian revolution of 2011’, Wikipedia).

3 On the question of the ‘performative’ revolution, see Abaza 2014, 2016.

4 This tour de force by Ortner consists of a survey of the major anthropological works to provide a rich panorama of what is understood by ‘resistance’ in a number of writings. She includes the works of James Scott (*Weapons of the Weak*, 1985), the subaltern studies school, the work of E. P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1966), Jean Comaroff’s *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985), and Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy* (1983).

5 Most importantly, the steep devaluation of the Egyptian pound against the US dollar in March 2016, leading to soaring prices and the collapse of the currency, produced a collective mental state of amnesia, if not a form of denial, accompanied by a growing sentiment that precariousness has become a collective, wide-ranging concern, touching even the declining middle classes. ‘The government has annihilated the middle class’ is a sentence I have often heard repeated in small talk in the street.

   Not only that, middle-class Egyptians are kept constantly on the run by hearsay and gossip that prices will continue to rise the following year. Thus, in the collective imagination, it is wiser to purchase durable consumer items (like refrigerators, stoves, air conditioners, water heaters) sooner than later, before the next wave of soaring prices. These items seem to break down more often than elsewhere because of electricity cuts, improper installation, or poor-quality products.

6 During the months of August and September 2018 alone, some seven suicide cases in the Metro have been reported. On this subject, see the sardonic comments of the blogger *Egyptian Chronicles: 7000 Years and Counting* (Zeinobia 2018).

7 ‘Bizarre’ is a bit of an exaggeration here. For example, for the descending status of the middle classes, renting out furnished flats to foreigners, and the transformation of entire residential buildings into lucrative commercial spaces, see Abaza 2016. In the past, mosques would be constructed in the ground floors of buildings to evade taxes. These flexible survival strategies teach us about how space is negotiated in Third World metropolises.

8 *Utopia* is the title of Ahmed Khaled Tawfi k’s novel, published in 2008. In the novel, Cairo in 2023 is imagined as a bleak dystopia, divided between militarisated, protected, gated communities/compounds and the sprawling slums populated with an unwanted, disposable humanity. The poor are chased by the rich as a leisure hunting pursuit. Yet this simplistic dichotomising of the city overshadows more sophisticated and complex narratives – for example, the intertwining working-class quarters near some compounds; lively, popular/working-class markets existing within walled, gated cities like Rehab City; the migrant communities
(the ever-growing Syrian community in the Sixth of October satellite city, the Iraqi and Sudanese refugees concentrated in various quarters); and quite efficient transport systems that have already been created as parallel spaces of ‘assemblages’ around the compounds and gated communities. All these phenomena need further reflection in relation to the notion of ‘assemblages’ (Simone 2013).

9 What needs to be emphasised here is also the discomfort, if not the near impossibility, of conducting any extensive empirical, let alone quantitative, sociological research after 2013 in Egypt. A generalised sentiment of fear and suspicion has overshadowed the milieus of research ever since the brutality of the internal security apparatus was epitomised in the murder of Giulio Regini, an Italian PhD candidate from Cambridge, whose body showed horrific signs of torture when it was found along the desert highway (see Malsin 2016). Since Regini was working on sensitive topics such as social movements and the Egyptian working classes, could it be a message addressed to the circles of local and international academics that anyone who dares undertake research in Egypt had better think twice, because such research is no longer possible? This is one explanation for my retreat into the confined space of my building.

10 Sari Hanafi, Mohammed Bamyeh, and Benoit Challand all speak of the new subjectivities triggering by the Arab revolutions. See Hanafi 2012; Bamyeh 2013; Challand 2001.

11 On the aspirations for Dubaising Cairo since Mubarak’s reign, see Abaza 2011b.