

# **Learning in Difficult Times: The Case of a Prefigurative Space in Post-2013 Egypt**

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## Abstract

In the past 11 years, Egyptians have experienced tumultuous times with extreme political and social transitions, with a revolution in 2011 changing the country and altering the trajectory of many lives. The revolution was a turning point for a generation that sparked hope and the possibility of a different future and a transformation in the country. Witnessing the revolution inspired various people to take the initiative toward forms of change and alternatives, not only in politics. But the revolutionary moment did not last long, with the 2013 coup marking the beginning of a new era that shattered the hopes and possibilities of the revolutionaries. This coup brought an authoritarian system to power, that eventually brought the revolution to a halt through oppressive measures. In my thesis, I investigate the alternative education and the learning spaces that emerged in Egypt after the 2011 revolution as an afterlife and a continuity for the revolution. How these spaces enact forms of prefigurative politics through everyday politics of solidarity and alternative ways of being and knowing in repressive and tough times of the post-2013 Egypt. I demonstrate how under counter-revolutionary repression where the public space is depoliticized, new meanings and spaces of politics and resistance emerge. Using the case of one of the learning spaces in Cairo, Egypt, I look at the revolution beyond being a mere event but as a process, how it has its afterlives and how in time of repression, the political expands through other means and forms. I employ a prefigurative lens (ways of organizing and social relationships in the present that reflect future goals) in understanding the case study at hand and how its participants engage in alternative lifestyles, ways of being and define politics as an act of the everyday.

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## Introduction

“Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointed, it would not be hope. That is part of it. Otherwise, it would be cast in a picture [...] Hope is not confidence. Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible.” **Ernst Bloch**

## Narrative Overview

In January 2016, I was drafting an essay entitled “Between Hope and Despair: a look at Egyptian youth in post-revolutionary times.” I never completed this essay but at the time its inspiration and the purposes for writing it, came as a part of my experience as a student at the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS), an alternative education program with a focus on social sciences and humanities. I would not be writing this thesis if it were not for this essay and for CILAS. In the unfinished essay I wrote “What’s left of the dreams?” wondering about the revolution five years after it erupted, lamenting the despair and political depression that seemed to have wrapped our lives and still does. The question is then of afterlives, what comes after the event and what remains and persists further.

This thesis is in a way both an afterlife of my personal experience at CILAS and of the Egyptian revolution. One of the former students at CILAS proclaimed one time that in his life he had two revolutions: the first is the Egyptian revolution and the second is CILAS. While I cannot declare the same statement or use the same language, these were two of the main changes in my life trajectory. This project investigates a difficult or otherwise bleak situation, but at a heart it is about hope, living, and creating life after and despite tough times.

The experience of writing this had me revisit many good and bad moments, but in this revisiting, there is a reconciliation with one’s history and how things developed. The thing that attracted me

to CILAS is the ability to establish a microcosm away from the outside world, in a liminal space that provides those who are part of it with what they needed , while keeping them attuned to the world. This thesis relates to my subjective experiences, through it I also try to speak for others who I hope I was able to narrate and translate their thoughts and emotions with clarity and honesty.

## **Afterlives?**

I contextualize this thesis in the post uprisings period (2011-2013) and until the present. I argue that the Egyptian revolution experiences a form of an afterlife through social and cultural spaces and or practices, the afterlife as a word can carry different meanings, and in these different iterations, we can think of the trajectory of the revolution, whether that be denouncing it as a failure or success or deciding it is early to decide. The afterlife in Merriam Webster dictionary can mean a “life after death” or “an instance of continued or renewed use, influence.” This frames our understanding of the revolution in a ghostly manner as something that died but continues to haunt the present or as a long and continuous event that can be later reused or experience a new life. Sarah Salem makes us aware of the value of looking through the afterlives “The afterlives of an event are often as revealing as the event itself, shedding light on pre-histories and futurities; on the multiple trajectories that could have been, and the one that eventually was.” (Salem 2020).

In this thesis I am looking at one site of alternative education that emerged or was influenced by the revolution and the kind of political, social, and cultural roles it plays in post-2013 Egypt? How does this form of alternative or critical education connect to the revolution and serve as a form of after lives? I argue that the shift to repressive measures after the 2013 coup, have led to a shift towards forms of what can we consider prefigurative politics, forms of politics that is works through creating alternative and in which there is an equality between the means and ends. In this thesis I shall use prefiguration as an analytical lens to frame the Cairo institute of liberal arts and sciences (CILAS), while examining its role as an afterlife of the revolution.

In writing this thesis, I have four aims: I want to complicate our understanding of the Egyptian revolution beyond binaries of success and failures, by providing arguments relating to its afterlives and continuities. I also aim to present prefiguration as a useful theory in understanding the political, social, and cultural shifts following 2013 through an ethnographic account. In addition to provide brief documentation and historicization for an educational experiment and attempting to understand its influence and effect. Lastly, I want to present a case that stresses on the importance of hope and community in difficult political times.

This thesis is contribution to a variety of bodies of literature one that is completely saturated which is work on the Egyptian revolution, but it covers a gap in literature on prefiguration in the Egyptian context specifically after 2013, also adds to literature on prefiguration in the region and the global south. In addition it contributes to literature on alternative and autonomous learning experiments outside of North America, the UK and Europe as I shall explore later in the thesis. It is an addition to the larger knowledge production on Education in Egypt.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork for this thesis took three weeks in Cairo, Egypt, in April 2022. This coincided with the Islamic holy month of Ramadan in which Muslims are fasting and there is a celebratory atmosphere in Egypt. This added an obstacle to my fieldwork as there were no activities to observe at CILAS, and there were many public holidays throughout my fieldwork. Doing my fieldwork in Ramadan complicated the access to participants for interviews. I conducted seven interviews with former students, as well as with the CILAS founder. The students were 5 males and 2 females, while I could not maintain a gender balance in the interviews due to the time constraints and availability, the participants represented five different cities: Port Said, Ismailia, Kafr El Sheikh, El Minya, and Cairo. All of them hail from different sections of the middle class, and their current ages were between 26-35 years old. I choose to interview people who were part of CILAS in the years 2016 and 2017, as this would provide a chance to assess the effect of the



CILAS experience after a period of time. In addition, it provided me and my participants with a distance from the experience, so we can assess its advantages and disadvantages. Prior to the fieldwork, I made a list of 18 people to interview. I tried to have a substantial geographical representation which gave me insights how the revolution effect on alternative education scenes outside of Cairo. I conducted only two interviews online, as the participants were outside of Cairo. My goal was to interview 10 participants, but because of the time constraints and the availability of my participants, I only managed to do seven. I interviewed the participants at their houses, because of the sensitivity of the questions and therefore it was necessary to put my participants at ease and in a safe environment. Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours in a semi-structured format, I prepared interview questions prior to the fieldwork, and it included questions that covered topics of relationship between politics and education, personal experience at CILAS, prefigurative politics, and political action in post-2013 Egypt. I tried to maintain a balance between my roles as a friend and as a researcher. I encouraged the participants to chat with me or ask me questions and share gossip. which eased the participants to share intimate details and revisit their memories. I sought to approach the interviews as an outsider, making sure I ask questions about information or stories I should already know. Although the participants are to various levels my friends, these interviews were also a chance to hear new insights and stories from them. I have visited the premises of CILAS in Cairo twice in my fieldwork time but since no events or classes were taking place at the time, I just observed the space to make a connection and reignite my own memory and senses. Since this research does not just depend on interviews but my personal memory as well I envision it to be a form of “accidental ethnography” which is “ the systematic study of past practitioner experience that includes the collection and analysis of extant data from the practitioner’s organization (school, nonprofit, or business) to serve an ethnographic purpose in reporting on an educational experience, culture, or innovation of significant merit and contribution to the field” (Levitan, Carr-Chellman, and Carr-Chellman 2020).

As a former student and a teacher as well as part of the administration of the space, I have the privilege to be close to my field and have the personal insights and experiences that can serve an ethnographic purpose. I conducted all my interviews in Arabic and I transcribed them, and used Quirkos software for coding my interviews and several themes emerged which are discussed later in the thesis.

## **Positionality**

Since I have a close personal relationship with CILAS as a former student and teacher, spending around 2 years full-time in the space, contributing to its management and administration. It is a space and a project that has contributed a lot to my own intellectual and personal growth, which is one of the difficulties in this project. Researching a familiar site and space meant I never had to develop rapport with my participants and gave me easier access to people and resources. Even though I have not been tightly involved with CILAS for the past 5 years, I was still part of the larger community and I have hosted a course in the year 2020 after a while with no professional engagement in the space. I consider this thesis as an “insider research” which is studies conducted within a social group or organization or culture that the researcher belongs to (SIKES and POTTS 2008). Robert Merton defines the insider as an individual with prior intimate knowledge of the community and its members (Merton 1972).

Although the outsider/insider dichotomy has been rejected as a false one (Banks 1998; Chavez 2008)(Banks 1998; Chavez 2008). However, the insider/outsider affects one's own positionality in the research process. In my case due to my closeness to the participants and the community, I inhabit an insider positionality “the aspects of an insider researcher’s self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants”(Chavez 2008, 475). Insider research comes with its pros and cons, on the positive side it entails having more knowledge about your field and the context, familiarity with participants, easier access to members and resources. On the negative, side insider research can be too subjective in the sense that the familiarity of the researcher jeopardizes

his/her “objectivity” and it can be seen as biased in favor of certain views, personal interests, and perceptions (Greene 2014).

These positive sides of insider research helped in making certain aspects of my research easier, while I have encountered some of these negative sides as I was not sure I can retain “objectivity” and I might be too subjective, but I think it worked in the favor of my research. Although I conducted my thesis with participants from a familiar culture or site, but our common experience within CILAS is at least 4-5 years ago which provided us with the distance to share “objective” insights from our conversations together. As for the bias, it is challenging, if not impossible, to avoid our own biases within a research process. But I have attempted to exercise self-reflexivity within the process of research, making sure I am always questioning my assumptions, arguments, emotions, and my social position vis-à-vis my participants. I made sure to not discuss the explicit details of the research and its arguments prior to my interviews, so as not to affect the answers of the participants. Before going to conduct my fieldwork, I discussed with my supervisor, how wary I was of doing research that can be present a biased view of the thesis’s case study, and we both agreed that this might be possible but what it’s important is to reflect on these questions and letting the fieldwork and the participants guide the inquiry.

This thesis contains four chapters, in the first chapter I will present a literature review on the concept of prefiguration as the main theoretical lens through which I want to examine my case study the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS). I also want to emphasis on the association of prefiguration not just with place-based movement but with alternative spaces and the groups. In addition to showing how prefiguration has been used in literature in Egypt. Lastly, I want to connect critical pedagogy with prefiguration. In the Second Chapter I am presenting a backstory and context, which situates CILAS within the period from 2011 until the present.

Investigating the questions around the success and failure of the revolution and its continuities.

As well investigating the emergence of an alternative education movement in the wake of the Egyptian revolution. In the third Chapter I want to present an empirical account of my case as

well as locate it within other alternative and experimental educational projects conceptually.

Following that in the fourth and last chapter I shall present my fieldwork and what were my findings.

## 1) Literature Review

As I mentioned in my introduction, I am planning to frame my cases study within a prefigurative lens, understanding how conceptually it applies to it. In this chapter I shall explore definitions of prefiguration, its applications largely and in the Egyptian context, Finally and because of the specificity of my site as a learning space, I shall bridge an understanding of pedagogy with prefiguration. Reviewing prefiguration can help us in understanding CILAS and how in Egypt due to the counter revolutionary repression since 2013, there has been a shift to other forms of politics. Although the term prefiguration or prefigurative politics became fashionable in the recent years in social movement literature due to the rise of place-based protests (e.g.: Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street) it was originally coined by Carl Boggs in 1977 as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977).

Prefiguration then assumes a process through which future goals are enacted or mirrored in the present time through aspects like social relations, decision making, and culture. But this original definition is one that has since expanded into different definitions of the term. Although prefiguration is a form of political practice toward social change, it is still unclear whether it is a tactic, orientation, way of protesting, an alternative type of movement activity, or a combination of these (Yates 2015).

Yates separates Prefiguration into two main distinct categories, first is the relationship between means and ends, in which the means are reflecting the end goals or are to an extent equivalent to them. An example of that is the use of consensus as a decision-making process (Yates 2015).

David Graeber represents this strand of prefiguration when he said, “When protesters in Seattle chanted ‘this is what democracy looks like’, they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary.”(Graeber 2004).

The second category of prefiguration, represented by Wini Breines and Barbara Epstein, is focused on the creation of alternatives, experimenting with social relations, and the construction of counter-institutions and counter-power. “The term prefigurative politics [ . . . ] may be recognized in counter-institutions, demonstrations, and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics (Breines 1989, 6).

I believe CILAS as an organization and space represents the second school of prefiguration mentioned by Yates, as it is an experiment in learning and also in creating a community. It is in a counter or alternative relation to the dominant institute of the public higher education institutes in Egypt. Although as Yates also indicated that these two strands of prefiguration are related in their prolepsis which he defines as “evoked by the word itself: to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an ‘alternative world’ in the present, as though it has already been achieved.”

## 1.1) Contextualizing Prefiguration in Egypt

In the Egyptian context and because of the protests period between 2011-2013, researchers used prefiguration to study political mobilization, social change, and coping issues in Egypt. Tahrir Square has been labeled as a prefigurative space “a complete alternative ‘society-under-construction’, which functioned as a social laboratory, as a place where alternatives could be formulated and experimented with.” (Sande 2013).

This view was echoed in another study which describes Tahrir square's sit-in during the revolution as an “eventful place” which is a place characterized by the building of a collective identity, and new social relations which makes it a prefigurative space of new alternative and social worlds (Risager 2017).

This view of Tahrir Square as a prefigurative is a common theme in the literature about place-based movements in recent years. (for example: Occupy Wall Street (SMUCKER 2014) , Spanish Indignados protests (Dhaliwal 2012), and Turkish Gezi park protest (Acar and Uluğ 2016) )

Seeing Tahrir Square from a prefigurative lens can be illustrated through the communal living of protestors in the 18 days of the revolution, as well as phrases uttered by the occupiers like “The Republic of Tahrir”. I agree with Sande’s view that as far as the “success” or “failure” of a social movement or a revolution, the prefigurative analysis complicates this as the relationship between means and ends becomes complicated, besides the temporality which also makes it difficult. In pointing out how Tahrir square is framed as a prefigurative space, I want to create the connection with my case which emerged after the Egyptian revolution and is directly influenced by it to understand also the roots of the understanding CILAS as a prefigurative space and in assessing and locating the literature in which this thesis is contributing.

Other studies explored aspects of the Egyptian Revolution through a prefigurative lens, The prefigurative politics of translation in the Egyptian Revolution (Baker 2016), anti-harassment groups between 2011-2013 (Tadros 2015), psychological coping following the revolution through

prefigurative practices in the everyday life (Awad 2016) and cooperatives in Egypt following the revolution (Maarek and Awad 2018).

These studies mentioned above have all focused on the periods between 2011 and 2014, which provide a gap to explore the continuities and the lingering effect of the 2011 revolution, especially after the political changes resulting from the 2013 coup. This gap is worth exploring to understand the Egyptian revolution, as well as its temporalities, continuities, and afterlives. In her study Sarah Awad has noted that research done on the Egyptian revolution focused on the collective social and political level (Awad 2016). Awad's brings to our attention the importance of focusing on the micro-level, individual, and everyday politics which is also what I hope to achieve in this thesis.

## **1.2) Prefiguration within Space and Time**

As a concept prefiguration or prefigurative politics is situated within a connection to notions of space and time. As I mentioned before prefigurative politics is frequently connected to spaces of protests however as a frame for analyzing political action and social movement, prefiguration is associated with institutions, spaces, organizations, and groups.(for example: (Uttamchandani 2021), (Deflorian 2021), (Creasap 2021) and (Culton and Holtzman 2010) )

This focus on spatial aspects in relation to alternative groups and oppositional politics has also been outlined in the work of (Polletta 1999) and (Cooper 2014).

The term "free spaces" have been duly analyzed by Francesca Polletta, defining it as small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of the dominant groups, generating their own internal counterculture. These "free spaces" are a window for social experimentation, establishing new social relations, and providing a "haven" for their participants. Polletta noted how free spaces are an enduring outcome of a protest movement. She



specifically mentioned how groups practicing a form of prefigurative politics can be considered a free space, which to her are groups that have definitions of politics that can be dismissed as cultural, personal, or private. On the other hand, Davina Cooper's work analyzes what she calls alternative social spaces through a utopian lens, coining the term "everyday Utopia." These spaces are ones that anticipate a better world through enacting new practices, bringing in new ways of relating to each other and oneself. Like the utopias of literature, they create a distance whether physical or temporal from the outside world, this distance provides room for creativity and imagination as well as a critique of the outside world. Paving the way for transformative politics. While these spaces develop a distance, they need connectivity and proximity to the real world as this connection is needed to provide well-being to participants and influence to the space. These alternative sites she argues are politically potent due to their ability to put conceptual terms into practice and materiality. By bringing these two concepts into the discussion I want to emphasize the spatial element within prefigurative practices, these practices are also embedded within the everyday of their participants. Between the concept of prefiguration and the constellation of related concepts like "free spaces," "everyday Utopias" we have several similarities in the attunement to the future, political potency, alternative practices, spatial configuration, critical distance from the outside world and new social relations.

### **1.3) Prefiguration and temporality**

Prefiguration is a practice connected to time in two separate ways, the relationship between present and future and the discussion of the failure and success of a social movement.

#### **1.3.1) Present and future**

Since prefiguration contains a relation between the means and ends to achieve a social or political change, it becomes a question of the present and the future. There are two views in this relation, the first puts an emphasis on a distance between the future goals and the present practices, in

which the present practices are one that leads to the future ends or goals the means here are instrumental in achieving the goals. However, the second view totally omits this distance, the means and ends are one and they are enacted in the present, and the future goals are instantly brought into the present (Swain 2019).

### **1.3.2) Success and failure**

As for the question of the success and failure of social and protest movements, prefiguration provides a lens to think of this binary through a temporal sense. It is argued that movements adopting prefigurative practices are usually dubbed as failures when analyzed in a short time, but the task of understanding the enactment of new social, political, and economic norms needs time in order to be succinctly analyzed (Maeckelbergh 2016).

In the same vein, understanding Tahrir square as a prefigurative space complicates the question of its success and failure, as this situates the Egyptian revolution within the alternative it produced and the continuities of across a longer duration. the revolution and its subsequent occupation become a prefigurative project (Sande 2013).

## **1.4) Prefiguration and Pedagogy**

Since I focused this thesis on a learning site, it is significant to show how the learning process and pedagogy in particular critical pedagogy relate to prefiguration as a concept. In a study focused on the relationship between learning and prefiguration Suraj Uttamchandani pointed out how prolepsis “how future anticipation shapes a present activity” is a key element in learning which is also one understanding of prefiguration. Arguing on how learning settings and interactions can help in reorienting social relations and mirror desired futures (Uttamchandani 2021).

If we look at Paulo Freire's work as one of the leading theorists for the school of critical pedagogy, his understanding of learning and education is placed in a larger project of liberation, social change, and personal transformation (Freire 2000, 12).

This view of education as politically potent can also be articulated much more clearly in Giroux's work "education as important not only for gainful employment but also for creating the formative culture of beliefs, practices, and social relations that enable individuals to wield power... and nurture a democratic society in that takes equality, justice, shared values, and freedom seriously." (Giroux 2011, 4).

Sites of learning become a site of struggle, through which alternative modes of social relationships and reimagining and transforming the status quo can be enacted. Freire understands critical pedagogy through praxis which to him is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" critical pedagogy and prefigurative politics as concepts are connected then in the necessity of a change or transformation.

### **1.5) The Question of Politics**

It's important to bring back the discussion and focus on the Egyptian context in the post-2013 era. In the post-2013 President Sisi established a new regime which exceeded Mubarak's authoritarianism. Even Tahrir square the symbol of the revolution gradually spatially co-opted by the new military regime (Riphagen and Woltering 2018).

Sisi's new regime put the tide and movement resulting from the revolution to a near halt through political and social repression, along with government propaganda. The diminishing of spaces for political action led to discussions about the alternative places for political practice as well as redefining political action in the light of repressive measures. Sarah Anne Rennick observed this trend, she examined activists in the Arab world departed from politics because of repression, state violence, and public apathy. This led to what she calls "apolitical" activism, concentrating on

the activities of social and cultural activism in small local contexts, instead of politics (Rennick 2019).

She positions these groups as practicing prefigurative politics through experimenting with a horizontal structure, alternative social relations, and a consensus decision-making process. This trend of departure from politics to either social/cultural politics or to a more everyday politics, can also be explained by the term “infrapolitics” originally coined by James C. Scott as forms of actions/resistance that are disguised or hidden and do not necessarily count as political or what does not qualify as political (Scott 1990, 183,200; Marche 2012).

Funneling the energies of youth towards alternative spaces of civic engagement has been the case under Mubarak, as previously examined seemingly non-political spaces of civil society organizations and NGOs were crucial in providing skills and networks to participants who later took leadership roles in the Egyptian revolution of 2011 (Abdou and Skalli 2017).

While it is too early to decide what this pattern will produce in the future, but it demonstrates that there is still a limited space for social and cultural organizations to function. In relation to Education, Nadim Mirshak argues that education is a central component in any effort toward social change in Egypt. He looks at expanding the notions of political education, reflecting on the experiences of civil society organizations and initiatives working on education in Egypt and their way of survival and maneuvers under authoritarianism. He finally argues that educational organizations in post-2013 Egypt serve as indirect political space and can help in building a future social and political movement (Mirshak 2020).

To argue for that Mirshak has used the concept of depoliticized political education which is “when the terminology and aims of the educational initiatives are not explicitly political, but the content and activities help develop skills, attitudes, and behaviors that can have long-term political, social and democratic implications” at CILAS this can happen through how the CILAS’s environment fosters discussion and dialogue, which in a classroom setting promotes

equality and breaks the hierarchical relations between student and teacher. CILAS program also contains a community service component in which students are required to volunteer as part of their study program. Also content-wise CILAS's course a number of CILAS courses through the years are critical of ideas about Egyptian Nationalism, gender and sexuality, and Egyptian history just to name a few. These points recall Gramsci's understanding of the civil society which is comprised of institutions such as the church, trade unions, schools, and media (Gramsci 1971, 12,15). Since for Gramsci civil society is the space in which the processes of cultural hegemony are happening, he discussed the possibilities of counter-hegemonic action, for him civil society was the area in which the contestation and resistance against hegemony can start. This can happen by bringing new social relations into play to replace the current state (Fontana 2006).

From this literature we can deduce three trends in understanding political action and activism in Egypt, first is the shift towards alternative spaces in cultural and social sectors (these can be seen as apolitical or non-political). The second is an expansion of an understanding of the definitions of the political, especially under authoritarian and repressive state measures. The third is the adoption of prefigurative politics and the shift towards what can be described as everyday politics.

## 1.6) Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the concept of prefiguration as well as its features and definitions. Employing Yates definition, we can think of prefiguration as either a relation of wish the means and ends are equivalent, as well as the act of creating alternative and counter-institutions aimed at breaking dominant power or replacing current structures of power. In this case, I think prefiguration can be useful on many levels. Due to its focus on temporality, it complicates the question of the success and failure of the Egyptian revolution. Which then offers us a space for hope and potentiality within the Egyptian context. In the case of CILAS prefiguration can help in framing the alternative community and learning practices at CILAS. It can also clarify the changes

resulting from the revolution from below, looking at the personal and everyday political ways of coping, sense-making, and survival. Finally, it is useful to understand the shift in what can be considered a political practice as well as the emergence of alternative spaces for it under repression.

## 2) Background and Context

### 2.1) Introduction

In the past 11 years, Egyptians have gone through tumultuous times with deep political and social changes between the years 2011 and 2013, with an uprising in 2011 changing the country and altering the trajectory of many lives. The uprising was a turning point, which sparked hope and the possibility of a different future and a change in the country. Witnessing the revolution inspired people across the country of different social classes, religious affiliations, and classes to take the initiative towards forms of change and alternatives not only in politics. Following the revolution and due to the easing of political restrictions, the introduction of political party law, drafting a new constitution and the revolutionary optimism, there has been a change in the ways people started to relate to one another and the larger social circles in which they exist. This spirit of the revolution was epitomized by the popular slogan on social media in 2011 “From today this country is ours” this sense of ownership of personal and country fate coupled with a desire for a radical social and political change inspired initiatives in many fields including education (e.g. reading groups and circles), culture work (e.g. Al Fann Midan), and urban studies (e.g. Tadamun: The Cairo Urban Solidarity Initiative). But the revolutionary moment did not last long with the fall of President Morsi in June 2013, in an event that is contested as a popular uprising or a military coup (Kingsley and Chulov 2013; Kirkpatrick 2013; Fisher 2013).

In a polarized and tense turn of events, Abdel Fatah El Sisi the minister of defense at the time with the assistance of the army ousted Morsi. Following the year 2013, Egypt has gone back to forms of authoritarianism that exceeded the times of Mubarak. Egypt’s new regime initiated authoritarian and repressive actions to consolidate power. One of the first laws that were issued was the protest law of 2013, which limits the ability to organize, mobilize and protest in Egypt (Hamzawy 2016).

Through the years a number of activists were arrested in numerous waves of crackdowns for exaggerated charges like promoting fake news on social media and inciting terrorism.

In 2021, The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) reported a dramatic increase of prisons built since 2011, this increase is described as a frightening escalation (ANHRI 2021). Also there has been an ongoing crackdown on the NGOs and civil society, through laws and measures that aim at obstructing their activities, curb dissident and block the acquiring local or foreign fundings (Reuters 2017; Fahmy and Faruqi 2017). Also in 2021, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) remarked how 10 years after the revolution, the situation of press freedom is worse than ever. With half of the media controlled by the state, numerous jailed journalists, and hundreds of blocked websites (RSF 2021). Academic freedoms are also in a bad state as evidenced by the murder of Italian researcher Giulio Regeni as well as the arrests of Egyptian researchers and students. In 2019, The Egyptian parliament passed constitutional amendments that would extend the presidential terms, allowing al-Sisi to be re-elected and rule until 2034 (Kennedy 2019). Maria Josuaa and Mirjam Edel describe the type of repression currently taking place in Egypt as “counterrevolutionary upscaling of repression”. As unprecedented protests and mobilization challenged centers of power, there was a need for upscaling of repression to restore power and crush any future mobilization (Josua and Edel 2021). This climate of repression and authoritarianism they argue has led to the de-politicization of the public sphere as the repression resulted in a lack of forms of contentious political action such as protests, strikes, or even participation as well as fear of expressing oppositional views due to the violent repercussions. In consequence, and as previously mentioned in the past chapter activists and politically active individuals gradually moved away from politics, opting to give their attention to their personal lives or shifting their attention to social and cultural work (Matthies-Boon 2017; Awad 2016; Rennick 2019).



This striking difference between the revolutionary period (2011-2013) and the post-2013 is in itself worth questioning on a number of levels, the afterlives continuities of the Egyptian Revolution as well as the question of what becomes of the movement and how the political expands and become redefined in oppressive time, as it became difficult or even impossible to practice forms of contentious or direct political actions, activists and other politically aware individuals have resorted to other forms of activism.

## **2.2) Notes on the Revolution (Thinking through Success and Failure)**

With that being said, it is worth asking the questions of the continuities and remains success or failures, in her book *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif notes, “A revolution is a process, not an event. And, as you know, our Egyptian revolution is ongoing. And its path has not been smooth. How could it have been when the interests we are seeking to break free of are so powerful and so pervasive?”

In my thesis, I refuse to think of the revolution in the binary of success and failure. Agreeing with Sande's argument that if we understand the revolution through its prefigurative project, it might be early to discuss the question of the failure or success of the revolution. This view can be supplemented with Asef Bayat differentiation between two dimensions of revolution: movement and change (Bayat 2017). Movement is the moment of explosion in which it is easy to celebrate the immediate change and the dramatic images of solidarity and altruism. Bayat lamented how the focus in the “Arab Spring” was mainly focused on the revolution as a movement, while the revolution as a change is a long process that requires a long path over a period of time that produces a new political order, he describes the revolutions of the Arab spring as “rich in movement but poor as a change.” Calling for engaging in using the celebratory moments of the revolution to reimagine the foundations of a good life, discovering new spaces for producing alternative speech and new ways of being and doing in social media, cultural production, art circles, legal work, and journalism. In his arguments Bayat recalls Raymond Williams's term the

long revolution as a long process of change and a series of successes and defeats. I think from Bayat and Sande's arguments beyond being a mere event, it is a continuous process and it might be early to call it a total failure, not just temporally but due to the lasting legacy of the revolution. Samuli Schielke provided a great reflection on the uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation in Egypt "Very often there is just no way to tell beforehand what the consequences of a project, an idea, an event, a decision, will be. Some things are so routinized and well explored that we can expect the outcome with some reliability, but as soon as some circumstance changes or a person's intentions shift, the element of surprise returns. The surprise effect of January 25, is a case in point." (Schielke 2015).

While we can think of the revolution as a long and continuous process, it is still important to think of the failures, and while I think it is a highly difficult task and beyond this study to analyze and reflect on the root causes of the defeat or failure of the revolutionary movement.

Gianni Del Panta argues that the failure of the revolution is due to the failure of the revolutionary power to create independent and alternative centers of power (Del Panta 2022). as Bayat stated the powerful moment of the revolution was not followed by the creation of popular and democratic bodies. Finally, it is important to understand the revolution and its trajectory through its remains and afterlives as a long process beyond a mere event. In the case of the Egyptian revolution, these afterlives take the form of prefiguration, through creating alternatives as well as thinking through the development of future politics and visions of a better life. Especially within these highly repressive times, it becomes crucially important to rethink the everyday politics and creating new ways of being in the world.

## 2.3) Emergence

The Egyptian revolution inspired a great deal of social and cultural transformation, which has led to the emergence of social-cultural initiatives, political parties, and a myriad of artistic output. I understand the emergence of organizations and initiatives that arose post uprisings, to be framed within the concepts of dominant culture vis-a-vis emergent or counterculture in Raymond Williams's work. Particular useful in this case is his concept of emergent culture which he defines as "new meanings, new values, new practices and kinds of relationships that carries with an oppositional or alternative to a dominant culture." (Williams 2009, 122,123).

Williams provides a framework for understanding the cultural changes and the emergence of alternative culture in the period following the 2011 uprisings. The change that occurred after the revolution can be briefly pinpointed on three facets, personal change, political/legal change, and sociocultural change. I want to examine these facets shortly to demonstrate the conditions which led to the emergence of alternative revolutionary culture.

### 2.3.1) Personal Change

I argue that the most important type of change is the personal transformations as a result of the revolution. The power, charm, and spirit of the revolution have captured the hearts and minds of those who witnessed it, while the social and political circumstances changed, it was the change in how people realized their agency, power and will that encouraged citizens to be socially and politically active. This change is not only about becoming more socially and politically engaged, but also about changing the ways of being and trajectories of one's life. In Sarah Awad's study observing the effect of the revolution on the personal trajectories of five participants and understanding how moments of rupture like the revolution shapes people's identities and trajectories. Awad concluded that although the revolution did not produce the desired social and

political change, it had an irreversible positive effect on participants sense of personal agency (Awad 2016). She observed that this change has fluctuated over the years with the political and social changes of the regime, however she argues that the personal change and transformation due to the revolution is to an extent irreversible.

### **2.3.2) Political/Legal Change**

There is a variety of legal and political gains that came directly after the revolution. The political party law of 2011 was one of the first and it eased several restrictions and allowed for the establishment of new political parties. Similarly, the ease of the extra-legal restrictions allowed for the creation of new initiatives. Additionally, in 2012 Egypt had its first democratically elected president after the revolution, Mohamed Morsi. The change in the political, legal, and extra-legal climate made more room for people to organize and engage more in the social, political, and cultural spaces.

### **2.3.3) Socio-Cultural Change**

The last facet of change is the sociocultural change resulting from the revolution, in the protests, one of the main chants was “Bread, Liberty and Social Justice” the revolution was a moment of coming together, in which wide groups of people were united towards dismantling the regime and establishing another. This sense of social justice and social responsibility was one of the ethos of the protest movement in Tahrir square, in the eighteen days of movement protestors shared food, tents, and supplies with each other’s. This climate of change within the Egyptian society at the time was the reason for an alternative culture to thrive.

## 2.4) Learning and Education

Since this thesis is focused on a site of learning or educational experiment, I want to dedicate this section to provide some context to the emergence of the alternative education scene in the wake of the Egyptian revolution. Nothing captures the culmination and the rise of alternative education models in Egypt than the “Alternative Models for University Education in Egypt-Symposium” an event that was organized by a coalition of three independent organizations the Townhouse (art gallery/space), Megawra (platform for debate and action in the built environment and Mada Masr (Online Newspaper) in 2014, so as to “take a critical look at current experiments with alternative models of education in the fields of architecture and urbanism, art, humanities, social sciences, and development” the event brought a number of Egyptian initiatives and groups (including CILAS) and foreign counterparts in a discussion of their practices in connection to their local contexts and the general historical moment. The symposium covered topics of the accessibility of university, the politics of education, legalities, and communal aspects of education. This momentum in the alternative and parallel education in Egypt brought similar forums or symposiums. For two years in a row 2015 and 2016, “Midan El Taa’alim Education Square” an education initiative focusing on promoting and networking alternative education participants organized “Kalam fel Alam Speaking of Education” an event that combines a fair of alternative education initiatives and groups along with talks and lectures that relates to the topics of learning and education. Education historian Farida Makar explains the proliferation of alternative education models in both child and adult education, because of the lack of quality education and the changes of perceptions in Egyptian society that gave birth to these new models. Lamenting that while these initiatives of alternative education are thriving, they often face a resistant state power that threatens their existence (Makar 2014).

While Makar does not mention the revolution, but the majority of alternative education initiatives mentioned in her article are ones that appeared after the revolution, this shows the emergence of

a movement in alternative education after the revolution, which facilitated the movement of activists and individuals willing to produce a change in one the central facets of life such as education. In connection to that, a conference paper written by Anne Clement as part of the “Civil role of universities in the Arab World” conference organized by the American University in Beirut, on the topic of reading groups in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 explored the landscape of parallel and alternative reading groups in Egypt (Clement et al. 2016).

The paper examines the appearance of reading groups in the light of the 2011 revolution. The paper distinguishes between three types of readings groups: first are the small groups that appeared between 2011-2013 but disappeared due to the political polarization or repression and violence, the second are reading groups that started after 2011 and then became organizations and lastly groups initiated by professors in the margins of the university. Two of the important initiatives that were mentioned in the paper are El-Lama in Arabic the group or the collection (currently inactive) was a loosely organized weekly meetings in public spaces that started in Cairo and then the same format was used in around fourteen city and four universities, in which young people met to either discuss a topic of choice, or a book or texts with readings for Galal Amin, Alaa El Aswany, Edward Said and many others. The other initiative is Sekket El Maaref (2013-present) in Arabic The Way of Knowledge, which is a public humanities group that organizes seminars, talks, and readings group and was founded by The American university in Cairo anthropology professors Reem Saad and Malak Roshdy. I mentioned these two organizations specifically since they have also come in my interviews and due to their relevance and proximity, also a remark here is how these organizations and initiatives are easily connected by their participants who were also part of other groups or founded other groups. There are hundreds of other initiatives, groups, workshops, and organizations that emerged after the revolution, but the purpose here is just to give a general context and not a clear chronology which is something that requires a much deeper historical work. This context serves as the background for the alternative

and parallels education fields to emerge in Egypt in the post-uprisings period. Moreover, this is the backdrop in which CILAS has emerged and continues to operate in Egypt.

### 3) Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS)

#### 3.1) Introduction

In this chapter, I want to present my case for this thesis The Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS). In the previous chapter I discussed the emergence of alternative education initiatives and groups because of the Egyptian revolution. I argue that due to their connection to the revolution, the initiatives that are still working can serve as a way of understanding the afterlives of the revolution through prefigurative politics, especially with the current defeat of the political and social movement in the light of the repressive measures with the new regime following the 2013 coup. The importance of learning and educational as a site of struggle or contestation is best articulated in Gramsci's work, in his discussion of hegemony For Gramsci, the concept of hegemony is closely tied to education. Education through schooling after all is one of the instruments through which the processes of hegemony can occur. But for Gramsci, every relation of hegemony is an educational relationship (Gramsci 1971, 350). Schools for Gramsci are one of the instruments of hegemonic culture (Mayo 2010). In addition, Gramsci conceived education as a political instrument through which the process of hegemony and subordination can occur (Giroux 2000). As educational institutions are part of Gramsci's sites of contestation of hegemony, this extends to Egypt as well at specially at a time when the spaces for political activity and socialization have rapidly diminished. Alternative education projects that work through establishing communities as well as opening a room for social, cultural, and intellectual debates, in a Gramscian sense CILAS and other similar organizations I would argue are the budding movement towards the process of breaking the hegemony and establishing a counterculture. CILAS is an educational initiative that began in 2013 months after the coup with a one-year program in the tradition of liberal arts, the teaching method in CILAS combines a focus on the



liberal arts model with discussion-based learning. CILAS courses offer a variety of fields and subjects within the social sciences humanities and the arts. It is an informal unaccredited learning space, where students and teachers take part in creating the experience. CILAS also acts as a cultural center where events such as workshops, talks, film screenings, and food gatherings are organized.

### **3.3) Locating CILAS**

While CILAS describes itself as a liberal arts college or a micro liberal arts college, I argue it has a resemblance to several organized higher education alternatives or schools. Particularly here I want to look at the anarchist free schools (sometimes referred to as free skools) and the free universities. Anarchist free schools are alternative learning spaces, that look at establishing and experimenting with social, economic, educational, and political alternatives in the here and now (Shantz 2012). This also points to the prefigurative nature of these spaces, as they are not only providing alternatives, but they also seek to bring and enact their ideas for change in the here and now. These spaces draw inspiration from a variety of anarchist and critical pedagogy theorists and writers (for example: Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich). Shantz locate their origin in Ferrer's free school movement in the 1950s which provided alternative forms of education and self-development. While some spaces functioned as anarchist hubs, they were also a space for others to get acquainted with alternative lifestyles and ways of being. These spaces are not just learning spaces, but they extend as social spaces for people to meet as well as other artistic activities. These spaces follow their anarchist anti-authoritarian ideals by embracing a more horizontal organization, consensus decision making, and breaking of the hierarchical student/teacher relation. While CILAS did not describe itself as such at any point, they share elements with the free schools in their loosely organized, horizontalism, playful ethos, alternative lifestyle, and education. There's also the prefigurative aspect, as a former CILAS student and instructor

remarked “I believe CILAS is more than just being a parallel university, it is hope for parallel society an alternative one from the prototype that (authority/world order) is promoting.”

A related term to describe alternative and experimental forms of educational organizations, that are not necessarily anarchic is the “free university”, Fern Thompson dissociates free universities from a specific political ideology as projects of collective study that are open to anyone and free to attend, avoid state affiliation, do not offer accreditation, gather in physical spaces, and include a goal of liberation (Thompson 2017). In addition, these “free universities” combine critiques of formal education with a re-imagination of not only a better university but a better world.

These features of the free university as specified by Thompson are befitting CILAS. Because it is not an overtly political space, CILAS inches closer to a “free university” than a free school. But as Thompson remarked these terms are a lot of times interchangeable and the influence of the anarchist thought on free universities is noticeable. CILAS from its description is inspired by the tradition of liberal arts colleges, a tradition that itself is hard to define and compile its history in these few paragraphs. But speaking of the American liberal arts model, In Victor E. Ferrall book “liberal arts at the brink” he brings a sufficient definition of a liberal arts college as an “an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies . . . [that hopes to develop] interests and capabilities that will enrich both the individual learner and future communities.” One of the notable features of liberal arts colleges is the small size of its classrooms, intimacy in the educational settings, focus on building communities, and the broad knowledge it offers to its students in. This breadth of subjects is accompanied by opposition to a vocational model of education (Ferrall 2011). Focusing on educating and producing students who have abilities to draw from different bodies of knowledge with a critical mind and appreciation of the arts and creativity. Jeffery Scheuer mentions that the underlying assumption the modern liberal arts holds about knowledge is that while every discipline has its own unique question and epistemologies, and at that at the same time they are

also connected through shared questions and ways of knowing. He points out that liberal arts is not one tradition to describe in one word, it is not “intended to inculcate practical skills or to dump data into students’ brains, Instead, it’s a wellspring of ideas and questions, and a way of promoting flexibility and openness to diverse perspectives.” (Scheuer 2015).

Scheuer declares that Liberal arts education contains two elements to facilitate democracy: critical thinking and citizenship. For him, liberal arts are not about developing professional or entrepreneurial skills, but it is more important to prepare well-informed and critical citizens. These features of Liberal Education are also part of CILAS and its ethos through critical thinking, discussion-based learning, and the focus on community.

In a recent news article, Karim described CILAS as a micro-liberal arts college, noting the difference in scale between CILAS and actual liberal arts colleges. From its name Cairo institute of liberal arts and sciences, CILAS is described as an institute but formally or legally it is not registered or operating as one. The word institute is one of the words associated with formal education and can be used interchangeably for university or college in some contexts. While CILAS's name draws from the formality and formal language of higher education, it is contrary to or in an oppositional relationship with the actual institution of higher education. In this sense CILAS occupies what Nora Sternfeld call a para-institution, from the suffix para is both beside and beyond, reclaiming and using the power of the word institute for oppositional and alternative purposes.

In conclusion to this section, I want to say that for me that while I have managed to draw some proximity to several organizational categories or trends within the alternative higher education circles, the task of locating remains incomplete and continuous, due in one part the specificity of the case at hand along with the fluidity and wide activities such projects may entail. An additional layer of complication comes from the scarcity or even the lack of literature that covers these budding movements in the region or outside North America, the UK, and Europe.

### 3.5) Backstory

Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts (CILAS) self-described as a micro liberal arts college in the heart of Cairo. For ease of the description, I will describe it as an alternative learning space. The story of CILAS goes to the year 2012 when CILAS founder Austrian Egyptian Karim Yassin Goessinger a 26-year-old at the time of founding CILAS, Karim who on the first impression can be seen as a European or white man speaks Arabic fluently, along with four other languages having lived between Egypt, Germany, France, and Brazil. After a couple of years of work following his master's degree, Karim decided to start CILAS, for this he took inspiration from a variety of sources mainly liberal arts college he attended in Maastricht, the Netherlands along with critical pedagogy theorists such as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and bell hooks. His experience at Maastricht was one of equality between teachers and students, along with the freedom of creating your learning path and a communal spirit. Liberal arts for him is an umbrella term that contains the pedagogical elements he prefers and aspires to. Karim describes how the Egyptian revolution and the revolutionary moment sparked conversations about society, politics, and personal lives that needed a space for these conversations to continue and expand. He explains that while after and before the revolution there were reading groups and reading circles in which people gathered around texts and the practice of reading, none of these groups provided a permanent experience. Ironically, CILAS began its operations a couple of months after the coup in 2013. In the post-2013 Egypt CILAS have also suffered under the current regime, as it must maintain the balance between being public and not being too public. There is also the self-censorship associated with newsletters and other media materials in which certain courses had their names changed although their content might stay the same. Furthermore, in 2016 the murder of Giulio Regeni who both attended a course at CILAS and had some work relations with some of the CILAS students, following that the project had to take extra steps in self-censorship.

### 3.5.2) Pedagogy

From its start, CILAS has been offering a one-year program following a discussion-based learning methodology like a seminar reading, in a casual environment in which the passion for learning comes before grading or certificate. The program is dissected into three semesters the first semester is considered the core course which consists of four classes: Arts and Cultures, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Natural Sciences. This follows the liberal arts tradition attempting to provide the students with a breadth of knowledge in a number of core subjects which covers readings in philosophy, literature, media studies, philosophy of science, ecology, anthropology, and sociology.

The first semester is three months of daily classes, where students of around 20 are divided into two groups of morning and evening. In the first semester, students present their interests for courses in the following semesters and according to these interests, the courses of the second and third trimesters are chosen. The teachers/instructors are called fellows in CILAS and have a master's degree for the most part or some significant work in their fields. In the last semester, students must choose between doing research or artwork as a capstone project or engaging in a civic engagement through teaching an academic discussion class for refugees in collaboration with Saint Andrew's refugee services (a Cairo based international organization that works with refugees.) Students are also asked to attend what is called labs which follow an experiential learning process where students can join labs like the pedagogy lab, translation lab, research lab, and the media lab, these different labs offer practical skills like writing, translation, creative writing, film making, and research skills. CILAS does not have lectures as a teaching method, instead, fellows and students discuss through the period of the course the reading every week, making space to reflect on the last week session in every new week. The interior of the rooms at CILAS does not resemble a classroom, it is more of a living room, or a dining table turned into a

place for discussion. This setting permeates warmth and equality as everyone is seated at the table and the flow of the discussion moves from one person to another. CILAS class is not only a space for intellectual discussions, before starting every session there's the habit of checking in, where students can reflect on their daily lives and their experience throughout the day. This invited many personal moments, where students also spoke about the difficulties of their day and their struggle with the readings. While CILAS language instruction began as English due to having a number of foreign fellows it eventually moved to a hybrid mixture of Arabic and English. The translation lab for example was one of the projects within CILAS that started for the purpose of producing translations of social sciences and humanities texts, in addition to open conversations about knowledge production in Arabic. Although CILAS exists in Cairo it has branched in 2018 into Alexandria through two of CILAS's former students. CILAS has also inspired the founders of the Quito Institute of Liberal arts and sciences (QILAS) in Ecuador. Along with being part of the "eco-versities" movement which is a network of alternative education initiatives and groups around the world.

### **3.5.3) Space**

Through its 9 years of existence, CILAS has occupied two places in the Old or old Cairo neighborhoods of Al Ghura and El Saida Aisha (Current space). In Ghuria, you had to walk in the Souq for around 5 minutes within the narrow-crowded space filled with blankets and women's clothes sellers and peddlers. The space is close to several medieval or old Cairo landmarks famously El Hussein Mosque revered sights for many Muslims especially those of Sufi background. CILAS's geographical location in old Cairo makes it in proximity to downtown and other areas but at the same time secluded from it, also Old Cairo due to its long history is perceived locally as authentic or different, which is an interesting choice for CILAS that was not planned in the beginning but later became part of experience and flavor of CILAS. The space also holds a contrast between the traditional or Islamic setting and the mostly western critical

social sciences and humanities readings. In 2016, the Egyptian ministry of Awqaf (Endowments) acquired the building where CILAS had its premises in El Ghuria. CILAS had to move its operations to another space. The new space also happens to be in another part of Old Cairo about 30 mins walk away from the old space. Both spaces contain the charm of the old apartments, with big windows, and high ceilings which are not the case for many of the newer buildings in Cairo. They also are in proximity to several beautiful and historic landmarks and mosques. Both old buildings had old staircases that made a distinctive sound as you walked, you could easily feel your weight as you moved one step after the other. In the current space of CILAS, there are three main rooms, plus a small kitchen, a tiny bathroom, and a library as well as a roof space. The first room is the classroom which has two main components that assist in the learning experience, a table with chairs and a projector. The second room is more of a gathering room with no chairs and people are asked to sit on the ground with many cushions on the ground, also this is the room that hosts the movie screenings, talks, or other events that CILAS hosts. The third room is the library which although is quite small contains a variety of books on subjects like social sciences, humanities as well as literature. Also, the balcony at CILAS overlooks the Sultan Hassan and Imam El Refaei mosques.



Figure 1 CILAS main classroom (source: CILAS Facebook Page)



Figure 2 CILAS Building the second building to the left of the mosque.



### 3.5.4) Students and Fellows

As CILAS describes its student body they come from all walks of life, although the program does not set an age for its students but they for the most part in their mid-20s or can be considered within the categories of “youth”. They come mostly from public universities and the students have previously studied all sorts of subjects from medicine to economics to engineering and literature. All the CILAS students are Egyptian, the majority of which belong to the Egyptian middle class, there’s a gender balance in CILAS where the two genders are equally represented. Every year CILAS offers around three to four places in its student body (around 20) to the refugee community in Egypt which suffers from a lack of access to education as well as opportunities to integrate within the Egyptian community. In my interviews, many have remarked at how CILAS brings people from different worlds, a view that Karim Yassin agrees with, for him CILAS functioned as a space to bring people of diverse backgrounds together specially after the great polarization following the 2013 coup. Reflecting on CILAS students and their trajectories after the program, Karim prefers to use the word bridge program as a metaphor for how students move from one point to another after passing by CILAS. Some students follow an academic route, while others pursue alternative lifestyles after their time at CILAS, several of them also change jobs or careers or go to work for other independent organizations in the fields of arts, culture, and civil society. On the other hand, CILAS fellows or teachers come from a number of different countries, but this has changed over the years, while in the three initial years more foreign fellows taught at CILAS, but following the Giulio Regeni case and other security fears, the number of Egyptian fellows increased. The relationship between the fellows and students is one of equality and mutual respect, there are no hierarchies and no grading required

from the fellows. It mostly follows a form of dialogical or narrative assessment of each student through their courses as well as feedback given for final projects or essays. The students and the fellows collaborate in number of courses and work together in compiling the syllabus and its readings.

### **3.6) Conclusion**

I joined CILAS in the year 2015, at the time I was working as a project coordinator in the development field and felt the disillusionment of work within that field. I also struggled through my university years both on a personal and academic level. Although I attended one of the prestigious public universities, I think I did not learn anything, or at least what I learned did not speak to me at any point in time. Before my decision to apply, I attended one of the CILAS events that I saw on their Facebook page, and I was captivated by the space and the environment as well as the friendliness of everyone there. It is always a cliché to describe an experience as life-changing, but this was the case for me. While I can talk about what I have learned and what readings I did but I had more important matters in my time at CILAS. Around the time when I joined CILAS, it was clear that the revolution is now in the past. It was through joining CILAS and being part of this community that I found hope, in a way the experience relates to what Bloch describes as “learning to hope.” It was through my time at CILAS that I developed my interest in social sciences, and the CILAS community gave me numerous inspiring moments and opened the door to lifelong friendships and connections. After the failure of the revolution, CILAS for me was the space where the revolutionary ideals were reignited not through political slogans but a connection to life itself, embarking on friendships and looking at the potentialities of life.

## 4) Analysis and Findings

### 4.1) Introduction

In this chapter, I will follow an ethnographic approach by narrating the CILAS students' personal perspectives and connecting them with the arguments of this study. In our first chapter, I demonstrated that though the revolution can be considered a failure, it is still lingering on or has an afterlife or a continuity through social and cultural practices. As demonstrated by Awad (2016) and Rennick (2019) the lack of room for any kind of political action meant that what can be considered "political" moved from the official realm of joining political parties and participating in elections into the politics of everyday life and navigating your personal life through finding spaces for solidarity, joy, care, and kindness. This change I argue is also a shift to prefigurative politics or prefiguration, as the politically active people moved towards a mode of everyday politics, enacting the changes they wish in their small circles and groups. As a friend once remarked that "we are working in culture and organize cultural events because we cannot do politics anymore." In this chapter, I will give the space to illuminate what kind of prefigurative aspects have been parts of CILAS as per the students who have experienced it, how they view education, politics, and the revolution and what are the possibilities and their definitions of politics in current Egyptian context and in the future. Through themes identified in the interviews, I will attempt to translate their experience.

## 4.2) Learning from and with the Revolution

Most of my participants described the revolution as a learning experience, as I was trying to assess how the revolution changed education and how people learn in Egypt. From the interviews I assembled a common view that the revolution is a “pedagogical event” or a chance for learning, this holds three meanings, one is that witnessing the revolution changes you as a person, second is that the sit-in at Tahrir square had pedagogical activities and third is how the revolution inspired personal and social change and hence the creation of alternatives. As Rahma aged 33, currently working as a manager on an online shopping platform put it eloquently “The revolution was a chance to learn, it is the most important event of our generation. I learned a lot about Egypt and my rights from the revolution. We had great expectations. The revolution as an event is a moment of unlearning, (she used the English phrase) you get to listen to many people with different opinions. You erase what you learned before and you start learning from scratch” Rahma who joined CILAS after a recommendation from a friend in 2016, comes from what she describes as a small village in one of the Nile Delta Governorates but currently living and working in Cairo. She describes the experience of CILAS as a “before-and-after” experience, as CILAS opened the door for different forms of knowledge as well as people who are different from her. For most of the other people who joined CILAS, the revolution is a central event in their life and its trajectories, Mohamed Mahrous 30 years who joined in the same year as Rahma describes the revolution as a moment of questions, and many questions surfaced not only on a political level but even existential ones. The revolution presented us with questions that were hard to answer through formal education. For him this explains both the emergence of an alternative education scene and the desire for people to engage in it, he mentions along with CILAS, El Lama(Group or The Collection) was a loosely organized weekly meeting in public spaces to discuss a topic, a book or a text, Shiekh El Amoud (The Sheikh of Column) is an alternative school that teaches Islamic sciences, the school was active until last year before the arrest of its founder Anas El Shiekh in February 2021 for operating an unlicensed school. The

case of Sheikh El Amoud also represents the difficulties and dangers of operating a similar initiative in the current climate in Egypt. But in relation to Sheikh El Amoud, Mahrous mentioned that the revolution was a chance for people of different political ideologies leftists, Islamists or otherwise to come to light and organize and hold meetings, which was a chance for people to come together but also for political polarization. Maryam 26 years old from Ismailia, who currently works remotely as an administrator in an international school outside of Egypt. She joined CILAS in 2016 to prepare herself for the experience of a liberal arts college in the United States. When I asked about the revolution and education, she mentions that “a revolution is an event that taught us, all of us. It opened the horizons for us and influenced our ideas about solidarity although the current situation is appalling, the revolution created an alternative that even though we are living under a repressive regime we still have alternative spaces, and other spaces might appear in the future. The spirit of the revolution created this.”

Thabet a 35 years old engineer from Cairo who previously studied and taught at CILAS recounts that before the revolution, he was not involved in any political activity, but for him, the revolution made him aware of his position in a historical period. “Standing in the square shoulder to shoulder with everyone changes your mind. You change as a person, and you start to wish for a better country with justice, love, peace, and dialogue. The revolution is like waves that change all your concepts and what you consider right and wrong. The revolution had so much impact and it changed the way we learn.” My participant's experience and views of the revolution as a pedagogical event corroborate Jason Dorio's argument which considers the Egyptian revolution a critical pedagogical workshop as “citizens engage with new forms of political intervention and resistance, critically reflecting upon consciousness-raising events, and experimenting with relationships between agency and power.” (Dorio 2017). Likewise occupy wall street as a place-based protest arguably is “a space for learning” and a site of public pedagogy (Webb 2019).

### 4.3) Withdrawal, hope, and life after the disappointment

The revolution and its subsequent failure had a great impact on those who were involved with it. While revolutionary moments are full of hope and imagination of a better future, they can also be full of disappointment, struggle, and violence. The memory of the revolution is still lingering as an afterlife or a ghost as Thabet says “I believe no one forgot the revolution, even the state did not. I don’t think the revolution is still there. But it lives in the minds and hearts of the people, the ghost still exists and the recent urban transformation projects by the state with all the highways, bridges, and the new capital city is just a way to reconstruct the urban space and combat the ghost. But the revolution is alive in the collective imagination.” Many of my participants were affected by the violence and traumatic events of the revolution but none more than Faysal 30 years old coming from an Islamist background. The 2013 coup that removed the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and the violent massacre against anti-coup protestors in the Rabiaa square in 2013 is an event that was highly traumatizing for him. He recalls how after 2013 he felt life was over and everything lost its meaning, “CILAS took me away from the despair of 2013. This was a space that told me there is still life after 2013. There are people living and having fun and are trying to do something in their lives. This brought me back to life, it was a wake-up call.”

Faysal’s experience speaks to the experience of others whom I have met that found this space a haven in accordance with Polleta’s ideas on free spaces. A place that not only offers an alternative but a space for recovery and recuperation. The communal aspect at CILAS becomes quite important, not only as a learning experience but for the chance to navigate and reimagine yourself and your relationship between yourself and others. Similarly, Sarah Amsler paper on free universities and alternative learning communities, notes how these communities can give people something to believe in especially at times of dissatisfaction and disaffiliation through diverse forms of sociability and solidarity (Amsler 2017). Rahma seems to share the same opinion as

Faysal, as she describes CILAS and other alternative communities in the post-2013 world as “bubbles” while this word evokes negative symbols or meanings such as enclosure or being away from the real world, but for these exact reasons, it can be useful, as she said “Every community is a bubble in a way, with their own language. And each community must escape from the reality and not indulge fully in it. And this is part of our efforts to regain our humanity after the disappointments of the revolution and life. Our involvement in these bubbles though should be temporary or we lose our touch with the world completely.” Rahma’s words reflect what Davina Cooper expressed in her writing about “everyday Utopias” as similar to the Utopia in the literature it creates a distance from reality that can be useful to foster alternative lifestyles, social relations, and critical distance from reality. Vivienne Matthies-Boon has demonstrated how the aftermath of the Egypt revolution is traumatic for the young activist who took part in the revolution, this has resulted in a shattered world for her study interlocutors, this trauma would be lessened or healed through having a social community that provides care and solidarity (Matthies-Boon 2017). Boon’s arguments relate to my participants experience with the revolution and their need for a community in the post-2013 Egypt. I think in addition to that spatially or geographically CILAS creates this distance or escapes, while it is located close to downtown but being part of Islamic Cairo gives the space magical, authentic, or special flavor as my participants describe it. Maryam explains how it is important for CILAS to be away from the center, as it creates a chance for the learning and community aspects to flourish better than in other neighborhoods where there are many distractions. Finally, we can say that CILAS while being a learning space, it acted as a communal space that can help in instilling hope after the disappointment of the revolution, CILAS, as well as other alternative communities that provide spaces for socialization, freedom to express oneself and spaces for fun, serve both as haven and provider of space for hope and potentiality.

#### 4.4) Social relations and learning from people

For Mohamed Mahrous who is now trying to pursue a career in the social sciences, life after the revolution was a quest to find people who resemble him or with his interests, as a medical student with interests in social sciences and humanities, he had to approach alternative educational circles in order to not only learn but to find friends. “Spaces make you see people who are like you, people who share your opinions and read similar books to you, people are the most important thing in any experience. We learn more from people than from books. I know many people that helped me later in my personal and professional life, CILAS was a start for my shift from medical studies to social sciences.” he told me as he recounted his learning experiences. Learning from peers or friends comes at the core of the CILAS experience, every person I met mentioned that they came to know CILAS through a friend. Rahma and Maryam emphasize this idea with inspiration from traditions of Islamic knowledge attainment, Rahma mentioned to me the idea of “the companionship of an Ustaz (Teacher or scholar)” as one of the six qualities one needs to possess in order to gain knowledge according to Al Imam El Shafi'i one of the four great Sunni scholars. Maryam on the other hand said that she is inspired by the idea of Murid in Sufism which is a novice desiring knowledge in the Sufi traditions, for her this idea carries the importance of learning through others especially ones that have gained more knowledge and so can mentor and guide us through the way. But my participants portrayed this relationship in a positive sense as an essential for education, in general my participants describe how the relationship between the students and teachers at CILAS was an equal relation, students used to finish classes and go sit in a cafe or smoke together and discuss not only class readings but have general discussions. Ayoob 31 years old artist who graduated as an engineer, mentions how CILAS opened the room for important friendships that still live on after finishing his study program in 2016. “We started a road together and we have been walking ever since,” he said about his friendships. People emphasized the value of learning from others as more important than traditional sources of knowledge, this for them was emphasized at CILAS as several people



mentioned how for them CILAS gathered a diverse group of people and this created a rich experience. Ayooob seems to think that while these people are different in their affinities and backgrounds, they are like him in their refusal or rejection of society and its institutions. Thabet and Faysal remarked how one of the most important things they learned and valued at CILAS was an appreciation of other people's feelings, in my interview with him Thabet said, "I was not used to care about others, but sharing a table with others who had many dreams and issues gave me this chance." In a way, there was an openness to talk about any topic, and the fact that learning at CILAS depended on discussion and dialogue, so there was a room most of the time to reflect not only on the readings of every week but on personal feelings and life and its connections to what people learned. But for me, nothing spoke more about the diversity of the community than what Faysal said "The diversity at CILAS produces a different space, an agnostic, a leftist, an Islamist, and even people are gays and lesbians all in one place and they realize that the other is not that different, and they become friends. This space eased the tensions between these people. For example, I remember that in the same spot where one student used to pray, people would discuss their sexuality quite normally at the same time."

#### **4.5) Everyday politics, alternatives, and resistance**

In parallel with Rennick ideas about the apolitical activism, I think this view was the one reflected in all my interviews. My participants expressed their discontent with the current political climate, but at the same time I think they were also conservative in expressing these views due to a fear of repercussions I guess or an apathy towards politics in the more formal and grand sense. Thabet describes CILAS as a revolutionary because it brought diverse people together under a community, "we read critical work that we do not usually read outside and we connect that to our current situation, thinking about what's happening is a form of resistance, this is what happened also in the revolution" he said. Maryam used the word Dunk which is an arabic word that describes an elevated level of poverty or difficulty in portraying the political situation in Egypt.

While all my participants saw there is a diminishing space for politics or political expression, there are still rooms for alternatives. Mahrous reflected on CILAS on this regard saying that “when you teach someone to think critically about his life and the public affairs, it is political. When you bring someone from the margins and give him a space to express himself that is a political act. To get people who do not know each other’s and they discuss their life and society that is political”

As I mentioned before as the room for contentious political activism or action becomes non-existent, the political and the meaning expands into other forms like everyday politics and what Bayat sees as the politics of life itself. As a feminist Maryam told me that for her, she no longer focuses on a big change, on the contrary her politics are now focused on the everyday life politics and micro politics of solidarity, kindness, care and friendship. She recounts the difficulty of even organizing a simple dance performance in her hometown, as she had to go through the obstructions from police officers who think “girls should not dance”. For her managing to organize this event in the end, is a political act. She stresses the importance of that by saying “for me the personal is political, the room for movement now is nearly nonexistent. We need to be able to see each other’s and be in solidarity together. A person who reject that the personal is political, will live in constant depression. We need to find moments of solidarity and friendship, and alternative education is political because you do something that can be considered self-improvement and you get to make friends and connections.” Maryam’s point while they reflect the importance of friends and connections specially in times of difficulty and crisis, but they also stress on the importance of fun and joy as a form of resistance. Ayooob thinks the political is always there, even the silence and the fact that people do not talk about politics anymore is political. Maha highlighted how with the lack or inability to express political opinions, many have resorted to either using cultural, social activism as in the example of the feminist movement where things can seem “non-political” or resorting to self-care and focusing on one’s own health and mental wellness.

## 4.6) What is Education?

Since CILAS is a site of learning, I asked my participants about how they define education and what are their formal schooling experiences and how they are different from the experience they had outside of the school and university, also understanding how they view education as political. As I mentioned in the section “learning from the revolution” my participants consider the revolution as a turning point in how people choose to learn and educate themselves not only as a pedagogical event or a site of public pedagogy but as an event that became a catalyst for people to learn about the world and themselves. While alternative education cannot be said to have totally emerged from the revolution, but all my participants recounted how the revolution encouraged more initiatives, organizations, and groups. In the CILAS case, my participants think that without the revolution, CILAS would not have existed. All my participants referred to education as political, Rahma and Ayoob claimed of the deteriorating state of education in Egypt is political, the lack of quality in formal education for them is not a coincidence. Generally, while my participants provided a variety of different definitions of Education, the common thread is a focus on education being holistic that breaks binaries of mind/body or theory/practice, as mentioned before the importance of others in the learning process highlights a desire for social forms of education that fosters dialogue and acceptance regardless of the diverse backgrounds of the learners, and most importantly how education can tie and connect with real-life experience. My participants lamented their experience in formal education as something you do not choose, expressing how boring or outdated it seems at the time. Thabet pointed out how one of the missing elements that he found in alternative education is joy, this view is also supported by Rahma and Mahrous who mentions how crucial joy and fun is to any alternative educational experience they choose to enroll. Several of my participants noted how CILAS gave them the freedom to explore and learn in the way they want, with no gradings and few assignments the experience of learning became more about your own desire to learn and the joy you get from this experience. The participants also commended the focus on dialogue and discussion at CILAS,

this is facilitated by the small numbers at CILAS in comparison to public universities where most of the students have attended, where there is no room for dialogue or discussion and there is a focus on lecturing as the main and probably only teaching method.

## Conclusion

In this research I looked at the post uprisings period in Egypt in an attempt to understand the afterlives or remainings of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and where they are located and how they are manifested. I demonstrated that after the coup with the ongoing repression and authoritarianism, the cultural and social spaces that emerged after the revolution served as an alternative for more traditional forms of politics that became unavailable, also how the activists and politicized individuals understanding of the definitions of what counts as political change from the macro to micro levels and expands into territories that may seem non-political or apolitical. These changes were accompanied with the adoption of prefigurative politics in the creation of small settings groups and organizations with internal values, organizational processes and social relations that corresponds to future social change goals. For this I have particularly focused on the alternative education movement or scene that emerged after the revolution, which due to its seemingly non-political nature have managed to evade although not entirely the diminishing spaces after the coup. I have used the case of the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS) which is one of the projects that as its founder labelled it in one of his talks as “the brainchild of the revolution” as one of the organizations that emerged or was inspired by the revolution I argue through this thesis that CILAS serves as a prefigurative space that inhabits a possibility to create alternative possibilities to its students not only through learning but through enacting new social relations and possibilities to reimagine one self and the world. To answer my arguments and research questions, I have used prefiguration as a theoretical base trying to locate

prefiguration in the Egyptian context, as an analytical lens that was used to frame the Egyptian revolution along with other place-based movements. I also wanted to locate how spaces can be prefigurative or how outside of protest sit-in or camp the prefigurative lens have been used to frame alternative spaces, groups, and organizations. To present CILAS as a prefigurative space I have also located it within the larger umbrella of alternative higher education projects such as free schools or free universities, following on that I gave both a backstory of the CILAS as well as an empirical account. I have conducted a fieldwork where I have interviewed several participants and managed to locate a number of themes that relate to my own arguments and questions. Through listening to my participants, I can say that my participants understood education and learning as political, and that the emergence of alternative education movement is rooted in the revolutionary moment. One of the unique findings or insights was how the revolution itself was described as a pedagogical event, that not only the site of the tahrir sit-in was a site of learning, but also the event itself taught them about their rights as citizens and changed their relations with concepts of power and agency. This relates to how Awad (2016) argued that the personal change resulting from the revolution is irreversible although the desired change did not happen, my participants were able to relate and remember the revolution and how it changed them. They noted the change in how they approach politics into more an everyday personal politics that are attuned to social changes they desire to see, as Maryam have noted that what is important for her is that the personal becomes political, and the everyday becomes a site for resistance. In parallel to that, there has been a shift to what can be seen as overlooked by the state such as the cultural and social spaces such as feminist activism, learning spaces, and art and culture centers. They also reflected on the CILAS space as the enactment of indirect forms of politics through gathering people and the creation of community. As for the community my participants have emphasized the importance of spaces like CILAS, in which new friendships can occur and a room for newer meanings and potentialities can occur, after the disappointment of the revolution the space functioned as a place to recuperate, have fun, learn, and experience personal changes. Finally

thinking through all what I have mentioned, CILAS is prefigurative in what Yates (2015) described as the second strand of prefiguration “the creation of alternatives, experimenting with social relations, and the construction of counter-institutions and counter-power.” which is reflected not only in the learning experience but also in the communal aspects. The afterlives of the revolution is important, not only in providing hope after the disappointment of the revolution, but they may offer a space for experimentation with alternative ways of living, being, learning, and organizing that might be useful in the future and help in building future movements for social change. Although there is no room to mention the influence of CILAS in a quantitative form, but organizations such as Muftadaa(The Beginning) an initiative to introduce high school students to critical humanities to high school students in Egypt and Mesahat (spaces) a self-directed learning initiative for children were established by former CILAS students. So, in this sense CILAS functioned as a catalyst and hub for these initiatives and organizations to emerge. I want to reflect finally on the limitations of this research and the future openings that this research can move further. I think that the time for the fieldwork was not enough to engage in a participant observation which would have been useful for research of this kind, in addition, I could not conduct as many interviews as I wanted to do, and I could not keep the gender balance. But I think within the scale of the interviews conducted, I managed to gather useful insights and findings that illuminated the research questions and arguments and helped in the process of writing this thesis. There are also aspects that I could not be due to time constraints to explore in the thesis which are the economic and financial sustainability of CILAS and the organizational structure. Which are aspects I wish I can explore more in the future, reflecting more on my personal experience in working or co-managing the space, as I think it can be useful to similar projects in the region and worldwide. Also, in relation to alternative education, I would have loved to also have another case study to add more holistic picture to my thesis. One of the challenges in this thesis as I mentioned before in chapter three was in locating CILAS as a project although much has been written about Education in Egypt but it focuses on the formal

education and due to the fluid nature of projects as CILAS it can be difficult to pinpoint how to relate it categorically, which is more complicated with the lack of literature on alternative higher education outside of north America, the UK and Europe and to a lesser extent South America. Finally, this research opens several directions that can be explored further in the future, from a conceptual side I want to see how applicable prefigurative politics as a framework on other spaces within or outside alternative education circles specifically through conducting long participant observations periods that can help in grasping the everyday and micropolitics. Investigating the concept of afterlives further as an analytical tool to understand what happens after the revolution and what remains of it. There are the possibilities of connecting CILAS further to the global movements in reimagining the higher education. Also work on historicizing alternative education in Egypt beyond revolution, also anarchist education as Cairo and Alexandria has a long history that goes to the late 19th century of anarchist activities whether by Egyptian or Greek and Italian anarchists. Finally hope as one of the themes that emerged in my interviews, I want to be able to investigate hope and where it is located specially in the times of political difficulties, which is an important question in the Egyptian context as politically and socially the situation remains quite bleak with the political and social restrictions along with the tough economic situation, which calls for the need to imagine alternatives and engage with and enjoy life as Bayat's said reflecting on a visit in an article published in Mada Masr titled "Revolution and Despair" after a visit to Egypt in 2014 "The memories of those extraordinary episodes and the moral resources they generated have become part of the popular consciousness. They could serve as the normative foundation to imagine and build a good society of inclusive social order that is concerned with solidarity, egalitarian ethos, and social justice."

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