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Seeing Social Change Through the Institutional Lens: Universities in Egypt, 2011–2018

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Egypt, 11 February 2011. Something changed. As is widely known, after eighteen days during which crowds of demonstrators occupied squares in Cairo and many other cities throughout the country, bravely resisting attacks from both police and different kinds of agitators and bandits, the President of Egypt for the last thirty years, Hosni Mubarak, stepped down and power was transferred to a military junta. The magnitude of the event is hard to underestimate; joyful celebrations in Egypt quickly became globally relevant, with iconic references to Tahrir Square spreading to countries as diverse as Libya, Syria and Yemen, Israel,

[1]The Egyptian revolution cannot be reduced to Tahrir Square or Cairo, as correctly pointed out by many scholars and commentators; still, it is difficult to ignore the iconicity of Tahrir Square occupied by cheering crowds for many months on at least a weekly basis, nor its place in Egyptian history (see for example Said 2015).

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Spain, and the US.[1] Even if the direction and speed of change has since evolved in different ways—at the time of writing a restoration of the pre-revolutionary order is fully in place, and 2011 is a pale memory rather than the foundation-stone of a different order—and even if many commentators have since argued against the notion that it was a revolution, as it resulted in almost no alteration of the control of the means of production or the security apparatus, it is indisputable that something happened in 2011, the magnitude of which was immediately apparent.

Many commentators pointed out that most of the protesters were young people—not surprisingly, in a country where more than half the population is aged 24 and under—and educated, at the very least in using new media and organizing spectacular forms of demonstration. Across the region, protests have gained a stronger impetus in countries with a solid educational background: "Spearheaded by educated youth, the Arab uprisings have been brought to fruition by the masses of ordinary people (men, women, Muslim and non-Muslim) who have mobilized at an astonishing scale against authoritarian regimes in pursuit of social justice, democratic governance, and dignity"[2] (Bayat 2011, 386).

While the protests in Egypt, as in Tunisia and elsewhere, were fueled by lack of political freedom and oppression, a major factor in escalating action has been the discontent over the crisis of education, particularly the expansion of higher education without simultaneous growth in job opportunities for graduates, leading them to joblessness. However, a direct causal process between the structural condition of youth unemployment and civilian unrest is hard to trace.[3] What is more relevant for my purposes here, however, is that the dimension of youth, education, entrance into the labor market, and the failure of the state to act on its promises were all part of a metanarrative of change explicitly adopted both within and outside the country.

[2]Rebecca Warden (2011) comments: "Once the protests broke out in Tahrir Square, many of the cohort of civic-minded active young people that universities raised in the past years were quick to join in. As the protests gathered strength, the protestors soon became highly organized with medical stations, cleaning brigades, security checks to stop anyone bringing a weapon into the square or small stands where people could leave their mobile phones to recharge, to give but a few examples."

[3]It is moreover a recurrent phenomenon in the modern Egyptian history (Abdalla 1985).

Although I had lived in Egypt for a couple of years carrying out studies on citizenship, youth, migration, religious minorities, and educational institutions, the 2011 events were unexpected and positively astonishing—it seemed that the people had finally found the ability to speak after all. At the time, I had started research on the university system in Egypt, thanks to my participation, in 2010, at a Social Science Research Council (SSRC)-funded project on Arab universities, with Egypt and Tunisia, Lebanon and Kuwait as case studies.[4] The 2011 revolution, and the emphasis it placed on youth and education, inspired me to revisit previous studies in light of the changes occurring; as early as 2012, the SSRC commissioned a revision of the research carried out in 2010 in light of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (see Cantini 2015).[5] At about at the same time, I started planning a new research project, which eventually started in 2013, on doctoral studies at Egyptian public universities with the aim of linking the changes in the provision of doctoral studies to the revolution. By studying the university as an institution, I tried to understand the kind of change that was happening while it was taking place. Rather than limiting the analysis to the conditions of change, I wanted to understand how people gave meaning to change by inscribing it in different metanarratives.

Therefore, in this chapter, I address the question of change at two different levels. First, I look at how university administrations were practically affected by the events of 2011 and how the people working in these offices reacted to the revolution. Second, I pay attention to metanarratives of change, or on how people made sense of and justified their actions through change. More precisely, taking the university as the unit of analysis, I discuss whether and how socio-political change, as initiated

[4]I had already a well-established interest in how educational institutions, and universities in particular, shape the lives and trajectories of the young people who attend them. As I have argued elsewhere, universities are spaces where critique can emerge at multiple levels, even when under tight control (Cantini 2016a).

[5]As indicated above, I am familiar with the debates about whether it was a revolution in the proper sense of the term or not, and agree that it was not a revolution from an analytical point of view; continuities from the previous order were always present (for an early analysis, see Kienle 2012). Yet this was how it was labeled and experienced, and I use the term here in an emic way.

by the 2011 revolution, translated within the university as an institution and how it evolved into discourses about change.

I do this by relating the macro level of change pertaining to the national political and social realms to the ways in which the metanarratives of change found their way both into the words and the deeds of the people I interviewed during my research, as well as into institutional practices and structures. The aim is to introduce a way of studying change through a focus on the university and the role of metanarratives of change: how the latter frame the ways in which actors understand and represent what they are doing, and how these metanarratives are contested.

Through this approach, I offer methodological and theoretical reflections on the possibilities offered by the ethnographic study of institutions to address the question of social change, in particular dealing with both changes within the institution itself and how the institution fosters and sustains continuity and change. The university as an institution was a rather unspectacular site of struggle, even during the most turbulent moments of recent years. And yet it was one of the sites in which the struggle between revolutionaries and conservative forces played out at different levels, and thus its analysis offers a multi-layered understanding of change, by looking at how institutional change is connected to changes in the grammar of justification adopted by different actors.

As I have shown in my ethnography of the university in Jordan (Cantini 2016a), following Luc Boltanski (2009), institutions have, above all, the function of constructing a "reality," a way of understanding the functioning of the institution itself and its role, the "whatness of what it is," which is inevitably challenged by the "world" or everything that is. Thus, discourses on excellence in teaching and research may be confronted by the practical constraints, known to all, that make the "reality" of the institution sound hollow. For instance, governance reforms regulating access to certain courses could be presented as a way of opening up the university to more students, but are understood by most people as a way of increasing profit. As a result, institutions are inherently fragile because critique can always draw events from the world that contradict the logic of an institution's reality: the two registers of confirmation and critique coexist, and institutional orders or state of

affairs are to be understood as inherently prone to critique even under the most reactionary circumstances (see Cantini 2016a and Cantini, forthcoming, for further discussion of what understanding the university as an institution entails).[6]

In what follows I further problematize this inherent tension at the core of how institutions work by discussing how different temporalities embedded in metanarratives of change, or the interplay between different layers of change, complicate the representations of the ways in which institutions function.[7] Showing how different actors talk about change, and looking at disputes and justifications around change, I caution against adopting explanatory schemes too easily, particularly when building narratives, and suggest looking at institutions instead to see how contradictory and overlapping notions of change are created, sustained, and contested, even in times of political repression.

A key aspect of the process of attributing meaning and value to change is the constitution of discontinuity. As I show in the cases I present below, the metanarratives of change vary greatly within the same institution at any given time; whether administrators at a private, for-profit university acknowledge the effects of the revolution on their institution depends of course on the moment in which they are asked, and the accuracy of their answers remains an open question. Similarly, professors and students alike have an understanding of recent changes in the provision of doctoral studies that may or may not have a direct relation to the broader societal changes that are occurring.

This chapter addresses the different scales of temporality at play and how they overlap in the daily experience of people involved in universities, looking at how claims to continuity or discontinuity shape the form and meaning of change. Discrepancies between temporalities hint

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[6]It is clear that a complex institution like a university does not evolve in a linear way—adaptation is always at play, particularly at moments of repression, and as widely noted in many studies, institutions are rather resistant to change (see Bammer 2015; Browne 2015). Even studies that emphasize continuity in institutions, however, recognize that work is required to maintain the logic of its reproduction, à la Bourdieu.

[7]In this sense, the proposed model of change is based on a kind of pragmatic analysis, one that is "capable of taking account of the ways in which people engage in action, their justifications, and the meaning they give to their actions" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, 3, quoted in Browne 2015, 71).

at the distinction of *kairos* and *chronos* proposed by Sian Lazar (following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who in turn draw inspiration from Martin Heidegger), where the latter constitutes the regular passage of time while the former is the "moment of rupture where the 'to-come' is made evident, 'the opportune moment that ruptures the monotony and repetitiveness of chronological time' […] the question becomes how to either recognize or create the *kairos*, the special moment of opportunity for revolution, within the *chronos* of everyday political time" (Lazar 2014, 102).[8] Therefore, I would finally like to argue that a key aspect of the process of attributing meaning and value to change is a stating and staging of discontinuities in overlapping and sometimes conflicting ways.

"We All Support the Revolution": Private Egyptian Universities in 2012

"We all support the revolution," claimed a senior professor at October 6 University (O6U), the private, for-profit university in the homonymous satellite city 35 kilometers west of Cairo, interviewed during the second phase of the SSRC research in May 2012. As mentioned, the second phase had the explicit goal of finding out whether the 2011 revolution had already produced changes at the institutional level. Support for the revolution just before the 2012 presidential elections seemed to be the official line repeated by almost all administrators and professors I interviewed. This view was aligned with the spirit of the time, when the idea that public political debate had become the new standard was perhaps at its highest, despite the already worrisome signs that the revolution still needed to be fought for.

A more relaxed atmosphere was clearly noticeable on campus, with bills announcing public events and talks, the university security guards slightly less visible, and university personnel more favorable to the presence of a foreign researcher. However, this more relaxed atmosphere

[8] Bammer (2015) cautions that other distinctions are necessary, for example between change we can influence and change that is beyond our control, and the difference between scale and tempo of change, where tempo, the pace of the events, is unpredictable, while the scale of change depends on the response from individuals and communities affected by change.

did not prevent an administrator denying me access to the documents outlining the internal regulations of the university on the grounds that it was sensitive information; I was also not allowed to move freely around campus or to speak with whomever I wanted to. The landscape of O6U bore no immediate reference to the revolution through such things as graffiti, posters, or any visible reference signaling change, and my interviews reflected a similar absence of any meaningful change at a deeper, institutional level. A few minor protests were organized on campus after the Revolution by students demanding greater representation, and employees and junior professors demanding better wages, but these occurred on only one occasion during the vacation, as one administrator noted with evident sarcasm. Their demands were met, and in the case of the employees and junior faculty their salaries were raised "even before they asked for it," as he put it (Cantini 2016b).

The possibility of hosting external guests, either as speakers or as attendees, and indeed the very idea of holding talks during the semester, was a clear marker of discontinuity compared to the first phase of the research, which I carried out in 2010. A professor was keen to emphasize this change; not only was she allowed to invite external guests to her classes without first seeking permission, she was also allowed to use contrasting ideas as a means of teaching in her classes. A senior administrator explained to me that student participation in elections and on governing committees was actively sought. One of the first things the administrators told me, with pride, soon after the claim that "we all support the Revolution," was that they had created a student union with free elections in each faculty. It turned out, however, that having some form of student representation in the faculty had not been changed but had now been "put into practice," as one dean explained, implying that during my first fieldwork period in 2010 I had simply been given a description of the system as it existed on paper.

The system allows for faculty elections—I was even shown a ballot box—but when I asked if the students had organized into political parties the answer was invariably that there was no need for that, and that they knew each other and were selected on the grounds of their capabilities. Elected students cannot take part in university governance, even at the faculty level (not to mention on the University Council). When I

inquired about their actual role, I was told that they collect students' grievances, and proposals for cultural and social activities, and submit them to the dean, who in turn asks for funding from the university and informs the students whether the proposed activity is feasible. The vice-president for student affairs underlined during our interview that the university is increasingly willing to listen to students. Toward this goal, a complaints and suggestions box had been provided near the vice-president's office, and he guaranteed that such boxes had been installed in each faculty; whether any concrete measure is taken depends on the willingness of the upper echelons of the administration (Cantini 2016b). It thus seemed apparent to me that the grammar of justification represented by the revolution had not impacted the workings of the institution in any fundamental way. This has something to do with how private universities came into being.

The introduction of private universities occurred in the context of what was represented as a public-sector crisis. While the American University in Cairo has existed since 1919 as a private, non-profit organization with its roots in missionary activities and Al-Azhar University, despite its previous centuries of existence, was incorporated within the public sector in 1961, Egyptian for-profit, private universities had been unthinkable in a state that had made education one of the fundamental services provided by the socialist state to all its citizens. They were only allowed in 1992 (Law 101), after heated debate (Farag 1997), and the first four private universities of this kind, O6U among them, opened their doors in 1996.

The link between these private, for-profit universities and the new satellite cities around Cairo should not come as a surprise. Since the beginning of the Mubarak era in 1981, urban planners and political elites have argued that population density was consuming the promises of economic growth, and the government deployed laws, investment, policies, and infrastructure to subsidize and build satellite cities in the desert to facilitate the "productive redistribution of the population" (Ismail 2006). Vast satellite cities such as 6 October or 10 Ramadan, established in 1979 but scarcely populated until the beginning of the 1990s, attract manufacturers, often linked to international companies and government supporters, which benefit from tax deductions and cheaper rents (see

Denis 2011). Private universities are part of this landscape, along with shopping malls, gated communities, and private companies.

Despite predictions of failure and largely well-founded criticism of the overall environmental and social sustainability of these new settlements, it seems that the political instability that ensued after 2011 and the difficulties of living in increasingly hard circumstances in Cairo's quarters had the effect of making these settlements even more desirable. Recent studies show that a few of them, in particular Rehab and Sheikh Zayed, with their new restaurants, shopping malls, and leisure venues, are attracting at least some of the middle class along with the upper classes, who are experiencing suffocation in the old city perimeters (Abaza 2018). This contrasts with the idea of a "phantom luxury class" evoked by Amar and Singerman (2006). Similarly, despite widespread predictions, including my own, about their ultimate unsustainability and very limited impact on the broader market for higher education, private for-profit universities seem to be on the rise, particularly in scientific sectors promising better employability. While these developments (satellite cities, private for-profit universities) evolved according to a different temporality than the 2011 revolution, it became clear that they would profit from the feeling of insecurity and chaos brought forth by the political turmoil.

Private universities did witness workers' protests, mainly about their salaries and labor conditions, and some student protests—although these latter reasons for demonstrating were less clear.[9] As mentioned, this happened even at O6U, although I did not witness any during my

[9]In 2012 I had the impression that such private, for-profit universities could not possibly be associated with the revolution in any meaningful sense, and that the link with the new settlements in the desert was somehow revealing a new class of citizens who had benefited from liberalization policies since the '70s and had continued to do so under Mubarak. In my opinion this new class had to be considered as leaning toward stability rather than revolution. At a project conference in Cairo in early 2013, this perspective was heavily criticized; private universities were also witnessing student and worker movements, and to draw too close a link between the new settlements and the for-profit, private universities with a class of supporters of Mubarak's regime, or at least of people not in favor of a continued revolution, seemed unacceptable to the scholars and activists who confronted my hypothesis. However, most of the people I interviewed then in these satellite cities associated the word "revolution" with problems that impacted their lives, namely *baltajiyya* (bandits) and the need to protect themselves and their families. On the positive side, my respondents often mentioned how amazing it was that the Egyptian people had managed not to lose a school or academic year, and that the revolution had only minimally affected the university.

research. As far as I could gather, the demands were not revolutionary in a broader sense, and similar demands were being voiced on a daily basis in almost all sectors of the economy. Moreover, when their demands were met, the workers continued their work with no further challenges to the structure of their institutions. Similarly, students' demands, although linked in some cases to some aspect of the revolution, did not challenge the logic of the institution, neither its reality regarding its private, for-profit setting nor the new class structure induced by the satellite cities. At the German University in Cairo, for example, demonstrations were related to the killing of a fellow student at Port Said[10] amidst fights at the stadium during a football match that caused more than 70 casualties, and at the British University, students protested rising tuition fees and demanded new accreditation with the partner university in Britain (Mahmoud 2013).[11] In any case, the more political demands were ignored by university administrators as soon as the political climate changed. The situation happened to be rather different in public universities, where the revolutionary struggle became apparent within the functioning of the institution.

Public Universities During the Revolutionary Years, 2011–2013

From their inception, universities have been one of the main places to challenge the existing order and nurture dissent, and at different moments in Egyptian modern history they have been at the forefront of political and social turmoil, particularly in the 1940s and '70s (see Abdalla 1985), and again from 2003. Abdelrahman (2015) includes university campuses among the mobilization hotbeds from 2003 to the

[10] In February 2012, clashes during a football match resulted in more than 70 casualties, and a ban on spectators attending football matches that lasted months. The student was among the victims.

[11] Students at the American University in Cairo were very active in many respects, from demanding the building of an archive documenting the revolution to other demands, at times in cooperation with other universities in the country. But AUC is not a for-profit, private university; it has a different mission, history, and orientation.

present that eventually led to the revolution, and as Abdalla clearly shows, waves of student demonstrations have been recurrent throughout Egyptian modern history. As many commentators have noted, in 2011 and in the years directly following, activists had access to many repertoires of action and mobilization, and were in explicit conversation with the "'70's generation," the last generation to have seen such intense political activity.[12]

Political unrest and institutional critique pertain to the very functioning of the university as an institution, in Egypt as elsewhere, to its *chronos*, although forces of stability seem to prevail at ordinary times. The momentum for change, however, necessitates a rupture, a *kairos*, which did occur in 2011. Universities were gathering points for some of the marches during the 18 days of uprising, particularly the February 8 demonstration that led to the fall of Mubarak. They became sites of political activity soon after his resignation, retaining their strong mobilizing power and taking on a clearly visible role in the series of strikes and protests that marked the country during the military council period from 2011 to 2012 and into Mohamed Morsi's presidency.

The student movement was at its peak from 2011 to the first half of 2013. At the beginning of the second academic term and following the January 25 revolution, Cairo University, like many other Egyptian universities, witnessed a general revolt against existing academic conditions (AFTE 2017). It began with the dissolution of student union, whose members were widely believed to have been elected under heavy political control and through the exclusion of some political groups, and subsequently the organization of a new election. Diverse political ideologies were represented, and students were allowed to mobilize around their causes. Students, faculty, and even some administrative staff organized many protests, among the main results of which were new student bylaws allowing their initiatives greater independence from external controls, the

[12]This analysis exceeds the scope of this chapter; here it is enough to say that some of the most prominent activists in 2011 came from politically active families, often with members who had also been active in the '70s. The phenomenon was so widespread that it was also discussed in the press, leading to discussions about the similarities and differences between the two movements, and particularly after 2013, on how to cope with the failure of challenging existing power structures.

expulsion of all police from campuses, new spaces for political groups in universities, and the free exercise of these new rights. This was evident in the increased number of protests, sit-ins, seminars, and bulletins, and the establishment of political clubs and societies (AFTE 2017, 12). These initiatives mostly originated in public universities.

The possibility of relative freedom of political activity led to some significant results, the most evident of which was the student union elections in March 2013. Students belonging to various revolutionary and secular political movements formed strong electoral alliances and managed to achieve a sweeping victory over students belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, the party then leading the government of the country. This election resulted in ending decades of Muslim Brotherhood dominance over student elections (Shams El-Din 2014). The victory of the non-Islamist student movement was an indication of the erosion of the Brotherhood's influence on university campuses, its major power base up to then, and of what was to come in the next few months.

Other changes pertained more closely to the functioning of the university as an institution. The election of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University was a major event in the context of widespread student demonstrations demanding the ousting of university provosts and in calling for elections for senior academic posts, in substitution of the existing (and, after 2014, reinstated) system of appointments made from above (AFTE 2013). The struggle around this election, which explicitly echoed similar struggles about the independence of the university as an institution since its inception (see Reid 1990), became one of the university's major achievements after the revolution, an indicator that real change was indeed taking place also at the institutional level.

Things were never straightforward, however, and the direction of change was never uncontested. Some actors of change started to gain momentum well before 2011, and seem to have actually lost steam at the peak of the revolutionary moment. Particularly relevant to a discussion of how change happens through different temporalities is the 9 March Group for Academic Freedom, established by 25 faculty members at different Egyptian universities in 2003 in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, with the intention to challenge the political control imposed

on academics.[13] In just two years, the group's membership grew to thousands of academics from a wide range of disciplines and universities. The movement has been involved in university faculty strikes and protests, both before and after the revolution, for better pay and pensions as well as for greater investment in the higher education sector and administrative reforms. The core public demands, however, concentrate on the defense of academic freedom and the freedom of scientific research, even if they were always opposed by conservative forces within the institution and a minoritarian interest within the group itself (Abul-Ghar and Doss 2009).

In 2008 I had attended a couple of the conferences organized by the group, one at Minya University and the other at Cairo University. While struggles against political interventions on campus, from security services or the police, were always at the forefront of the group's activities, its biggest problem has mainly been internal, institutional, and organic. This was evident at the meeting I attended, with professors from the more prestigious universities and faculties being self-critical and professors from weaker institutions praising the system, and looking unaware of, or disconnected from, the goals of the group, namely to fight for greater academic freedom, concentrating instead on demands for salaries' increase. "The bulk of the university is corrupt and mediocre," argued one of the promoters of the group in an interview; many professors have "navigated hard times by engaging in questionable practices: giving private lessons; taking endless sabbaticals without surrendering their posts; not teaching for the number of hours that they should; assigning their own textbooks and favoring large lecture classes to maximize their profits" (Lindsay 2013). The fight to change academic practices "is a much more difficult fight to engage in, […] you're going against the academic culture, against your colleagues, your dean, […] the person you share an office with" (ibid.). This points to a necessary institutional change that has to be kept distinct from the political struggle, although of

[13]The 9 March inspiration and name came from the date, in 1932, when the first president of Cairo University, Lutfi al-Sayyed, resigned in protest against the government's decision to dismiss Taha Hussein, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and a renowned intellectual, to placate clerics' anger about his book on pre-Islamic poetry, which was regarded as blasphemous (Abul-Ghar and Doss 2009).

course the two are closely related. After the revolution, even for members of the group, the interest went into the political struggle, whereas the badly needed institutional reforms were left behind, as I will discuss in the next section.

All of the cases briefly presented here can be understood as showing different dimensions of change, from the political to the more institutional struggles, before and after 2011, to point out at the working of different temporalities. It should be added that this access to new forms of liberty, the opening up of what is possible and all the new stimuli offered by this situation, generated a considerable amount of uncertainty and even anxiety (for a similar reflection in a different context, see Dakhli 2016). This was true not only for those experiencing the changes and struggles but also for the researcher trying to make sense of at least some of them.

At some point, the developments felt so overwhelming and omnidirectional that one simply had to choose where to focus one's attention. In introducing this section I mentioned that while some events and protests were clearly inscribed in previous repertoires of action and had a clearer political outlook, other initiatives were oriented toward the reform of the institution.[14] As I made clear in the introduction, my own analytical interests lean in this latter direction, and despite some frustration at not being able to follow the more exciting and eventful developments, I decided to stick to what at times looked decidedly out of focus and felt lacking in momentum, but was closely related to the necessary institutional changes advocated by the proponents of the 9 March Group. I thus decided to focus on one of the core aims of universities, where the discourse of crisis was predominant: the production of knowledge through research.

[14]The two perspectives are not in contrast, of course. It is necessary again to remember that, despite all the clashes and demonstrations, not a single semester or an exam session was lost. The university as an institution showed considerable resilience and continuity, in my view, due to its absolute relevance for most Egyptians, regardless of their political orientations.

Change After 2013

After the "second revolution," the coup d'état with popular support on June 2013, the conflict between the military and the supporters of the ousted president quickly dispersed any hope of meaningful change in university life. Some campuses, in particular at Cairo University and Al-Azhar, became organizational hubs due to their proximity to two major protest sites and were places from which demonstrations started—albeit this time not in the direction of Tahrir Square. Moreover, protests by Students Against the Coup, an umbrella group headed by Muslim Brotherhood students, were usually confronted by students supporting the interim government and security forces, leaving those who supported neither the military nor the Brotherhood stuck between a rock and a hard place. In the 2013–2014 academic year, 18 students were killed in anti-government demonstrations and 998 were arrested. Hundreds of university students across Egypt, almost half of whom were at Al-Azhar University, were suspended for their alleged role in on-campus violence and protests (AFTE 2017, 24).

However, attending classes during this period, one could easily remain oblivious of these events. For instance, in the late spring of 2014, soon after the beginning of my project on doctoral studies, I attended two seminars by the same professor of Sociology, one at his Department at Cairo University and the other at a research center not far from the campus, which he directed and where he has run a reading seminar for years. The seminar at Cairo University was very quiet, with seven students attending. The discussion was led by the professor, who does the most of the talking while Ph.D. candidates asked some questions. The seminar at the research center was somewhat better attended, with perhaps two dozen graduate students including M.A.s, and it looked more like a lecture, with an assistant to the professor delivering a frontal lecture while the students sat quietly, most taking notes. In comparison to what was happening on campus, with almost daily clashes between supporters of the deposed President Morsi and loyalists of the present regime, the scenes looked unreal. The immediate feeling was that action was evidently taking place somewhere else.

The state's effort to regain control of the campuses was not limited to violent acts and extended to the institutional level soon after President Morsi's dismissal. Most of the major gains of the 2011–2013 period were reversed, with new laws and regulations treating universities as military facilities under military jurisdiction, with the consequence that many students were referred to military trial. University presidents were given the right to expel students, and exercising freedom of expression and freedom of assembly at universities was effectively criminalized (AFTE 2017, 30). The new system of elections put into place after the 2011 revolution was reversed, as was the system for electing university presidents and deans, who are now appointed by the President of Egypt. The system had actually been more decentralized under the deposed President Hosni Mubarak, who at least allowed the prime minister to appoint deans (Abd Rabou 2015).

In the next academic years, 2014–2015 and 2015–2016, it became apparent that the authorities were determined not to relinquish their control of the universities. While the actual numbers of students killed and arrested gradually fell, this was due to a decrease in the number of protests through the combined effects of repression and disenchantment in a large stratum of the population, rather than to a change in the government's approach to autonomy in university life. As in the seminars I describe above, some normality was restored on campus amidst a widespread context of disillusionment on the part of those who believed in revolution. By 2016 a new "normalization" had been achieved; after many years of activism, campuses went forcibly quiet, as they had under the most repressive phases of previous governments. *Kairos*, the moment for change, was gone.

Conflicting Metanarratives of Change: Revolution and Internationalization

The events succinctly reported above should give an idea of the dramatic changes in the higher education sector, among many other sectors, in Egypt in the post-2013 phase. Let me now turn to other metanarratives of change in the university context, both at the institutional level

and in the discourses and practices of the people I encountered during my research on doctoral studies. While the overall political struggles are less relevant to a discussion of change through the institutional lens, it is nonetheless not hard to imagine the effects that these violent and visible clashes had on academic life, and particularly on the ability to do research.

The scenes at the seminars I described above show a rather placid and uneventful setting despite the ongoing clashes. While they do represent a rather traditional picture of doctoral studies, with training at centers that become somehow affiliated with single professors, or at best to a network of professors, and an overall sense of boredom and remoteness from any significant action, the scenes should not be taken as indicating the somewhat dire conditions of knowledge production in Egypt. The severe political and social conditions and constraints that confront researchers are known preconditions: a sort of public secret.[15] At the same time, however, doctoral studies have been an integral part of Egyptian universities since their inception, and benefited from high status and consideration for some decades until they entered crisis mode in the 1970s, despite a continued increase in quantity and their central role at establishing research credentials (Cantini 2021).

Doctoral studies, despite their seeming remoteness from any consideration of change, are indeed the object of reform attempts—in particular, the creation of doctoral schools, with their credits and courses, mirrors parallel developments elsewhere—and in general there is a new focus, at least in public discourse, on the necessity of research as a precondition for accessing the knowledge economy.

In the limited space available here I limit myself to point to just one factor that I find particularly interesting in a discussion of institutional change: the newly founded Euro-Mediterranean Studies Program (Euromed) at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science (FEPS) at Cairo University. It is an ambitious attempt at developing an at

[15] A recent analysis shows that research in Arab countries is made an "impossible promise" by the persistence of political and societal control over knowledge production and the uncertain status of academic freedom. In the social sciences and humanities there is a double impossibility, since in addition to the impediments to research at large there is the poor consideration devoted to such disciplines (Hanafi and Arvanitis 2016).

least partially international study program at one of the most prestigious public faculties in Egypt, which is itself already the object of several attempts at internationalization, in particular through its curricular programs in English and French. There have been several efforts to internationalize higher education at Egyptian public universities, in particular thanks to the many full Ph.D. scholarship programs offered by the Ministry of Higher Education. Egypt's former Minister of Higher Education pointed out that in 2011 and 2012, 3000 Ph.D. students were granted scholarships, including 500 from Cairo University alone (Kubbara 2021). The main disadvantage of these programs, however, is that many grantees do not return to Egypt, depriving their country of the possibility of benefiting from the knowledge they have acquired: the well-known brain drain phenomenon. Euro-Med was initiated to counter this. In its first phase from 2002 to 2006 it was a TEMPUS (Trans-European Mobility Program for University Studies)-funded joint M.A. program with faculty drawn from four European universities. When the European funding was terminated, the faculty decided to continue this program as a doctoral course, which was initiated in 2007. The latter, now discontinued (see Kubbara 2021), was the only doctoral program taught in English at an Egyptian public university with local staff, and higher tuition fees in comparison to the regular doctoral program offered in Arabic. This attempt at internationalization, which is currently on hold, created many tensions among faculty and staff; and the actual quality of training received and of the theses produced by the program were subject to close scrutiny and debate.

This example clearly shows that some institutional change was taking place in parallel to the 2011 events, yet in a different temporality. Institutional change is slow, but internationalization features prominently within this context, and knowledge production is a core business of the university. These trajectories and discourses are largely independent from the revolution, predate it and continued after it, not without change. They are, however, not disconnected from the political and institutional changes discussed in the previous sections; they pertain to the institution, and affect the practices of those who people it.

Where Is Change, and How Can It Be Studied?

I have accounted for some of the major changes in the higher education sector at a time of the Revolution, both at the macro level and in my own ethnographic research, in the discourses adopted by people I interviewed and in the institutional practices that could be observed. At the macro level the directionality of change seems clear and has been discussed extensively in both the mass media and academic discourse: there was an initial period when revolution stood a chance, or was at least alive, something that is normally taken to have happened between 2011 and 2012. Then a second phase, after the election of the first President coming from the Muslim Brotherhood, in which the struggle became tripartite, with the old regime and the military on one side, the Muslim Brothers on the other, and the revolutionaries on neither side. After 2013, the struggles in 2013–2014 and the ensuing repression, Egypt seems to have resorted to an order similar to what was in place before 2011. On the other hand, change happening within the university is complicated by its unclear relationship to the political and social change happening all around it, and the different temporalities at play. Actors operating within the institution, however, largely adopted grammars of justification that were informed by the broad political developments. It is at this intersection of different metanarratives of change that I now focus my analysis.

There are two major ways in which change within the higher education sector is discussed, and they reveal some of the complexities of accounting for change through an institutional lens. The first, coming from those who were actively involved in the 2011 revolution, is one of depression and silence as a consequence of the severe backlash. The extent to which the revolution penetrated the university as an institution was never altogether clear—changes such as those to student bylaws and the election of deans at Cairo University were counterbalanced by relative indifference toward the political and societal changes as seen at O6U, among other universities. Even when the institutional changes were successful, they were quickly reversed as soon as the political climate changed. Importantly, the very possibility of change was negated by those who opposed the revolution, who invoked the “nature”

of students at private universities or the necessity of keeping the universities under tight political control. The analysis of doctoral studies at Egyptian public universities falls squarely within this negation of change due to the perceived irrelevance of the topic compared to the magnitude of change promised by the revolution and the disillusionment and disengagement under the increased repression. Despite some hints of a possible alternative trajectory, for example the fact that soon after 2011 several students at Cairo University registered for the doctoral program with proposed theses that directly referred to the revolution, doctoral programs were not really part of this metanarrative of change.

The second perspective or metanarrative of change stems from the recognition that the higher education sector is indeed part of a global endeavor, subject to reforms, geared toward innovation and quality, in which a metanarrative of change is indeed posited as necessary and welcome. The overarching narrative, however, links privatization to internationalization and presents an orientation toward profit-making, justified by the diminished funds coming from the government and enshrined in a new ideology in which education is less of a right and more of a good, to be placed on the market like other goods.

Most actors, particularly those who oppose political change, tend to negate the relationship between these two metanarratives of change—institutional change would have almost nothing to do with the overall political situation. In this logic, it is interesting to see how reforms, or plans for reform, seem to have some capacity for navigating through hard times and to resurface as soon as there is a chance. In August 2014, the government announced an eight-year plan to reform the higher education sector and bring it into line with the provisions of the 2014 Constitution, which sets the level of public spending on education, with the goals of "reforming the educational system to reflect the needs of the marketplace and incorporate the competencies necessary for innovative and entrepreneurial thinking" (Sawahel 2014). More recently, the government announced plans to remedy the 'damage' done to the education system over the past 30 years, that is in their view not offering education in line with market needs (Bothwell 2016).

The overall stability of the system and the persistence of a clear direction for reforms, toward increased internationalization and privatization,

are remarkable, despite governmental hesitation and, at least partly, societal opposition. In particular, the process of privatization is still ongoing, and has not been challenged by any ministry of any political inclination. For the more politically active, however, these two metanarratives of change are bound to one another, and the remarkable resilience of the reforms, or plans for reform, was clearly linked to the repression of revolutionary forces; in this sense, in contrast to the *chronos* of the reforms, the *kairos* of the revolution simply did not last long enough to have a meaningful impact on the direction of change imparted on the education sector. The inertia of the institution, seen in this way, is much less an absence of change than a change in a different direction altogether. The persistence, and likely proliferation in the coming years, of for-profit enterprises which understand academic freedom in only a very limited way could be understood as going against the ideals of the revolution. In a similar vein, neglecting or outright negating of the institutional conditions for doing research, particularly in the fields of the social sciences and humanities, could also be seen as a way of preventing further radical attempts to reflect on social and political conditions with the ultimate aim of changing them.

Conclusion: What Does an Institutional Lens Tells Us About Change?

The higher education system seems to have navigated through the most turbulent years in recent Egyptian history with few practical consequences: not a single semester has been lost since the 2011 revolution, and despite all the political turbulences the institution has continued to function with very little change, or at least little change that can be imputed to the revolution. The gains of 2011–2012 had already been rescinded by 2014–2015, and other, surviving institutional changes do not seem to be connected to the revolution. The cases, indeed miscellaneous, presented here could represent good examples of the overall failure of the translation of social mobilization into structural change, as discussed, for example, by Sune Haugbolle and Andreas Bandak (2017).

In this chapter, however, I have tried to put these miscellaneous considerations into one single narrative, with the aim of accounting for how political and social change can be seen through an analysis of the university as an institution in the midst of political and social turmoil, as well as by showing the different scales of change and the temporalities at play.

Change is far from unidirectional. The revolutionary moment was characterized by a multiplicity of struggles, some directly political, with clear reverberations in the higher education sector, with seven ministries changed between 2011 and 2013 and some outright revolutionary changes in the sense of *prendre la parole*, such as free seminars at various universities and new doctoral theses on the revolution registered at Cairo University. These changes were always contested, however, and in my analysis of for-profit, private universities it was clear from the beginning that many administrators and professors were simply getting by while waiting to see what would happen, making some concessions to the spirit of the time without allowing meaningful change in how the structure was managed. The university, as a complex and crucial institution for everyday life, in Egypt as elsewhere, allows one to see different and competing temporalities, directions of change and grammars of justification. This analysis brings together the macro political changes and the possible and contested institutional changes to offer a more complex understanding of how change appeared in this context.

For the institutional change, I have focused on two distinct studies: one on private, for-profit universities between 2010 and 2012, and the other on doctoral studies at public universities between 2013 and 2016. In both cases I have discussed the political and social macro conditions and how these entered people's discourses as an initial metanarrative of change. I then discussed the extent to which, if at all, change penetrated the university as an institution. The first study on private universities, conducted at the height of the revolutionary moment, showed a prevailing of the metanarrative of change, even when it was already evident that no meaningful change would be allowed on the premises of the university-as-corporation. Despite their insistence that they were on the side of the revolution, officials at O6U in 2012 tended to minimize the discontinuity I could observe, drawing on the first phase of the

research carried out in 2010, before the revolution. They rather emphasized how even the new developments, such as students' elections or the possibility of organizing seminars at the university outside of the approved curriculum, were somehow already planned for, and in any case were not against the institution itself. On the other hand, between 2011 and 2013 there were some institutional changes at public universities, pushed for by those who hoped that the constant protests and action would eventually lead to some kind of rupture. The search for discontinuity, for example in the election of deans, new student movements, and relative freedom on campus, is a distinctive feature of a revolutionary temporality.

The second study started when the revolution was still alive, at least in political discourse—a few months before the 2013 ousting of the then President Mohammed Morsi, which was nonetheless presented as a second, corrective revolution; the term was also enshrined in the 2014 Constitution. It then continued through the years during which the revolution was gradually being erased from public discourse and political practice. From 2014 onward, the discourse on institutional change became increasingly disconnected from the macro political condition, somehow reverting to an earlier, pre-2011 version of institutional change focusing on the double dynamic of internationalization and privatization, in which both were simultaneously sponsored and prevented by the regime.

I opened the chapter linking the revolution, an obvious event, to the education sector and its crisis, which for decades featured among the top worries of citizenship, becoming over the years almost a trope, and a major source of dissatisfaction. After so much hope that things would change, the crushing of the revolution brought with it more authoritarian liberalizations, also in the education sector, which largely continued the policies that started being implemented from the 1990s onward, and which do not address the overall sense of a crisis in the system. Discontent is clearly still there, and there is little doubt that education, and higher education in particular, will continue to be central for any change at the macro level.

In this chapter I have shown ways of making sense of change as it happened, by discussing some institutional changes that I observed

as they occurred, and through analyzing the grammars of justification adopted by the actors involved, which largely depended on macro level changes. These studies were carried out over several years, during which, despite the large-scale social upheavals, I tried to keep the analysis focused on the changes that were occurring to the university as an institution, in the belief that such an analysis could help generate a better understanding of the broader direction of change. In this process it is crucial to discuss how hindsight—or the co-creation of the past—comes about, for my own experience of both revolutionary moments and politically mundane times (*kairos* and *chronos*) is that the two are not easily distinguishable while they are happening. What makes them different is their effects, or perhaps more properly their perceived effects and the ways in which coherence is constructed after the event. Here, scholars and political commentators in the media play a crucial role in constructing a narrative framework and reworking past events, in collaboration with participants in those events. This is inevitably a multi-layered process, as everyone participates in the co-construction of a narrative, creating *kairos* retrospectively. In the macro metanarrative of change, educated youth spearheaded the revolution and their education was a key factor in their ability to act. Yet very little attention is paid to educational institutions, and when one carries out an institutional analysis of universities it is very difficult to pinpoint any meaningful and lasting change. The predominant feeling at the time of this writing is that of a quickly vanished *kairos* and a largely prevailing *chronos*; one should not forget the heavy control under which universities have been placed for decades and the multiple ways in which their functioning is actively obstructed by the powers that be. As I have shown, however, the possibility of critique stems from the very institutional character of the university, and some seeds of change are inscribed into the fabric of Egyptian universities at different levels. As the experience of these past years indicates, all the repression notwithstanding, discussions on the role of universities in fostering freedom of expression and research are very unlikely to fade into oblivion.

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