

STATE OF POWER 2017

On culture and power

- Interview with Ahdaf Soueif

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We seem to be entering through a period of contradictions, of dislocating change and crisis, of raised hopes and terrible realities. We have seen the economic crisis questioning the very pillars of neoliberalism yet market fundamentalism has not faltered in its march. We have had inspiring flourishing of social movements yet authoritarian leaders everywhere are rising to the fore. How do you understand this moment?

There's clearly a struggle taking place on a universal scale between a system that has the world in its clutches, and something new that's trying to be born. In a sense, this is the story of mankind. But some elements in our situation are particular to this moment. The first is an awareness of the interconnectedness of the world – in both problems and solutions. Of course people with interests in the matter have always been aware of the opportunities that different parts of the world present; trade, conquest and migration are all based on that. But now there's a growing general awareness that the world's problems need to be solved globally. Environmental issues are the most obvious examples, but there are many more – the exponential increase of both wealth and poverty and the obscene gap between rich and poor, wars, migration and the movement of capital, and more - and they're all linked.

We can't pretend that this awareness is shared by everybody, but it's shared by enough politicized groups of - on the whole young - people across the world (can we call this 'the Young Global Collective?') - to make it now unremarkable for us to see Palestinians, say, sending messages of support to Black activists in the US, or to have seen Occupy using Tahrir iconography. This awareness needs to grow, to coalesce, and to use its potential to generate ideas and action. For this we need forms of global conferring, decision-making, solidarity and action – like the TNI enterprise.

The second element that's particular to this moment is that the Internet and related technology seem to hold a promise that global conversations and actions are achievable.

The third element is that the fate of the planet itself is in the balance; this lends acute urgency to the struggle.

On the other hand, the existing power system also sees the issues in global terms – and it is in a better position to create and enact its own global solidarity in pursuit of consolidating and furthering its power. Bilderberg, Davos, G8 are all examples of this.

I think we need to recognise that neoliberalism has not failed. It has not failed its proponents. It understands that it has not delivered its promises to 'the people' and that, therefore, it is under attack. But its answer is to find reasons outside itself for this non-delivery (immigrants, shirkers, Terror) and to repeat its promises more emphatically every time it changes its front players. It plays to the fears of the audience, and it breathes life into the demons in their psyches: jingoism, selfishness, racism, a readiness to embrace violence, etc. The Trump campaign was an example of this.

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The system – being old and in power – has its ideas, arguments, discourse and justifications in place. And embedded within it are the power structures with which it protects and continuously justifies and consolidates itself: the governments, the intelligence, police, security and military establishments, the legal and financial systems that underpin them – and the media.

One of the traits I find really attractive and encouraging in the Young Global Collective is how unconstrained it is by old ideologies. It has powerful ideas - and has ethics and natural justice on its side - but these ideas are not yet translated – how could they be? - into one overarching idea that can develop into a coherent system for running the world. It has not yet found a way to coalesce into a global movement – although we often see bits trying to come together as happened in Cancun and Durban. (My sense is that the Green parties are the most suited to embrace and process the impulses and ideas of the Young Global Collective and forge them into a much-needed vision centred somehow around life, sustainability and human rights).

So what we have now is a situation where the Young Global Collective understands that neoLiberalism is lethally bad for most of the world's population and for the planet itself. It continually challenges various aspects of Neoliberalism in a variety of ways in different parts of the world: activists take on Big Oil, armaments, dismantling the NHS in the UK, police brutality in the US, austerity in Greece, the BDS campaign takes on the Israeli occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and so on. Every one of these challenges raises our hopes.

It used to be a received idea that if millions came out onto the streets and stayed there the existing power structures would collapse and space would be created for something new. Exactly what the new thing would be like no-one knew, but everyone had a good idea what it would *not* be like. And everyone hoped there would be space and time for forms to evolve. Egypt 2011 proved that this was not true. Syria is proving it in even uglier fashion.

The young of the Young Global Collective are to a large extent averse to the structures and practices of power. They – commendably - want to change the world but not to rule it. In other words, most social movements would find it an impossible contradiction to employ, for example, an armed force to defend themselves and spin doctors and PR firms to propagate their ideas.

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In the midst of this conflict there are now the emerging armed actors, like Islamic State. They serve the existing system – by purchasing arms, militarizing struggles, normalizing violence and by providing a Terror Monster for the use of fear-mongering politicians and so a justification for increased surveillance of citizens, increased spending on arms, intelligence and security. In a way, we are witnessing an alliance of Neoliberalism and Terror whipping democracies into fascism.

All these are things we need to be – I'm certain many of us are, constantly – thinking about, trying to imagine and image, to represent and to develop and to counter.

You had the experience of being part of the movements in Cairo and Egypt that inspired the world. Can you tell us something about the culture of those resistance movements? Is there something of that time that remains today?

What happened in Egypt in January 2011, and so embedded itself in the world's imagination, was a moment – a climactic moment - in a process that had started years before, and continues today.

I would particularly like to remind us of two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that were set up in the 1990s: al-Nadim Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, and the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre (HMLC). Both were set up by committed and charismatic professionals: psychiatrist Aida Seif el-Dawla and lawyer Ahmed Seif, who were able to gather around themselves similarly committed and smart teams. Their focus was human rights, and their work revealed the extent to which the abuse of human rights had become a normalised part of how power structures in Egypt are serviced, consolidated and extended.

Both organizations sought to redress and challenge this abuse; al-Nadim treated people who had been tortured, published reports and statistics, and took huge risks campaigning against the Ministry of the Interior and individual officers; HMLC provided people with legal support against a wide spectrum of human rights violations, published information and research papers and sought to take cases to the Constitutional Court and so to change and develop the law itself.

By taking on the Mubarak regime in this way al-Nadim and HMLC started this latest round of resistance and enabled it to take root. The positions they took formed the “personality” of the 2011 revolution.

Both organizations provided their services free, paid their staff in line with Egyptian rates, and were very careful in choosing non-governmental funding sources whose agendas matched their own; this way they avoided the alienation and de-politicization that blights so much NGO work.

Both were clear in that their services were available to everybody regardless of nationality, citizenship, faith, gender, sexual orientation, etc. HMLC, for example, took on the defence of the unpopular and dangerous “gay case”; the Queen Boat. Both were welcoming of refugees. Their audience - their constituency - was the public both at home and abroad. They implemented a vision of human rights and speaking truth to power as international as well as local concerns. In Australia, I once met a Sudanese writer who told me al-Nadim had saved his life and his marriage.

The first decade of the new century saw a number of initiatives appearing in Egypt, all seeking change and challenging power.

HMLC then opened its doors to new initiatives like the Movement for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada (2000) providing these initiatives with a free safe space, resources, information and advice. Lawyers trained in HMLC established their own NGOs supporting freedom of information and expression, workers' rights, land rights, personal rights, economic rights, housing rights and others.

There were movements for the independence of the universities and for the independence of the judiciary and movements simply for ‘change’. ‘Kefaya’ was an umbrella movement for social and political change which put sudden and imaginative protests on the streets from 2005 to 2011.

The 6 April Youth Movement, which worked to establish links with workers' protests, managed to create a reasonable cross-country presence with activists in every major town.

When –after 28 January 2011 - Tahrir - and other locations in Alexandria and other cities - for a period became a liberated space, the culture they created was informed – in its basic principles – by the spirit of the work of the previous decade.

One clear principle was the empowerment of people. Activists taught reading and writing to street children who, for the first time, found a safe space on the street. The Mosireen Film Collective trained anybody who came along to shoot and edit film. Some of the trainees were street children who went on to shoot their own footage with Mosireen equipment. Mosireen documented housing struggles, fishing, industry and legal struggles and amplified people's voices through them.

'Let's Write Our Constitution' was an initiative set up by Alaa Abd el-Fattah (Ahmed Seif's son and one of the most prominent figures of the revolution. Now serving five years in prison for protesting) to elicit a new set of constitutional governing principles from ordinary people across the country.

Freedom of information was another principle, with Mosireen, again, acting not only as producer of footage but as collector, archivist, point of exchange and distributor of footage onto mobile phones. By the end of 2011, when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was killing revolutionaries on the streets, this footage was used by activists in the campaign: Kazeboon ('They Lie'), to expose the lies of the military. Kazeboon achieved what every grassroots movement aims for: non-ownership. People across the country downloaded footage from mobile phones, acquired or borrowed projectors and set up surprise screenings against walls. This was how everyone came to see the huge gap between the rhetoric of the military and what they were doing on the ground.

Another initiative set up by Alaa Abd el-Fattah - who happens to be a software designer - was 'Tweet-Nadwa'; a discussion forum run by Twitter rules. This was one of the activities in which technology and game-playing were used to celebrate diversity, tackle difficult topics and bring people together. The first Tweet-Nadwa brought young people from the Muslim Brotherhood and others who'd left the Brotherhood to talk about their experience with each other and with a wide audience – a meeting that was a ground-breaker for everyone involved. Another was held sitting on the ground in Tahrir, about reforming the police. Applause was not by clapping but by 'twittering' your hands in the air. Attracted by the twittering hands more and more people joined the nadwa and the discussion. Tweets were streamed on a large screen.

In Tahrir there was, overall, a rejection of Neoliberal capitalism. There was true altruism, a rooted belief in human rights and a tremendous emphasis on social justice. People understood that their views about how to achieve social justice ranged from centre right to far left, but it was enough that everyone wanted it. For the moment the work of keeping the sit-ins alive, pressing for the removal of Mubarak and then trying to press for transparent, democratic government provided enough common ground for people to work from.

As Tahrir was periodically under attack by security forces, the army and various related thugs, field hospitals very quickly appeared. The organization and efficiency of these cannot be overstated. Entire systems came into being organically to save and treat people. After the attacks they often stayed in place to provide everyone with free medical care. A culture also grew where many

physicians who did not come to Tahrir made themselves available to perform emergency surgery – particularly eye surgery – for free at their hospitals and clinics.

And, of course, art was everywhere. From simple pavement drawings by people who suddenly realised they were free to make them, to huge sophisticated murals by graffiti artists that expressed – and created – the collective spirit of Tahrir. Graffiti artists recorded events, made statements, created iconic emblems – The Blue Bra, Nefertiti in a Gas Mask, Angel Ultras, Universal Man – and eventually created massive murals which mined the art of every era of Egypt's long past to bring its aesthetic and moral force to bear on the present moment.

There's much more. But I want to close this section with a quote from a young revolutionary, written in December 2011:

Tahrir Square worked because it was inclusive – with every type of Egyptian represented equally. It worked because it was inventive – from the creation of electric and sanitation infrastructure to the daily arrival of new chants and banners. It worked because it was open-source and participatory – so it was unkillable and incorruptible. It worked because it was modern – online communication baffled the government while allowing the revolutionaries to organise efficiently and quickly. It worked because it was peaceful – the first chant that went up when under attack was always 'Selmeyya! Selmeyya!'. It worked because it was just – not a single attacking (thug) was killed, they were all arrested. It worked because it was communal – everyone in there, to a greater or lesser extent, was putting the good of the people before the individual. It worked because it was unified and focused – Mubarak's departure was an unbreakable bond. It worked because everyone believed in it.

Inclusive, inventive, open-source, modern, peaceful, just, communal, unified and focused. A set of ideals on which to build a national politics.

You ask *Is there something of that time that remains today?* The answer has to be 'yes'. Even though thousands of our young people have been killed and thousands have been injured – some without repair; even though tens of thousands are in prison and hundreds of thousands live in trauma.

Even though the country has been through betrayals and massacres, the democratic process has been discredited and the military has established a counter-revolutionary regime more repressive and vicious than any that Egypt has ever known.

Even though there are people who found themselves in the revolution and when it was lost they were lost. Even though there are people who are disillusioned and bitter and people who pretend 2011 was a mass hallucination and people who have gone back to their lives and are trying to forget that the last six years ever happened.

Yet, I would say that everybody who was truly involved in 2011 and who is now working on something – anything, whether they are in Egypt or outside it - is doing work that will one day fuel the next revolutionary wave.

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Enough to note the internet news sites like *MadaMasr*, or *al-Badeel*, or *Yanair* and all the people working in them, still providing news, analysis and commentary. The network of legal and practical support for the prisoners – still functioning despite exhaustion. The human rights organizations born of HMLC, still working despite arrests, freezes on assets and smear campaigns. Aida Seif el-Dawla and her colleagues sitting in their office, refusing to close, and facing down 20 security agents just a few weeks ago. And all of this while arrests disappearances and deaths in prisons and in police stations continue.

From your experience in participating in the Arab Spring and then seeing its hopes and aspirations diverted or crushed, how do you see the role of culture in sustaining and one day delivering on those dreams?

It is through culture that we describe the world and what has happened to it and to us in it. We comment on the present, excavate the past and try to imagine a future – or several. Culture holds up a mirror, criticizes, tries to synthesize; it puts worlds together, opens up feelings, validates them, provides illumination, ideas, respite. Culture is dreaming the dream, it is also enacting it. Culture provides us with the language, the symbols, the imagery to explore, communicate and propose. Without culture no dream is dreamable.

I'd like to give you one tiny, and to me, powerful example of the role of culture creating meaning.

We've all seen the ancient Egyptian symbol of the scarab with a disc between its front legs. Well, some artist, thousands of years ago, watched a black beetle lay its eggs in a bit of animal dung. The beetle rolled the dung and rolled it and rolled it till the eggs were encased in a ball of dung at least twice its own size. Then the beetle dug a hole. Then, moving backwards and using its hind legs, it rolled the ball of dung deep into the hole. It then came out of the hole, filled it up and went away. The artist watched the space where the hole had been until one day, struggling out of the earth, there emerged 15, 20 baby beetles. As they found their feet and shook the dung and the earth off their wings and started to take their first tentative flying leaps the artist saw the new little beetles' luminous bright blue wings catching the light. Iridescent, sparkling little joyous flickers of sapphire blue against the earth. The Scarab is the dung beetle, the Disc is both the ball of dung and the sun that gives light and life to everything. For the reader, thousands of years ago, the image of the 'Scarab holding the Disc' spoke of 'becoming', of transformation and emerging. Just think of all the elements that image brought together, and of the power of what it proposed.

"Culture" is often regarded - and may be presented by political and religious authorities - as being both homogeneous and static, yet we know that there are always fault lines and voices that don't get a hearing or are suppressed. We also know that well-intentioned external efforts to address harmful or gender-restrictive traditional practices can have the effect of further entrenching them. How, then, can changes happen and be sustained?

I think change happens organically within each community/culture group. The change is for the better – in other words towards more freedom, openness, transparency etc – when people are confident and not defensive. 'Outside' intervention should only ever be at the request and

according to the demands and guidelines of trusted and authentic 'inside' groups. So a feminist group from Somalia, say, wanting to work on feminist issues in Norway, would only do so in partnership with credible, rooted Norwegian groups and within their programme.

What does a culture of transformation, democracy and justice look like?

The society we dream of would be one in which no child is born disadvantaged, where basic education and healthcare are free, where people don't have to worry about survival, where everyone has enough time and resources to fulfil their potential as they see it, where people are truly involved in the decisions that will affect them, where we respect the earth and all natural creatures on it.

I believe that the world needs to be engaged with and run as one unit.

I believe that the processes of democracy unless accompanied by certain safeguards are merely a tool for the system. When people have to make a decision on an issue they need to have all the information that's relevant to that issue, be able to understand it, and be free of any need or coercion that affects their decision. Without transparency, freedom of information, education and guaranteed human rights there is no democracy.

Finally, this is a statement that I've been making for a while, and I would like to make it again here, as particularly relevant to TNI:

"If I could decree a universal education programme, I would make every child in the world learn a brief history of the entire world that focussed on the common ground. It would examine how people perceive their relationship to each other, to the planet, and to the universe, and it would see human history as an ongoing, joint project, where one lot of people picked up where another had left off."

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This essay appears in TNI's sixth annual State of Power report. This year, it examines the cultural processes that are used by corporations, military and privileged elites to make their power seem 'natural' and 'irreversible'. It also explores how social movements can harness creativity, art and cultural forces to resist and to build lasting social and ecological transformation. Visit www.tni.org/stateofpower2017 to read all the essays and contributions.



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