

From the Editor

“The Egyptians,” according to the website of the United States Department of State, “are a fairly homogeneous people of Hamitic origin. Mediterranean and Arab influences appear in the north, and there is some mixing in the south with the Nubians of northern Sudan” (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm>). This distinctly Victorian note from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, dated 10 November 2010, would have triggered learned nods a century ago when its biblical, linguistic, and racial references were still fresh. But that freshness was well spoiled by the second third of the last century, and the survival of such discourse as part of an official description of the Egyptian populace seems striking not only in its sorry, anachronistic racialism, but in its sheer, puzzling pointlessness. What can such a description possibly intend to communicate?

The January 25th 2011 Revolution, as it is now being called, saw hundreds of thousands—some would claim millions—of Egyptians crowding the streets of Suez, Alexandria, Cairo, and Luxor, burning local headquarters of the National Democratic Party and withstanding the assaults of hired thugs and regular state security agents. Claiming their solidarity with the army, they held out peacefully and even cheerfully for weeks against violent attack, legal threat, hunger, and the comprehensive disruption of their daily lives—all the while photographing the jubilant crowds around themselves with their cell phone cameras—until President Husni Mubarak was forced to end his long reign, exiled internally to the sandy tip of the Sinai.

Various segments of the complex and fragmented opposition movement have, since then, voted in a successful referendum to amend the Constitution, triggered a massive destruction and a less massive public seizure of secret police documents, and inspired a revival of labor organizing, popular volunteerism, and national pride. Several members of the former Mubarak regime are under investigation for crimes committed during their terms, ranging from financial corruption to participation in terrorist bombings against Egyptian churches. The revolution—if we can apply the term to

a military coup—has had worldwide influence. Apart from helping to inspire other protest movements across the Mideast (and perhaps even the Midwest, as Wisconsin's public employees occupy their capitol), the events in Tunisia and Egypt have also sparked a civil war and another Euro-American military adventure in their common neighbor, Libya.

These events have also changed the conditions under which knowledge-production of all sorts will be conducted for the next generation. The Al-Jazeera news network has once again emerged into North America's consciousness despite what amounts to a commercial ban in most of the United States. Social media are an ever more visible focus for talk about the role of technology and information in political and social change. Middle East scholars are already beginning to write about how the changing political landscape of the region challenges what we have been reading and writing for the last few decades. This moment presents us with some of the same practical and intellectual challenges as the 1979 Iranian Revolution or the September 11th attacks. We are called on to interpret unfolding events at the same time that we are blamed for not having predicted them. We are assured that research in and about the region are more vital than ever, at the same time that the U.S. Congress proposes restricted research funding in the humanities and social sciences. We are urged to speak to the media and publish at the same time that our classes are growing in size.

The "fairly homogenous people of Hamitic origin" who occupy Egypt might provide us with inspiration about how to proceed as we are called on to discuss the region. The flaws in official constructions of reality such as racialism, are most apparent when they become survivals: when the interpretive frameworks in which they were originally articulated are no longer taken for granted by their audiences. The issue of homogenous Hamitic origin can no longer be taken seriously as a question of fact—are they really homogenous? Are they really Hamitic?—nor a question of whether or not one fact or another makes a difference in understanding Egyptians. Instead, the terms and the issues they seek to formulate have simply become meaningless.

When they have not yet become survivals, the flaws in official constructions of reality sometimes become clear after the fact—for example, DeGaulle's promise that the 1958 Plan de Constantine would result in equitable development in Algeria (Davis, this issue)—and sometimes become clear when we examine people's practical reactions to policy, as in the case of Arabic as an official language in Israel (Uhlmann, this issue). Beyond these particular cases—in fact, in and through particular cases like these—the discourse of economic development

and the discourses of language ideology and ethnic nationalism still make sense to us in ways that the discourse of racialism does not.

Discourses surrounding the current revolutionary atmosphere in the Middle East are an extraordinary opportunity to question official constructions of reality. Two that jump out as being good places to start are the way we understand human rights, and the way we understand national interest. When, shortly after the beginning of the Egyptian protests, the Mubarak regime cut off internet and cell phone service in the country, activists on the ground, prominent intellectuals commenting in the international media, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton immediately denounced the action as a violation of the fundamental human rights of Egyptian citizens, and called on the regime to restore internet service. What does it mean to think of internet service as a fundamental human right? What does it mean to think about the consumption of technology—in this case, the ability to contribute to the profits and the share price of companies and services like Facebook, Google, and Twitter—as a fundamental human right?

Likewise, we are using with renewed frequency and vigor the concept of “national interest,” as we wonder what the revolution in Egypt means for Israel, or what interest the U.S. has in enforcing a “no-fly zone” in Libya, or whether we should, in general or in particular cases—Bahrain? Yemen? Iran? Syria?—support entrenched regimes or their critics. Why is the notion of “national interest” not already a survival? What keeps it making sense to us as a concept as we hear it and say it and disagree about it? How is it that we take seriously the notion that there are nations (or even states) with coherent interests parallel or in conflict with one another?

How can the current dynamic environment of the Middle East help us talk to our students, our colleagues, and the residents of our cities and states, about broader processes and problems in the social sciences and humanities? Which of our concepts, which of our interpretive frameworks, have outlived their usefulness? Which have been found wanting? What can replace them? And which have become simply meaningless, the equivalent of the Victorian racialism that still survives, like an unpainted stain on some neglected wall, in one of our most powerful political institutions? ✂

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We hereby solicit short articles (maximum of 1,000 words) on the theme of the future of knowledge production in Middle East studies in the light of “revolution.” The deadline is 31 December 2011. Submit them to us at mesabulletin@uncc.edu.