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The politicized café: explaining the politicization of the ahwa in contemporary Egyptian social movements

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The Politicized Café:
Explaining the Politicization of the *Ahwa* in Contemporary Egyptian Social Movements

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Abstract

The Arab Spring uprisings (2010-11) have inspired a recent outpouring of critical scholarship examining the logic of protests. Scholars have emphasized the role of information technologies, the experiences of particular social groups, and comparative political transformations. Less consideration has been given to the contributions of everyday spaces in this period of popular revolution. However, during the 2011 protests, Egyptian cafés facilitated political activity by providing activists space in which to organize campaigns, shelter from law enforcement, and cultivate solidarity networks among demographics traditionally segregated from one another by gender and socioeconomic class. In exploring the politicization of the Egyptian café at the onset of the Arab Spring, I pose the question: *under what conditions are seemingly apolitical spaces rendered political in periods of social unrest?* In my analysis, I prioritize the *processes* which facilitated the Egyptian café's transformation from an everyday space into a setting for political mobilization. I argue that the *ahwa*'s politicization in the lead-up to the revolution reflected a shift in ordinary Egyptians' experience of political repression from atomized and particularistic to general and collective. I demonstrate further that this collectivism served to 'activate' the *ahwa* within a broad network of politicized everyday spaces that facilitated 'hidden in plain sight' mobilization along Egypt's periphery.

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Introduction

The Arab Spring uprisings (2010-11) have inspired a recent outpouring of critical scholarship examining the logic of protests. Scholars have prioritized the role of information technologies (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Jamali, 2014), the experiences of particular social groups (Gerges, 2014; Khatib & Lust, 2014; Korany & El-Mahdi, 2012; Mako & Moghadam, 2021), and resulting political transformations (Aboueldahab, 2017; Luciani, 2017; Zartman et al., 2015). Less consideration has been given to the contributions of everyday spaces in this period of popular revolution. Accordingly, the present study explores the politicization of the Egyptian coffeehouse (called *ahwa* in the Egyptian vernacular Arabic and *ahawi* in the plural form¹) in the Arab Spring through analysis of social movement theory, subversive urban geographies, and the effects of state repression on these environments. To this aim, I pose the question: *under what conditions are seemingly apolitical spaces rendered political in periods of social unrest?*

Cafés offer valuable insight into the role of everyday spaces in contentious politics: throughout Egyptian history, urban *ahawi* have played important roles in the country’s social movements. In times of political unrest, Egyptian coffeehouses have attracted broad swaths of an otherwise fragmented society, whose mounting dissatisfaction with the regime has successfully subverted traditional class, gender, and other social divisions in pursuit of solidarity and mobilization. Popular cafés have served as settings for discussing the news and debating social taboos, organizing political campaigns, collaborating on written demands during protests, providing medical aid and shelter to those suffering from altercations with law enforcement, and more (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020).

Notably, recent scholarly interest in everyday spaces has overlooked their transformations from apolitical localities into sites of simultaneous political participation and repression. In contrast, this study examines the *processes* that rendered Egyptian coffeehouses important revolutionary spaces during the Arab Spring uprisings, with relevant attention directed to spatial, gender, and socioeconomic

¹ I use the terms “café,” “coffeehouse,” and “*ahwa*” interchangeably throughout this study, making distinctions between certain variations of the establishment (defined in greater detail on p.11) explicit when necessary.

variations. I argue that the *ahwa*'s politicization in the lead-up to the revolution reflected a shift in ordinary Egyptians' experience of political repression from atomized and particularistic to general and collective. This process served to politicize the *ahwa*, as well as to 'activate' it within a broad network of politicized everyday spaces where mobilization could take place. Ultimately, I maintain that the Egyptian café's revolutionary character cannot be understood without due recognition of individual agency, through which the *ahwa*'s politicization emerges from sustained, underlying contention between the people and the state. I suggest that my findings bear insightful implications for other seemingly apolitical spaces rendered political through ordinary citizens' active resilience against state repression.

The present study cites a rich catalog of sociological and anthropological scholarship examining Egyptian coffeehouses. The fieldwork I conducted over a period of one month in Cairo, from mid-December 2022 to mid-January 2023, has also influenced my analysis. During this trip, I visited and observed numerous cafés throughout the city, particularly in the downtown area where my research is geographically focused. My approach included participant observation (surveying, for example, the general demographics of the café's patrons, any notable events/figures honored through the café's decor, its relative location to other notable urban landmarks, etc.), as well as brief interviews with close acquaintances and willing informants, such as university professors. Unfortunately, my ability to gather first-hand data was hindered by concerns for personal safety and language barriers. Having consulted close acquaintances before embarking on my fieldwork, I was informed of Egypt's increasingly tense political climate in the post-Arab Spring era. I was advised against striking up spontaneous conversations with café patrons/owners on topics pertaining to politics and social issues. Consistent with research I had conducted on café dynamics before my trip, I was warned of the presence of undercover police spies (*mukhbireen*) in cafés, as well as in the streets of Cairo generally. The upcoming 12th anniversary of the January 25 uprisings no doubt exacerbated this tension.

I have structured my analysis in two main parts, approaching the *ahwa* first at the level of an insulated space (Part I: The Café as a Space), then at that of the sociopolitical environment in which it operates (Part II: The Café Within a Space). Part I examines the ways in which solidarity networks within

the café-space are challenged and strengthened in accordance with political climate. I approach these dynamics presupposing the value of non-kinship ties in the study of political mobilization. I begin by consolidating competing narratives about the *ahwa*'s political role in the lead-up to the Arab Spring. I have chosen to prioritize the experiences of politically active Egyptian youths in this section in order to account as accurately as possible for relevant variations in gender and sociopolitical context. Yet, my findings bear larger implications for the experiences of Egyptian society at large: I illustrate that the widespread use of the *ahwa* as a political space at the onset of the revolution reflected the gradual development of a broad Egyptian collectivism in the face of political repression. In Part II, I position the *ahwa*'s role in revolutionary politics through its relationship to the state, the city, and the street. I explore how the café functions within a broad network of politicized everyday spaces activated by ordinary citizens' collective mobilization. I argue that a thorough understanding of spatial politicization must address the contributions and agency of the ordinary people who reappropriate such spaces for political purposes. Before concluding, I examine the conditions of the Egyptian *ahwa* in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Inspired by my own fieldwork as well as Abdelrahman's (2016) "securocratic state" model, I argue that the regime has reasserted its authority over the café-space since the military takeover of 2013.

Understanding Everyday Spaces in Contentious Politics

I begin by situating the present study alongside existing explanations for the role of politicized everyday spaces in contentious politics. First and foremost, this study seeks to rectify the fact that sociopolitical analysis of the Middle Eastern café is severely underrepresented in the field of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) studies and, where it has been explored, critical approach of its politicization has leaned towards the observational rather than the causal. In documenting the spread of the coffeehouse throughout the Medieval Near East, Hattox (1985) surveys early religious and political opposition to the café. Mostafa and Elbendary (2020) map out the origins and development of the *ahwa* in Egypt,

exploring, among other things, its “political implications” as a gathering space for revolutionaries to meet, plan protests, and activate mutual aid networks (p. 76). However, both Hattox and Mostafa and Elbendary stop short of explaining *how* these cafés transformed into settings for political mobilization. Tam’s (2018) work on Cairene coffeehouses begins to fill this vacancy, positioning the study of cafés as crucial for the appreciation of “many broader histories” (p. vi) in Egypt — an approach the present study affirms and seeks to emulate. However, Tam’s causal reasoning into the role of Cairo’s cafés in political movements (derived primarily from his analysis of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution) is limited to revolutionary patrons’ “use of informal social networks that [make] up the political public sphere” (p. 276). Instead, I argue that the mere existence of social networks does not sufficiently account for how the *ahwa* became political. Indeed, social networks may constitute the *mechanism*, but they do not reveal the *process* through which that politicization is realized. Hattox, Mostafa and Elbendary, and Tam lay valuable foundations upon which this study seeks to examine the processes behind the development of the Egyptian café’s revolutionary character.

The 2010-11 Arab Spring presents a valuable opportunity for such analysis. In major cities across the region, coffeehouses and their owners met frequent praise for their role in sheltering political dissidents during protests (Rabbat, 2012). Moreover, Arab Spring scholars have occasionally appropriated the symbol of the café to describe the metamorphosis of other public spaces (such as roads and city squares) into hubs for political activity. Marzouki’s observation in early 2011 that streets in Tunis had “transformed into a sort of large coffeehouse” (p. 3) explicitly associates the newly communal and politically charged atmosphere of Tunis’ main streets with the region’s cafés. In Egypt specifically, cafés around Tahrir Square became popular meeting spots and resting places for Arab Spring revolutionaries. Well-established social barriers associated with age, class, and gender were temporarily overlooked within cafés in the pursuit of political mobilization (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 40). Notably, the *ahwa*’s revolutionary character in the Arab Spring was foreshadowed by its contributions to multiple pre-

2011 political movements, like labor strikes, sit-ins, and the April 6 Youth Movement² (Mostafa & Elbendary, pp. 113-142). This study makes valuable references to these proto-revolutionary experiences, and more importantly, approaches the Arab Spring as one moment in a vast history of vibrant café-politics which has seen the role of the politicized *ahwa* fluctuate in accordance with the degree of state repression. Since the 2011 protests, the regime's crackdown on coffeehouses has intensified, and the frequency of undercover police spies surveilling the *ahawi* has increased considerably (Mostafa & Elbendary, p. 13). From the standpoint of this study, such repression serves to justify why research into the political nature of the Egyptian *ahwa* matters: because "café-politics" pose an observable threat to the ruling elite.

Indeed, scholarship on civil society activity in the Middle East at large has tended to spotlight the systemic factors either permitting its success or impeding its progress. Generally, MENA scholars have challenged Tarrow's (2011) "political process" model, which claims social movements emerge from "increased political opportunity" (p. 26). Instead, Wiktorowicz (2000) reveals how Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes' manipulation of civil society into "instruments of social control" enables the state to "monitor collective action by channeling group work into well-managed formal organizations" (p. 43). In Egypt specifically, Wickham (2002) demonstrates how limited access to democratic channels results in the marginalization of popular political activity away from the formal "center" towards the informal and unorthodox "periphery" (p. 94). Finally, Bayat (1997) questions the utility of the term "civil society" to the Middle Eastern context, where he argues "modes of struggle and expression" emerge that are "more extensive and effective than [the] conventional institutions" most often associated with social movements (p. 55). Similarly, the present study seeks to challenge the dominant Eurocentric narratives depicting the emergence of social movements as dependent upon pre-existing democratic structures.

² Launched on Facebook in 2008, the April 6 Youth Movement consisted of around 70,000 young, educated Egyptians who were planning to strike on April 6 in support of the workers in the *El-Mahalla El-Kubra* industrial district (Shapiro, 2009).

Certainly, systemic factors play a considerable role in enabling, shaping, and ultimately inhibiting the development of civil society and the success of social movements. Government crackdowns on cafés throughout the Middle East since the early seventeenth century (including one particularly forceful decree issued in Istanbul by the sultanate of Murat IV [Hattox, 1985, p. 102]) suggest that the degree to which the café's revolutionary potential is *allowed* to materialize greatly depends upon the particular regime's "coercive apparatus," defined by Bellin (2004) as the combined "will and capacity" of the state to "suppress democratic initiative" (p. 143). Indeed, according to Tschirgi (2013) Mubarak's allowance of a considerable degree of oppositional assembly (permitting law-abiding opposition to publish newspapers and appear on television, for example) is widely considered a precondition for the emergence of Egypt's January 25 protests (p. 15). However, this study maintains that structural analysis alone cannot sufficiently explain the *ahwa*'s revolutionary character. Instead, a thorough understanding of the café's role in Egyptian contentious politics requires examining the café-space itself: its social and political function, its role in Egyptian urban geographies, and its simultaneous development as a tool for the political masses and a threat to the ruling elite.

Furthermore, where studies of non-traditional political activity in the Middle East have considered specific movements, scholars have dedicated ample focus to the rise of peripheral Islamism. Wickham (2002) utilizes the center-to-periphery spectrum to explain the rise of the "parallel Islamic sector" in 1980-90s Egypt, when political Islamists successfully mobilized "on the periphery" (p. 116). Similarly, Khoury (2017) claims that the failure of MENA regimes to effectively modernize all socioeconomic classes resulted in the marginalization of vast swaths of society who, in turn, interpreted Islam as an informal tool for the realization of their political and economic demands (p. 214). Scholars have also paid close attention to the rise of specific institutions, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah (El-Ghobashy, 2005; Brooke, 2016; Cammett & Issar, 2010). Ultimately, this study seeks to de-prioritize sectarian case studies in the literature on Middle Eastern peripheral political activity by centering the Egyptian coffeehouse.

In doing so, this work takes inspiration from available scholarship exploring everyday spaces and unorthodox political participation in the Middle East. In the Egyptian context, this includes Singerman's (1995) study of Cairo's urban quarters and Bayat's (1997) look at "ordinary" political practices. In the Middle East at large, Iran's "*patogh*-spaces" have proved insightful for scholars' interdisciplinary approach to examining ordinary citizens' construction of "protean, *ad hoc*," and politically subversive localities along the margins of official, and often exclusionary, public space (Khorshidifard, 2011; Mohammad-Zaheri, 2009). Onyebadi (2020) depicts the Kuwaiti *diwaniya* as a "semipublic forum" in which participants circumvent freedom of speech restrictions in Kuwait (p. 5). Analyzing "non-jurisdictional units" in Qatar, El Kurd (2022) reveals how these informal spaces succeed in facilitating democratic participation by cultivating political agency and providing activists the opportunity to network (p. 15). Lastly, Wedeen's (2008) work on Yemeni *qāt* chews explores both the merits and shortcomings of applying a Habermasian public sphere framework to this distinctly Middle Eastern practice, an approach that has heavily influenced the present study.

Finally, I have found various theoretical and anthropological frameworks useful for a thorough understanding of the processes of politicization. Arguing that "political movements [...] remain ineffectual until they assert a material presence," Harvey (2006) affirms that the neoliberal world order has rendered it "crucial to reflect on the nature of space" in order to achieve deeper understanding of popular movements and other urban processes (p. 120). Likewise, this work presupposes the value of spatial analysis in examining contentious politics and seeks to contribute to the literature interpreting space as instrumental in the development of citizens' political consciousness. In particular, the present study approaches the *ahwa* according to Lefebvre's (1992) conception of space as socially produced, examining it relationally in terms of time, the individuals which occupy it, and the activities that take place within it. Soja's (1996) "Secondspace" theory considers the "mental space" of subversive actors' "utopian thought and creative imagination" (p. 67). In other words, publicly oriented social movements only emerge once participants have realized the revolutionary potential (or "counter-space" potential)

within the physical reality of their everyday surroundings. Habermas' (1991) public sphere model also informs my analysis, both in agreement with this framework and, occasionally, in opposition to it.

Finally, the present study endorses recent trends in anthropological research promoting affect-forward analysis in the study of contentious politics. In her exploration of post-2011 Egypt, Malmström (2019) cites the value in “[considering] attachment and affinity between people and other materialities” (p. 74), an approach which counters the temptation to misrepresent the café as a self-contained, autonomous place while ignoring the very real agency, contributions, and relational dynamics of those acting within it. In acknowledging individual experiences of friendship, surveillance, and urban life, this study does not altogether dismiss the value of a system-forward approach. Rather, it maintains that affect theory can enrich our understanding of systemic analysis.

Accounting for Variation in the *Ahwa*-Space

Three distinct categories of the coffeehouse establishment exist in Egypt, each performing unique functions in Egyptian society. From my fieldwork, as well as the secondary literature, I have found that a café's function is closely tied to its politicization.

To begin with, the *ahwa baladi*, otherwise known as the traditional coffeehouse, constitutes the analytical focal point of the present study. Variations of this institution exist in nearly every Egyptian neighborhood and are also frequently encountered in the downtown areas (where they are called *ahawi wist el balad*). Typically patronized by men, they provide opportunities for affordable entertainment and masculine socialization (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 2). Neighborhood *ahawi* tend to consist of one small room, around 15 feet in depth and 5 feet wide, with a metal roll-up door opening to the street. In contrast, the downtown *ahawi* are often larger and provide more opportunities for indoor seating. In my experiences walking through the suburbs of Giza and Cairo, it was common to see one or two men seated within an *ahwa baladi*, smoking *shisha* and chatting to the owner. One Egyptian man I spoke to

emphasized the popularity of games like backgammon and dominoes in these settings, with day-to-day conversation occasionally touching upon issues like the price of fuel and food.

The second form of the Egyptian *ahwa* is the historical/cultural café. Typically enjoyed by both men and women of middle-class status and of varying age groups, these cafés tend to be more formal in their European-inspired structure and design, and include the iconic *el-Fishawi*, Naguib Mahfouz coffeeshop, Café Riche, and *el-Horriya* Café (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 2). Thirdly, modeled after the popular Western variety, the modern café establishment has grown in quantity and popularity throughout Egypt's major cities since the turn of the twenty-first century, particularly in middle- and upper-class areas (de Koning, 2009, p. 91). Notable examples include Cilantro and Beano's, the former of which one acquaintance had remarked upon our visit as feeling "just like Starbucks" due to its decorative green accents, English-only menu, and sleek, modern-looking kitchen appliances on sale. During my stay in Cairo, I observed the relatively greater presence of young women in these cafés (ranging from veiled to unveiled, and even on occasion, displaying 'alternative' styles, like striking makeup and short 'pixie' haircuts), often sitting alone with a book or a computer.

Notably, even within these categories, cafés are often differentiated according to specific features and atmospheres. For instance, some downtown cafés may offer small plates of food brought in from nearby kiosks (unlike the neighborhood cafés, which tend to serve exclusively drinks and *shisha*). Moreover, the *ahawi baladi* in downtown Cairo are often distinguished from the *ahawi* in cities like Luxor, Aswan, and Hurghada, where the relatively high presence of tourists renders their cafés less "traditional" than their Cairene counterparts (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, pp. 116, 128). Regarding the cultural cafés, according to one informant, "especially for the middle- and upper-middle classes, they are places for socialization, where different groups of people meet at specific locations to discuss their shared interests...for example, people interested in literature might meet at one café, while people who want to discuss music meet at another." This observation is consistent with the interview segment of Mostafa and Elbendary's work, where participants reflect on the distinct cultures that attract different groups to certain cafés, such as "[the] arts, cinema, and politics" (p. 130). I also find it interesting that several of the men I

spoke to did not even consider the modern café an *ahwa* at all, but rather, an inauthentic imitation of Western culture that was “totally unrelated” to my study on politicized cafés.

As the variation outlined above suggests, perceptions of spatial politicization are tied to cultural context, in which gender and socioeconomic factors play a crucial role.

I. The Café as a Space

The present study begins by exploring the influence of the café-space on Egyptians’ social networks, particularly among politically oriented café-patrons. This section presupposes the value in examining non-kinship ties in contentious politics, and additionally, the relationships between such ties and the everyday spaces that may undermine or strengthen them. In the anthropological literature, non-familial relations have been largely overshadowed by near-exclusive focus on kinship ties (Bell, 1999, pp. 1-19), a trend this study seeks to deviate from by exploring how Egyptian cafés influenced solidarity networks in the lead-up to the Arab Spring. To account for competing narratives about the *ahwa*’s political role in the pre-2011 period, I examine how gender and sociopolitical context shaped the experiences of politically oriented Egyptian youths in the café-space. I argue that the solidarity bonds cultivated within the *ahwa* reflected a broader sociopolitical process in which ordinary citizens *en masse* “[went] beyond their particularistic claims” in pursuit of “common, collective goals” like access to “freedom, dignity, [and] social justice” (Bayat, 2021, pp. 81, 108). Although this section spotlights the experiences of youth activists, its findings contribute to a general understanding of the development of Egyptians’ political consciousness at the onset of the January 25 protests.

After conducting ethnographic fieldwork among Cairo’s youth activists in 2007-11, Onodera (2020) concluded that “most young people in Egypt [...] cherished the company of good friends,” an observation he maintains holds far-reaching implications for the study of Egyptian “modes of social belonging” that differ from kinship ties (p. 44). Citing Bell and Coleman (1999), Onodera promotes the analysis of friendship as one method of examining “social relations that may include but are not reducible

to kinship; that are sustained beyond single or short-term encounters; [and] that involve the search for some form of sentiment, or at least empathy and common ground between persons” (p. 44). Citing Bayat (2021), this section extends Onodera’s approach to the study of café-politics, exploring the value of friendship in the “confrontation [of] regimes of surveillance and suppression” (p. 25).

“Like a sewage”

Remarkably, Onodera (2015) observes that some pre-Arab Spring Egyptian youth activists disparaged downtown cafés. On the extreme end, Mahdi’s opinion of the café-littered *el-Borsa* district in downtown Cairo characterizes the establishment as “like a sewage [...] it is a place for things, of course, to be decided, for some plans to be made, but not always for the best of the country” (p. 152). Mahdi’s criticisms also refer to cafés’ seemingly inevitable tendency to, as Onodera explains, “entangle one into a contradictory web of social relations” in which café-goers “[wage] plots against others,” making it “impossible to remain neutral in terms of one’s allegiance and loyalty” (p. 153). Mahdi himself maintains that the typical downtown *ahwa* scene

was a place where things changed from being groups based on ideologies to groups based on interests [...] to get the best possible gain out of the movement, and of persons like myself, who were foolish enough to trust [others]. (p. 153)

Likewise, Walid, a journalist-in-making and member of the April 6 Youth, expresses frustration with the movement “whose members still talked too much, performed few concrete actions and, for the most part, *met with others in downtown cafés*” (Onodera, 2020, p. 49, my emphasis). Walid also observes a difference between two forms of non-kinship bonds considered valuable to Egyptian youth at the time: “acquaintanceship” (*ilāqa*) and “friendship” (*sadāqa*). When questioned by Onodera, Walid

explained that young activists usually have a large number of acquaintances with whom they meet regularly and engage in oppositional activities. They may appear to be close friends, but their alliances are mostly forged in order to defend specific political positions or opinions and, especially, to pursue their personal interests. Thus, acquaintances stand in contrast to what Walid

sees as true friendship, which is characterized by mutual loyalty, affection or love, and genuine interest in the other's wellbeing. (p. 50)

Walid's remarks are consistent with anthropological research examining the role of friendship in stateless societies. Although early 2000s-Egypt can hardly be classified as such, much of the political and social instability observed in the absence of states feels applicable to the sociopolitical circumstances that shaped Onodera's findings. In their study of ancient Iceland, for instance, Durrenberger and Pálsson (Bell, 1999) argue: "Friendship can be viewed as an adaptation to situations of fundamental insecurity, the necessity of surviving in a context of shifting alliances and chaotic political maneuvers" (p. 73). Yet, according to Onodera, Egyptian activists prior to 2011 believed that the networks cultivated in the café-space "usually lasted as long as the grounds for these tactical alliances were in place, but, in the politicked and fast-paced sphere of youth activism, acquaintances often proved interstitial, giving way to new alliances" (p. 50). Therefore, Mahdi and Walid's judgement of a relationship's authenticity indicates an underlying desire for the "trust, loyalty, and solidarity" that they found lacking in the highly political pre-Arab Spring acquaintance networks typically formed in cafés, but as Bayat (2021) argues, are particularly sought-for in times of political instability (p. 24).

Indeed, many activists like Onodera's (2015; 2020) informants preferred meeting in private homes, local neighborhoods, and university campuses, which, while perhaps quieter and more conducive to intellectual discourse, were also far more private and exclusive of other age groups, workers, and social demographics in Egypt (2020, p. 52). In fact, relative to the political climate of the 1970s, university campuses in the early 2000s were not considered "meaningful spaces for public political dissent" (Shehata, 2008), especially in comparison to direct street action and Internet activism. Thus, the café's very 'public-ness' and, equally important, its propensity to bring people of diverse backgrounds together, was seen as a hindrance to the activist work of some youth cohorts who saw their personal social networks threatened by the numerous and often competing particularistic interests of the heterogenous café-patrons.

“Places which welcomed us”

Mahdi and Walid’s (Onodera 2015; 2020) reflections could not be positioned in greater contrast to Marwa’s from Mostafa and Elbendary’s (2020) ethnographic study. “I started sitting at *ahwa baladi* in 2006...and also in the downtown cafés,” Marwa recounts, “the café was the place where we met to decide where to go or what to do next...to go to the theater or to the cinema, or to join [a] demonstration” (p. 117). Marwa began participating in youth politics during the *Kefaya* movement,³ and, like Walid, eventually joined the Youth for Change.⁴ Marwa describes the kinds of activities the downtown cafés facilitated for her and other young Egyptians: “We were a group of friends as well as colleagues working within this political movement [...] so we spoke about everything: politics, cinema, our studies, and personal stuff. The cafés were places which welcomed us, especially the downtown ones” (p. 119).

Clearly, to Marwa, the café did not present a threat to her political activism and while, like Walid, she also differentiates between the types of relationships cultivated in cafés (“friends” vs “colleagues”), the café-setting did not appear to compromise either of those connections. In fact, unlike Walid, Marwa seems to have appreciated the café’s diverse clientele:

The *ahwa baladi* [...] is related more to a sense of ‘collectiveness.’ You’ll find ten or fifteen people sitting together and you can join them [...] This happened a lot during the demonstrations ... you would go to the *ahwa* to have a break and then you find yourself sitting among a big group of people, ten or twenty, and maybe you only know just one of them! This way you get to know new people, and new relations would be formed; friendships and personal relations would be built; or you begin to organize activities with new people. I believe that the cafés also link different groups to one another. (p. 133)

Mahdi/Walid and Marwa’s perspectives reveal a striking inconsistency in the perceived value of the downtown café for Egyptian youth activists prior to the Arab Spring. How, then, can we reconcile these

³ Also known as the Egyptian Movement for Change, *Kefaya* was a grassroots coalition for political reform which, launched in 2004, expressed opposition to Hosni Mubarak’s presidency, as well as to ongoing political corruption and stagnation (Oweidat, 2008).

⁴ Youth for Change was the youth branch of the *Kefaya* movement (Howeidy, 2005).

seemingly incompatible positions? What is there to be learned from these honest, yet disparate, reflections concerning the role of the *ahwa* in Egyptian youth politics? The following discussion resolves this tension through analysis of the informants' gender and socioeconomic contexts, offering explanations as to how such perspectives might plausibly exist in tandem without invalidating one another.

Consolidating Competing Narratives

The Function of the Café

Within Egyptian society, women and men face unique challenges in the realm of public socialization. According to Peterson (2011), “coffeehouses of different kinds are sites of gender performance, places where particular kinds of masculinity and femininity are constructed” (p. 141). Peterson maintains that the Egyptian *ahwa*'s depiction as a Habermasian public-sphere may overlook the tendency of the café-patrons themselves to reinforce social norms of behavior according to gender and class expectations (p. 145). Moreover, the intersection of these expectations, Peterson argues, is vital for a comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences associated with public socializing for young Egyptian women and men: in the public realm, Peterson demonstrates, “class and gender are mutually constructed” (p. 142).

On the one hand, Peterson (2011) examines the importance of the *ahwa* as a space where “cosmopolitan men,” including middle-class educated youth like Onodera's (2015; 2020) Mahdi and Walid, can assert their masculinity. Analyzing his ethnographic findings, Peterson concludes:

The mocking idioms of incest, homosexuality, and effeminacy that recur between these young men draw attention to the fact that, for cosmopolitan young men, mixing with the other classes at the *ahawi* is at least in part about cementing their masculinity. Because they don't actively labor and are associated with Western lifestyles, elite men are said to be effeminate and homosexual [...] The playful attacks these men make on one another's masculinity is intended to cement that masculinity by demonstrating that they are “man enough” to take it, and give it back. (p. 147)

To Walid and Mahdi, therefore, the behavioral expectations within the café-space — acting as a stage upon which the (successful) demonstration of masculinity is deemed an important marker of belonging — may be considered an inconvenience easily avoidable by prioritizing at-home and on-campus locations where the comparative homogeneity of socioeconomic status and political involvement among male youth minimizes the expectation to defend one’s manliness and, thus, provides greater opportunity to engage in intellectual discourse. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the very *el-Borsa* neighborhood Mahdi and Walid disparage was known (prior to its demolition in 2015) for being uniquely welcoming to male and female café-patrons alike: *el-Borsa*’s cafés served a gender-diverse clientele which included upper-middle class women with relatively liberal views and educated backgrounds (Hilmy, 2015). For these women, *el-Borsa* provided opportunities for mixed-gender socializing which contrasted distinctly to most working-class areas of downtown Cairo, where “the sight of young women smoking cigarettes and socializing with unrelated young men could potentially create a minor stir” (Onodera, 2020, p. 47). Therefore, although Onodera’s Mahdi and Walid do not comment on the appearance of women in the *ahawi* of *el-Borsa*, the experience of being watched by women within the cafés no doubt exacerbated the pressure placed upon male café-patrons to exhibit ‘sufficient’ masculinity.

El-Borsa aside, the Egyptian café’s legacy as a “masculine space” (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 135) renders female café-patrons at far greater risk of wider public ridicule and alienation. This is especially the case for educated middle and upper-middle class Egyptian women, like Marwa and the other young female political activists referred to in Mostafa and Elbendary’s (2020) work. Accordingly, Peterson (2011) likens the *ahwa* for women to Foucault’s “structural organization of space that disciplines and regulates bodies” (p. 152, as cited in Foucault, 1979). Notably, Marwa’s perception that the café allowed her to feel “a sense of collectiveness” among her fellow Egyptians indirectly speaks to the segregation educated, middle and upper-middle class Egyptian women feel in their everyday lives from non-kin Egyptian men and Egyptians of different socioeconomic classes in general. Careful considerations of class cannot be overlooked here, since studies suggest that even lower-class women might face less public scrutiny for frequenting the *ahwa* than their wealthier counterparts. As Peterson,

citing Hoodfar (1997) and Ossman (2002), reveals, “middle-class women may be assigned the home and the salon, but for working-class women, the alleys and neighborhoods are equally women’s spaces” (p. 156). If this socioeconomic context does not grant working-class women and male Egyptians *equal* access to the café, it *does* imply a greater acceptance for working-class women to engage in everyday mixed-gender socializing than for women of relatively higher classes. Thus, Marwa’s observation reveals a unique feature of the young Egyptian female activist’s experience wherein feeling “Egyptian” is indirectly associated with existing in community with men. As Peterson emphasizes, this dynamic “poses a particular problem for [middle and upper-middle class] women, for whom participation in leisure activities with men risks a loss of their reputation as decent (*mu’adab*)” (p. 142).

For Walid and Mahdi, the convergence of the café-space with patriarchal norms of behavior likely presented a hindrance to the activist work they participated in as pre-Arab Spring political youths, as well as a threat to their friendship networks considered vital for maintaining a degree of stability and reliable support in times of widespread uncertainty. In contrast, Marwa and other young politically active Egyptian women utilized the café-space for mixed-gender socializing. In this setting, educated middle and upper-middle class women could feel a sense of collectivism with their fellow Egyptians through engaging publicly in community with men — something generally inaccessible to them due to the social value attributed to modesty for women’s reputations. This begs the question, therefore: what prompted women like Marwa to overlook such risks in pursuit of mixed-gender socialization within the café-space? And what may account for such a marked difference between Marwa’s opinion of the role of the café in her friendship networks compared to those of Walid and Mahdi?

The “Cosmopolitan Class”

Elsewhere in her interview response, Marwa acknowledges “the touristic attraction” of the downtown areas she frequented while participating in the *Kefaya* movement: “This [is] why it was easier for us as young men and women to meet more often at the *wist el balad ahawi*,” she reflects (Mostafa &

Elbendary, 2020, p. 119). Indeed, among Mostafa and Elbendary's informants, exposure to tourists and proximity to highly touristic areas are frequently correlated with the presence of women in cafés: "In Alexandria," for example, "things are more acceptable for women to do openly because of the touristic nature of the city" (p. 141). Additionally, some informants associate specific "touristic cafés" located in Luxor, Aswan, and Hurghada with the relatively high presence of female patrons, although these *ahawi* are often explicitly differentiated from the *ahawi baladi* of downtown Cairo (pp. 116, 128). Nonetheless, a relationship persists between the presence of non-Egyptian (particularly Western) foreigners in an urban area alongside that of Egyptian women in the area's cafés.

According to Peterson (2011), "mixed-gender socializing is one of the hallmarks of a 'cosmopolitan lifestyle,'" one that many young, educated Egyptians seek to emulate in their daily lives: "Certain forms of consumption and practice," he explains, "are indexical of 'the West' or 'the global' and serve as valuable means for displaying cosmopolitan identity" (p. 3). Writing in the early 2000s, Peterson identifies a demographic of Egyptians he terms "the cosmopolitan class," a group spanning multiple socioeconomic backgrounds (the "old-money families, nouveaux riches [...] globe-trotting teens with substantial trust funds, families that count their pounds carefully as they strategize for their children's upwardly mobile social futures, and many varieties in between"), nevertheless united by a desire to "incorporate modernity into their everyday lives primarily through consumption" (p. 4). Writing from a post-2011 perspective, Bayat (2021) likewise observes a collective exposure to Western- and foreignness, particularly among a population he has termed "the middle-class poor" (p. 9). Characterized by "economic marginalization" and "political repression," the middle-class poor embodies

a paradoxical class that enjoys college degrees, knowledge of the world, and middle-class dreams but [has been] pushed by economic deprivation to live the life of the poor in the slums and subsist on precarious jobs. (p. 55)

Of course, the precise extent to which the "cosmopolitan class" and the "middle-class poor" overlap is unknown, although some degree of confluence is certain. Thus, the combination of increased exposure to Western/foreign aesthetics and the trend of economic liberalization since the latter half of the twentieth

century culminated in an (often unfulfilled) desire among the educated middle classes to emulate a Western-adjacent cosmopolitan lifestyle. Manifesting in the aesthetic expression of consumption, this desire gradually permitted Egyptian women limited access to the once-inaccessible *ahwa*-space, particularly in areas of Egypt boasting greater concentrations of (mixed-gender) tourists.

Moreover, many of Mostafa and Elbendary's (2020) informants reference the *ahwa*'s low prices as contributing to their appeal. "The most distinct quality of all these cafés we went to," recounts Khalil, "was their cheap prices. At that time, we were very poor university students, so the only place where we could afford to meet was the *ahwa*" (p. 121). Similarly, Marwa, who attended the American University in Cairo (AUC) at the time, cites affordability as "one of the main reasons which led [her] to sit at cafés" (p. 119). As Bayat (2021) illustrates, this combination of education and dispossession among the "middle-class poor" eventually "underscored [the] widespread dissent" which came to a head during the Arab Spring: "In their quotidian existence," Bayat explains, "many members of this [group] were involved in everyday struggles to advance their claims, while creating alternative life norms in their dispersed cliques and collectives" (p. 56). For Egyptian women and their male allies, such "alternative life norms" evidently included permitting women access to traditionally masculine public spaces, like the *ahawi*.

An "Adversarial Culture"

Equally valuable in Marwa's testimony is her reference to the "many demonstrations" occurring in downtown Cairo in the years 2005-7, during which she participated in the *Kefaya* movement by campaigning for Youth for Change (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 119). Marwa posits these protests as an additional reason she and other Egyptian women felt comfortable deviating from well-established patriarchal standards of behavior and frequenting the *ahwa* (p. 119). I argue that mounting political instability of the early 2000s, within which Egyptians at large found it increasingly permissible to voice their grievances through direct street action in the downtown area, facilitated the growth of an "adversarial culture" through which Marwa and her friends cultivated their "alternative life norms" within the *ahawi*.

According to Trilling (1967), “adversarial culture” serves to “liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture [...] and permit him to stand beyond it [...] and perhaps revise it” (p. 12). Paine (Bell, 1999) sees the worth of adversarial culture in “its readiness to challenge [the] moral and social contradictions” present in the dominant culture of which the adversarial culture emerges as a subversive alternative (p. 48). Regarding the role of friendship within such dynamics, Paine concludes that

the ideal friendship relationship with its own rules of relevancy is made for [adversarial culture]. However, the practice of [it] introduces argument and beyond argument, fundamental differences. *What, then, when friends find themselves on opposing sides? [...] How should, and do, friends fight?* (p. 49, my emphasis)

Thus, Paine identifies the paradox of the adversarial friendship: strengthened by shared resistance against undesirable social and political norms, it simultaneously risks being weakened by emergent clashes in participants’ individual views. Indeed, it was quite common for educated middle and upper-middle class Egyptian women to face scrutiny from their peers for frequenting the *ahwa*. Peterson (2011) acknowledges the frequent isolation Egyptian women who chose to visit the *ahwa* and engage in mixed-gender socializing often experienced from their fellow female students:

The young women who exhibit themselves at the *ahwa* are simultaneously violating multiple norms for honorable and appropriate feminine behavior. This does not always sit well with their peers [...] Their public display of themselves with men, smoking *shisha* and swearing, is a powerful technique for constructing transgressive gendered and class identities [...] Yet precisely because it is public, this display allows for the reinscription of gender ideologies by subjecting the women’s performances to public critique. (p. 155)

Peterson cites the remarks of Salma, a student also at the American University in Cairo, who expressed simultaneous praise and admonishment towards female café-patrons. “You have to admire them because they are showing that they don’t give a damn,” Salma admits, “but all they are really doing is, everyone sees them and says, ‘See? All the AUC girls are whores.’” (p. 154). Peterson attributes Salma’s disapproval to her “fear that she will be tarred by her affiliation with the school that produces women who

go to the *ahwa*” (p. 155). Thus, Salma’s admiration of her female peers who frequent *ahawi* positions her in close proximity to the adversarial culture of women like Marwa, yet her ultimate condemnation weakens the possibility of sustained friendship between them.

Certainly, it is within Trilling’s (1967) “adversarial culture” that politically subversive individuals may feel comfortable challenging dominant social structures. Yet, it is also through the broadening of the adversarial culture that the *dominant* culture finds its reinvigorated supporters, as evidenced by Salma’s disapproval. Indeed, the very fact that some Egyptian women found themselves increasingly isolated over their decision to frequent the *ahwa* may have prompted Marwa to feel that her remaining friendships were in fact *strengthened* by her controversial behavior. This conclusion would support anthropological research suggesting that friendship-ties are often reinforced by collective adversity (Bastian et al., 2014; Olivola & Shafir, 2013). Therefore, in the mounting instability of pre-Arab Spring Egypt, politically active women and their allies cultivated an “adversarial culture” within the *ahawi*, which permitted the expression of such “alternative life norms” as enabling the presence of women in traditionally masculine everyday spaces.

The Café as a Site for Political Mobilization

Mahdi and Walid’s (Onodera 2015; 2020) grievances aside, ample evidence exists for the value of Egyptian cafés to political organizers in the immediate lead-up to the Arab Spring, as well as during the revolution itself. Mostafa and Elbendary (2020) cite numerous Egyptians who recall the café-space’s function as a site for political mobilization during the protests. “The *ahawi* around Tahrir Square,” recounts Tarek, “were meeting places for the revolutionaries [in 2011]” (p. 123). Similarly, Samir notes:

With the commencement of the 2011 January revolution, *a new momentum* took place around the downtown cafés. The revolutionaries became the main customers [...] This again changed the downtown cafés to places where politics was discussed day and night. (p.124, my emphasis)

Notably, Samir is not the only interviewee to observe an apparent shift in Egypt’s political climate at the onset of the Arab Spring. According to Edward,

during the 2011 revolution, things were very different because the revolution itself led to *a completely new way of thinking* [...] people were able to break so many barriers and became aware that they had the power to change things. (p. 125, my emphasis)

Samir and Edward's accounts reflect a narrative of transformation taking place both within and beyond the café which served to render once-subversive decisions like Marwa's increasingly acceptable for Egyptian women, and the complaints of Mahdi and Walid rapidly negligible. At the onset of the 2011 uprisings, the *ahawi* became "places for huge gatherings of people from all age, class, and gender groups," Edward explains (p. 125). Harnessing their "collective power," protestors would "start the demonstrations by meeting first at the cafés and then proceed to the streets and squares" (p. 125).

Unfortunately, the 2011 uprisings exceed the scope of Onodera's fieldwork, so we do not know whether his informants eventually joined other political youths to mobilize at the *ahawi*. Nonetheless, it is evident that, at the onset of the Arab Spring, the café embodied a place where ordinary people mobilized for their political demands; where once-marginalized demographics found inclusion in a broader Egyptian collectivism; and where the social barriers and particularistic interests that may have previously hindered the pursuit of solidarity eventually dissolved. I argue this transformation signals what Bayat (2021) describes as the "affective and strategic urge for equality and unity" (p. 38) that emerges within popular movements.

According to Bayat (2021), successful revolution demands that "people think and feel not in terms of 'me' or 'my group' but in terms of [Egypt], or the entirety of the nation [until] the particularistic claims of the subaltern (women, youth, or the social minorities) are eclipsed behind the larger struggle for freedom and justice" (p. 109). Through a "unified language of revolution," Bayat maintains, "unity is achieved" at the expense of individual demographics' unique needs and desires (p. 109). The *ahwa*'s politicization signifies this emerging collectivism: in the lead-up to the Arab Spring, as dissidents' objectives transitioned from *discourse*-oriented to *mobilization*-oriented, ordinary people set aside their particularistic claims in favor of collective solidarity and utilized the *ahwa* for political purposes.

Discussion

Onodera's (2015; 2020) fieldwork on pre-Arab Spring youth politics reveals that the potential for the *ahwa* to realize activists' discursive goals was not universally recognized in the early lead-up to the January 25 protests. Instead, café-spaces were seen by some to promote individualism and threaten the stability of their social relations. In Mostafa and Elbendary's (2020) study, on the other hand, the *ahawi* are depicted, by male and female activists alike, as settings which cultivated friendships and acquaintance networks, and provided a sense of collectivism for a clientele diverse in socioeconomic status and gender. Thus, in the pre-Arab Spring period, there persisted a notable divergence in the perceived value of the downtown café for Egyptian youth activists.

Consolidating these conflicting narratives requires considerations of gender and socio-political variations. As Onodera's (2015; 2020) findings suggest, the infiltration of patriarchal standards of behavior into the café-space may have rendered the required performance of masculinity an inconvenience for male activists, who, in turn, preferred to discuss politics in the relatively homogenous surroundings of their campus and home environments. For Marwa, however, the café as a setting for mixed-gender socializing provided educated middle and upper-middle class women a newfound sense of solidarity alongside Egyptian men. In turn, the *inherently* political experience of visiting the *ahwa* as an Egyptian woman may have strengthened female activists' friendships precisely where it weakened those of Onodera's informants. Such dynamics are clarified by an understanding of the "alternative life norms" (Bayat, 2021) young, educated Egyptians have aspired to since the turn of the twenty-first century: a proximity to Western ideals, of which mixed-gender socializing remains a visible expression. Thus, for youth activists who approved of Marwa's gender-nonconformity, the café-space provided an affordable opportunity for the educated and dispossessed to display their cosmopolitan views by engaging in an "adversarial culture" (Trilling, 1967) which welcomed the presence of women in traditionally masculine everyday spaces. Marwa's reflection on the numbers of tourists in the *ahawi* she frequented supports this conclusion. Of course, not all Egyptian youths aligned with this thinking: Peterson (2011) cites Egyptian women who disparaged female café-patrons and, while Onodera's informants do not comment on the

presence of women in cafés, the pressure placed upon men to exhibit sufficient masculinity within the *ahwa*-space was no doubt exacerbated by the audience of female patrons in the *el-Borsa* cafés they discredited.

Despite these variances, however, at the onset of the 2011 uprisings, the Egyptian *ahwa* was widely considered a politicized space, cultivating a “unified language of revolution” which Bayat (2021) argues eclipsed the “particularistic claims” of individual demographics who united in solidarity against a repressive ruling elite (p. 109). As activists’ aims shifted towards mobilization, ordinary people engaged in collective solidarity and utilized the *ahwa* for their political aims. Notably, Bayat (2017) reveals that Arab Spring activists (in Egypt and Tunisia in particular) “never expected” how widespread urban protests would rapidly become (p. 18). I suggest that the spontaneity of the uprisings, implying a comparable spontaneity in the development of such widespread and all-encompassing collectivism, enabled the *ahawi* to transform into bustling hubs for revolutionary organizing during the Arab Spring. As will be explored below, had activists openly chosen the coffeehouse as the venue from which they would attempt to plan a successful revolution months in advance, it can be expected that law enforcement would have swiftly cracked down upon the organizers, if not the cafés themselves.

II. The Café Within a Space

This section examines the Egyptian *ahwa* according to a Habermasian (1991) public sphere model, positioning the café’s role in revolutionary politics through its relationship to the state, the city, and the street. I argue that the café contributes to a network of politicized everyday spaces that facilitate ‘hidden in plain sight’ subversive activity where ordinary people may be hesitant to express outwardly anti-regime sentiment. In doing so, I demonstrate that the *ahwa* operates along the “periphery” of Egyptian political society, where unorthodox participation may be less vulnerable to state repression. I illustrate that in times of political uprising, the Egyptian café and other similarly informal, peripheral localities become transformed from individual units into a *patogh*-network of semi-public spaces, through

which the exchange of ideas and resources becomes possible. Finally, I argue that the transformation of Egyptians' political consciousness from the level of the particularistic to that of the collective, as illustrated above, serves both to politicize the *ahwa*, as well as to 'activate' the *patogh*-space network in which the *ahwa* operates.

In this section, I take an approach to participation akin to that of Aboubakr's (2021) focus "on the informal venues that exist beyond the classical institutional level" (p. 7). Likewise, an "actor- and action-centered [lens] focusing on different cultural, social, political, and economic practices of participation" positions those who occupy the Egyptian public space as active agents of the politicization process (p. 8). Furthermore, I demonstrate that the politicization of the café takes place, in part, through a complex system of subversive "tactics" deemed valuable tools for participation in Egypt's highly surveilled political climate. In authoritarian contexts, where everyday spaces are fraught with contention concerning who — the people or the state — bears "the right" to occupy them (Bayat, 2017, p. 106), the attempts of ordinary citizens to *reinforce* public ownership of these spaces, by reappropriating them for political purposes, can serve to politicize the apolitical.

The Café in the State⁵

As acknowledged above, structural analysis is crucial for a thorough understanding of the development of civil society and social movements in closed regimes. Wickham's (2002) center-to-periphery spectrum provides a valuable framework in which to situate the role of the Egyptian café as an "avenue of participation" (Aboubakr, 2021) in a repressive political climate. This section depicts the Egyptian café as a public sphere locality positioned on the "periphery" of Egyptian political activity.

Wiktorowicz's (2000) claim that numerous MENA regimes have successfully converted civil society into "instrument[s] of state social control" (p. 43) provides an appropriate lens through which to examine civil society in the Egyptian context. Under Law 32 of 1964 — eventually renewed as Law 84 of

⁵ See Amin (2021) for an earlier draft of this section.

2002 — all Egypt's non-governmental and “semiperipheral” organizations, including private and civic associations, are subject to top-down administration by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) (Human Rights Watch, 2005). For an organization to operate in accordance with Egyptian law, the MSA must approve its registration, whereafter it is at liberty to revoke a group's license, monitor its finances, and intervene in its activities and electoral processes for undisclosed reasons. According to Wickham (2002), such restrictions within the formal political arena incite unorthodox participation “detached from — and opposed to — the country's formal institutions” (p. 94). Thus, in crucial ways, the Middle Eastern context challenges the renowned “political process model” advanced by such scholars as Tarrow (1998) and McAdam (1996), which credits the emergence of social movements to “expanding political opportunity structures” (p. 26). Inspired by Western European democracies and the United States, this model overlooks the importance of informal and peripheral arenas to people living in states where access to formal democratic institutions is severely restricted.

In the case of the Egyptian café, a prominent theme among many of Mostafa and Elbendary's (2020) interview responses is the spirit of collectivism apparent among the *ahwa*'s patrons, particularly during periods of revolutionary unrest in Egypt. Recounting his involvement in early-2000s Egyptian labor politics from an *ahwa* on *Hussein Higazi* Street, Tarek notes that “the café as a social and political space played a primary role in the organization” of multiple sit-ins (p. 123). Moreover, numerous responses indicate that, even in periods of relative political stability, the *ahawi* signified a “space for critical thinking” and debate over “religious and untouched, or taboo issues” outside the mainstream (p. 122). Many informants also point to the *ahwa*'s unique ability to cultivate social and political connections where they did not already exist, including Marwa's testimony above that cafés often “link different groups to one another” (p. 133).

The restrictive requirements for official, non-governmental associations operating within Egypt's core and semiperiphery are hardly conducive to the sort of spontaneous fraternization outlined above. Indeed, portraying the *ahwa* as a platform for the exchange of free thought and collective engagement, Michael concludes that the downtown cafés' subversive political character clarifies why they “were

always targeted” (p. 122) to some degree by police and undercover informants, a regime strategy which has merely intensified since the 2011 protests. Licensed or otherwise, downtown cafés fueled revolutionary fervor in Arab Spring Egypt by sheltering huge gatherings of people “from all age, class, and gender groups” — even evolving into “temporary clinics” for the beaten, gassed, and shot (p. 125). Yet, the *ahwa*’s historical development as a place where ordinary (particularly male) Egyptians’ political consciousness is developed, challenged, and strengthened evokes a Habermasian public sphere, restricted in its outward expression by a repressive regime. Ultimately, I argue the *ahwa* has undoubtedly emerged along the periphery of Egyptian civil society as a space for anti-regime political activity.

The Café in the City

In the Egyptian context, the location most often associated with the 2011 uprisings is Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. Translated as “Freedom Square,” this public space has maintained a reputation for fostering political dissent since the 1940s (Ziada, 2017) and, under the current Sisi administration, has been subjected to various aesthetic and structural transformations which, critics claim, stem from a top-down desire to eradicate its insurrectionary symbolism (Middle East Eye, 2020). Without appearing to undervalue its significance as a “symbolic place in Egyptians’ collective memory” and one of the “primary sites for voicing people’s grievances” (Ziada), I suggest that iconizing Tahrir Square as the preeminent archetype of Egyptian public space overlooks the contributions of numerous politicized everyday spaces, such as the *ahwa* and the taxicab, in attracting an estimated 2 million participants to the much-beloved public square.

The role of the Egyptian café in the Arab Spring recalls what Khorshidifard (2011) identifies in the Iranian context as the “*patogh*-space,” defined as a “creative and genuine [...] socially constructed public space, which allows [for] democratic discourse, self-representation, [and] collective identity” (p. 37). Khorshidifard posits that such localities — which, in Tehran, include cars, cafés, and street corners — may form a network of “interrelated, ‘rhizomatic’ connections where a [single] *patogh* is not only constituent of the whole network, but also an entry to the entire experience of the public space of the city”

(p. 53). In other words, *patogh*-spaces can be understood as socially constructed *spaces-within-spaces*, produced when ordinary citizens create spontaneous public space, particularly in authoritarian settings where official, state-sanctioned public space is restrictive and highly surveilled. Within Iran's repressive political climate, *patogh*-spaces and their broader networks provide ordinary citizens the opportunity to engage in civic (and often, although not exclusively, political) discourse along the periphery of Iranian civil society. For instance, cars often function in Tehran as "semi-private containers" in which ordinary citizens feel free to discuss taboo subjects, like sex and social issues, while traversing the *official* public space of the city square or streets (p. 50). I argue that in times of political upheaval, the Egyptian café and other similarly peripheral everyday localities become transformed from individual units into a *patogh*-network of semi-public spaces, which facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources throughout the city.

Numerous activists in Cairo have detailed the role of public and semi-public spaces in facilitating political discourse among individuals, as well as planning and activating the protests themselves. Lim (2018) chronicles the contributions of numerous "nonhuman routers" in these processes, including *ahawi*, taxicabs, mosques, and soccer fields (p. 122). One activist from Lim's study recounts making use of the taxicab as both a means of physical transportation and a method of transporting information to others:

Every time I was in a cab, I would call [a friend] on my cell phone and talk loudly about planning a big protest in Tahrir Square for January 25th, because I knew that [the drivers] couldn't stop themselves [from] talking about what they'd overheard. Eventually, on January 23rd, a cabbie asked if I'd heard about this big demonstration that was happening in two days. (p. 124)

This account illustrates the role of urban geographies in facilitating the physical movement of people and ideas throughout the city, as well as the role of individual actors in utilizing everyday spaces for their political aims. In contrast with the café, which embodies a *fixed* space where people of diverse backgrounds meet to exchange news and ideas, the taxicab emerges as a *mobile* space through which such ideas are disseminated to others. Yet, both *patogh*-spaces operate within — and contribute to — an urban network in which the city square (e.g., Tahrir Square) epitomizes the most "public" (read: visible) locality for the expression of grievances. Indeed, Samir (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020) recounts that Arab Spring

activists often took breaks from protesting in the *midan* (city square) by sheltering in the *ahwa*, utilizing the café-space to rest, refuel, and re-mobilize (p. 124). Thus, during the Arab Spring, activists navigated a myriad of ordinary spaces like the *ahwa* and the taxicab, reappropriating them for extraordinary purposes and, in doing so, politicizing them.

Khorshidifard (2011) posits that “one of the leading consequences of extreme [and] controlling strategies over space has been the (re)creation of a uniquely improvised, temporary, and ‘protean’ social space typology” where participants can “appropriate the existing authorized urban space to socially construct unauthorized public realms within it” (p. 37). In the Egyptian context, I argue that the politicization of the *ahwa* and its analogous everyday spaces produces comparable “unauthorized public realms,” not in terms of their explicit materiality, but in the abstract sense of the “unauthorized” political participation occurring within them. Such participation serves to politicize these everyday spaces and connect them to one another. The experiences of Lim’s (2018) informant, as well as those from Mostafa and Elbendary’s (2020) findings, are central to our understanding of the café-space, acting in tandem with the taxicab-space, as liminal spaces through which people and ideas navigate the city while remaining ‘hidden in plain sight.’ In authoritarian contexts, this invisibility represents an important precondition for the successful organization and mobilization of protests.

The Café in the Street⁶

The role of the Egyptian *ahwa* in periods of political instability — from its function as a setting in which solidarity networks are cultivated, to its contributions to a vast network of politically subversive everyday spaces — has rendered it a constant target of the regime’s surveillance and control (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 13). Underlying the politicization of the *ahwa* and its analogous everyday spaces is the essential debate concerning who bears “the right” (Bayat, 2017, p. 106) to occupy them: the presence of police and undercover informants challenges, and often explicitly violates, their ‘public-ness.’ “From

⁶ The title of this section is inspired by Asef Bayat’s conception and definition of the “political street” in *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (p. 229).

our perspective as citizens,” Mostafa and Elbendary explain, “streets, squares, and parks are defined as public space, but the state deploys its police force to guard them. The citizens feel that they are under surveillance in this seemingly free public sphere” (p. 13). Thus, where people feel entitled to public self-expression, the state simultaneously “aims to maintain its power and authority” (p. 13). As illustrated above, ordinary citizens’ attempts to *reinforce* public ownership of these ordinary spaces, by reappropriating them for extraordinary purposes that — directly or indirectly — weaken state dominance, often serves to politicize them. The activities of ordinary citizens like Lim’s (2011) informant transform these localities into utopian “counter-spaces” (Soja, 1996), understood as the products of ordinary citizens’ “creative imagination” that politicizes (and re-politicizes) such spaces through the subversive participation of those who occupy them (p. 67). Such can be said for the *ahwa* and its patrons.

The following discussion examines the *ahwa* as a locus for contention between its patrons and the regime, a dynamic this study considers microcosmic of the greater public sphere in Egypt, wherein the people and the state are engaged in constant rivalry over who bears ‘the right’ to occupy it. Such contention positions the *ahwa* in the “street,” where the “collective sensibilities, shared feelings, and public judgement of ordinary people” (Bayat, 2013) confronts the state’s surveillance and repression. As Mostafa and Elbendary (2020) argue, there exists a distinct “spatial connotation of *ahawi* on the streets, [where] the act of placing tables and chairs outdoors for large numbers of customers [that are] constantly seen, heard, and felt” bears political significance (p. 14). I maintain that the Egyptian *ahwa*’s politicization is not inevitable, rather, that owners and patrons alike must be conceptualized as agents of the café’s development into a Habermasian Egyptian public sphere.

The “Quiet Encroachment” of the Café-Space

In states where access to institutional democratic channels is repressed and social services insufficient, a phenomenon has been observed wherein the ordinary and the marginalized have gradually pushed to reclaim their cities through illegal and semi-illegal means, such as by establishing informal neighborhoods. Bayat (1997) defines this “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” as the

silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives. They are marked by quiet, atomized, and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action [...] an open and fleeting struggle without clear leadership, ideology, or structured organization. (p. 57)

Driven by the desire for survival, autonomy, and access to social goods (i.e., opportunities, commodities, and public space), these “quiet encroachers” mobilize passively in their everyday collective resistance against the institutions that have failed to provide for them. In cities marked by wealth disparity and rapid urbanization, like those of Iran, Egypt, and Brazil, this protracted advancement has manifested primarily in the form of “informal neighborhoods,” established spontaneously on unoccupied land; connected illegally to sources of electricity and running water; and incorporated gradually into the operations of “traditional” city life via manmade roads, stores, libraries, and clinics (p. 54). Viewed by some as “marginals, outlaws, and criminals,” when examined through a political economy lens, these communities expose the rapidity of twentieth-century neoliberal expansion and the steady exclusion of broad swaths of Egyptian society from the benefits of privatization. As early as the 1980s, scholars of the Middle East have observed a steady process of “state exhaustion,” defined as the ruling classes’ “inability to bring the whole of the [states] into modernity” and “to close the gap in wealth and opportunity between themselves and the rest of society” (Khoury, 1983, p. 214). In Egypt, the neoliberal trend launched by the Sadat administration in the late 1970s, and reinvigorated by Mubarak in the second half of the 1990s, exacerbated the marginalizing effects of this systemic incapacity (Pfeifer, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, these illegal and informal subsistence practices have penetrated the realm of business, resulting in an increased number of street vendors and participants in the underground economy at large.⁷ Although Bayat’s (1997) “quiet encroachment” model examines primarily the reclamation of public ownership over urban space, particularly in the realm of informal homeownership, the Egyptian *ahwa* industry has experienced similar expansion as a provider of inexpensive and informal income for

⁷ One common informal subsistence practice I observed during my stay in Cairo was some Egyptians’ reliance upon tips acquired while assisting public parking, particularly in the downtown areas with high traffic congestion.

the marginalized of Egyptian urban society. Indeed, unlicensed café-ownership has provided opportunities for dispossessed Egyptians to acquire stable income in exchange for minimal financial investment since the country's turn to neoliberal privatization in the late twentieth century (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, not unlike the bureaucratic and economic obstacles plaguing “traditional” home ownership, the goal of formal café-licensure has become increasingly unattainable for ordinary Egyptians since decades before the Arab Spring. For instance, in addition to the typical licenses accompanying lawful food service and entertainment, a permit to serve *shisha* is a necessity for any aspiring café manager hoping to attract a steady clientele through legal means. However, as one distressed *ahwa*-owner lamented in 2015, “the government stopped issuing *shisha* licenses in the 90s” (Rios, 2015). Thus, the bureaucratic minefields associated with formal café-licensure in urban Egypt have rendered the majority of Cairo's street and neighborhood *ahawi* unlicensed. In many cases, their owners have turned to such informal employment out of a sense of hopelessness. “They give us no way to become legal,” the same café-owner explained, “what else are we supposed to do?” (Rios).

Bayat (1997) considers this desperation a critical point of divergence between his “quiet encroachment” framework and the Gramscian (1971) model of “passive revolutionaries,” which depicts its subjects' actions as deliberately political, i.e., intentionally “targeting state power” (p. 109). Instead, Bayat argues

the disenfranchised groups [...] are driven by the force of necessity — the necessity to survive and live a dignified life. Thus, the notion of ‘necessity’ and a quest for dignity justify their struggles as ‘moral,’ ‘natural’ and ‘logical’ ways to survive and advance their lives. (p. 58)

“Quiet encroachment,” Bayat emphasizes, “implies changes which the actors consider significant in themselves without intending necessarily to undermine political authority” (p. 58). This distinction between *moral necessity* and *political intent* bears valuable implications to this study's analysis of the *ahwa* as a politicized space. It is important to resist the temptation to interpret the café-space, both in its creation and use, as *inherently* political. Rather, the politicization of the café-space should be seen as a product of the limitations imposed upon formal democratic channels by a repressive regime: the Egyptian

café, in essence a source of income for its owners and consumption for its patrons, has *developed* a political character through its reappropriation for political purposes. No doubt, its revolutionary character heightens in moments of political upheaval within Egypt, but nonetheless, it is the agency of the café-patrons themselves, *in competition* with the repressive apparatus of the state, that transforms the café-space into a revolutionary space. I argue below that the “quiet encroachment” of the desperate provides the foundation upon which their “tactics” of reclamation serves to politicize everyday space.

Surveillance, Contention, and Agency in the Café-Space

Notably, Bayat (1997) identifies the potential for politicization in the “quiet encroachment” of the dispossessed only *after* such encroachment becomes self-aware:

So long as the actors carry on with their everyday advances without being confronted seriously by any authority, they treat their doings as ordinary everyday practice. Once their gains are threatened, they become conscious of their actions and the value of their gains, and they defend them collectively and audibly. (p. 62)

In other words, it is not until the gains of the “quiet encroachers” are threatened by state opposition that individual participants become conscious of their actions as politically subversive. In the case of the *ahwa*, as I will illustrate below, state opposition takes the form of the regime’s attempts to monitor and, at times, repress café-politics. In response, individual participants are impelled to secure ownership over their gains — whether that be the *ahwa* as a source of income for the owner, or the *ahwa* as a space in which to socialize and express grievances for the patron — through collective mobilization. In the face of state repression, Bayat demonstrates that “the street as a public place [makes] it possible for [a divided population] to mobilize” spontaneously and informally: in such moments, people who may otherwise feel segregated from, or even opposed to, one another “may act collectively because common space makes it possible for them to recognize their common interests and identity” (p. 64). For instance, in the case of the *ahwa*, Edward (Mostafa & Elbendary, 2020) reveals that during the 2011 protests, “even the café owners did not think about whether the presence of women was acceptable or not. These were not the

issues that occupied people's minds at the time. The presence of women was normal, natural, and *spontaneous*" (p. 125, my emphasis). Without accounting for this logic of collectivism, Bayat adds, "many find it difficult to make sense of the 'surprising,' 'unexpected,' and spontaneous mass eruptions in urban settings" (p. 66). Moreover, I suggest that without considering the political agency which binds such actors together, it is difficult to conceptualize the politicization of space, particularly as an interconnected network of everyday spaces as depicted in Khorshidifard's (2011) model.

Indeed, according to many of Mostafa and Elbendary's (2020) informants, the Egyptian *ahwa* is emblematic of Egyptian civil society and public space at large. Commenting on increased state repression since 2011, Edward maintains that "the *ahawi* do indeed mirror [Egyptian] society" (p. 126). "During the revolution," he explains, "there were so many positive things happening [...] so the cafés mirrored this positive attitude. Today, as things have deteriorated, the cafés also mirror this decline" (p. 126).

Numerous interview responses reference the Egyptian police's attempts to monitor and repress political activity taking place within the *ahawi* during the Arab Spring by coercing owners to inform on their revolutionary patrons. Tarek, for instance, recalls the police's attempts to surveille cafés surrounding Tahrir Square:

Café owners started getting orders from the authorities to inform on particular figures when they went to the *ahwa*. Specific groups were targeted. As they cracked down on political parties and labor unions, they also cracked down on gatherings in public places. (p. 123)

Edward, among others, describes how these attempts failed overall:

When things were tense and bloody on the streets and many protestors were followed by the police, some café owners hid these protestors in their cafés. This happened to me several times.

The waiters would let me in and hide me inside. (p. 126)

Edward's response reveals evidence of the subversive "tactics" employed by ordinary citizens in the *ahawi* during moments of collective political mobilization. According to Ghannam (2002, citing de Certeau, 1988), a "tactic" consists of a "clever trick" designed to "use, maneuver, and invert spaces" and "manipulate any emerging opportunities in a system of domination" (p. 15). Although tactics are not

always explicitly political,⁸ the political uncertainty and repression which often underscores them feels pertinent to the study of subversive café-politics, particularly in terms of the dynamics of surveillance and contention within the café-space. In this case, café owners' refusal to inform on the political activity of their patrons extends to a willingness to repurpose the café-space into a shelter for activists. Likewise, the strategy of Lim's (2011) informant to exploit taxicab drivers' gossip constitutes a tactic in the sense of the reappropriation of everyday space for political purposes, a process reliant upon the mutual trust of ordinary citizens pursuing collective mobilization (this is especially true given that, according to one informant I spoke to, undercover police spies [*mukhbireen*] often perform their duties as taxicab drivers).

Ultimately, the police's failure to monitor and repress café-politics during the 2011 uprisings supports Bayat's (2017) understanding of the "unified language of revolution" (p. 109), which successfully mobilized vast and otherwise segregated sectors of society to collective action. Moreover, the strength of these solidarity networks effectively undermined the neoliberal rationale justifying the ruling elite's decision to delegate the duty of monitorization to the café owners themselves. According to such logic, which assumes that those in possession of relative capital are incentivized to protect their earnings at the expense of those of lower socioeconomic status, café owners' refusal to give up their political patrons to the police signaled the true extent of the solidarity garnered among demographics, including those of divergent socioeconomic classes. In conclusion, the café-space must be seen as neither inherently nor inevitably political. Rather, the agency of the patrons occupying *ahawi* with the intention to reclaim their function as public spaces — by cultivating bonds of solidarity and employing subversive tactics within them— serves to politicize the apolitical.⁹

⁸ Ghannam (2002) provides an insightful example of an apolitical "tactic" in the advice she received from an Egyptian friend (a man from the *Zawiya al-Hamra* neighborhood who she considers a "good Muslim"), who suggested she quote the Bible in her dissertation in order to "'trick' [her] Christian supervisor into being more sympathetic while reading [it]" (p. 15). Ghannam considers this recommendation indicative of the practices familiar to residents of *Zawiya al-Hamra* who, in their dealings with corrupt and powerful state officials, are used to "working on the feelings of the other and making him or her supportive of [their] cause" (p. 15).

⁹ It is worth noting that numerous scholars have attributed similar qualities to the role of social media in the Arab Spring uprisings, but I have refrained from conducting extensive analysis of the internet in the 2011 protests since the mechanics of its contributions are far less physical and geographical than that of the *ahwa* and its analogous everyday spaces. For the purposes of my argument, it is sufficient to say that social media experienced a comparable politicization during the Arab Spring. When announcing news of upcoming demonstrations, internet activists often

Discussion

Approaching the Egyptian café's role in revolutionary politics through its relationship to the state, the city, and the street, I demonstrate that, during the Arab Spring, the *ahwa* contributed to a *patogh-* network of politicized everyday spaces that facilitated 'hidden in plain sight' subversive activity along Egypt's periphery. I argue that the development of a broad Egyptian collectivism in the lead-up to the 2011 protests served both to politicize the *ahwa*, as well as to 'activate' the broader spatial network in which the *ahwa* operates. In doing so, I demonstrate that the politicization of the *ahwa* took place, in part, through a complex system of subversive "tactics" (de Certeau, 1988) deemed valuable tools for participation in Egypt's repressive political climate. In authoritarian contexts, where everyday spaces are fraught with contention concerning who — the people or the state — bears "the right" (Bayat, 2013) to occupy them, the mechanisms through which ordinary citizens *reinforce* public ownership of these spaces can serve to politicize the apolitical. In the face of state opposition, these tactics often involve reappropriating everyday spaces for political purposes, such as utilizing the taxicab to spread news of upcoming protests or transforming the *ahwa* into a shelter for protestors fleeing from law enforcement. In such cases, the emergence of an Egyptian collectivism which eclipses traditional social barriers (as outlined in Part I) can trigger the politicization of everyday spaces as ordinary citizens rely on "trust, loyalty, and solidarity" (Bayat, 2021) in their efforts to mobilize.

Ultimately, I maintain that the Egyptian *ahwa*'s politicization is not inevitable, rather, that owners and patrons alike must be seen as agents of the café's transformation into a Habermasian Egyptian public sphere. Such is the case for the politicization of everyday spaces at large, particularly as an 'activated' and interconnected network of such spaces.

employed de Certeau's conception of the subversive "tactic" by intentionally releasing incorrect information about the location or date of upcoming protests and, in doing so, misleading law enforcement (Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2018; Ilie et al., 2017). Additionally, not unlike the physical locations analyzed in this study, the contestation concerning the "right" to claim everyday space applies to the surveillance of social media platforms by the regime, particularly as sweeping internet shutdowns were enacted, and frequent arrests took place of online spokespersons (Rosen, 2011; Woodcock, 2011).

In the Aftermath of the Arab Spring: The State's Victory over the *Ahwa*

In the years immediately following the 2011 uprisings, the number of downtown *ahawi* increased considerably throughout Cairo and Egypt's major cities (Rios, 2015). This accompanied a general boom in the Egyptian underground economy since the Arab Spring (Elsayed, 2017). In his study of 'informal' neighborhoods, Bayat (1997) observes a pattern in the disenfranchised's ability to "take advantage of the collapse of police control" and to "encroach" upon public space during such periods (p. 53). Likewise, observers in Cairo cite law enforcement's temporary "loss of control" as one critical reason for the increase in downtown cafés, many of which are unlicensed (Rios).

In recent years, however, the regime has responded with its own crackdown on cafés, one notable example being the 2015 decision to eliminate the café-littered *el-Borsa* district (Rios, 2015). Since the Egyptian military's takeover in 2013, a nationwide "emergency mentality" has granted the regime increasing impunity as it claims to "protect the country from complete chaos" (Abdelrahman, 2016, p. 193). Likening the resulting "securocratic state" to a Foucauldian disciplinary society, Abdelrahman cites both the "increasing power of the security bureaucracy" as well as "the rise of a regime of surveillance [...] that relies on the participation of its own watchful citizens" (p. 187).

Indeed, Abdelrahman's (2016) "securocratic state" model reveals the extent to which the "unified language of [the Arab Spring]" (Bayat, 2017 p. 109) has suffered at the hands of a repressive regime. Since 2013, the "trust, loyalty, and solidarity" which Bayat (2021) considers prerequisite to the "spontaneous" mobilization witnessed in 2011 has faded in the face of even greater political repression (Abdelrahman, p. 24). Likewise, in her study of post-2011 Egypt, Malmström (2019) cites the "hypervigilance" (p. 113) and "self-censorship" (p. 116) which has characterized many ordinary Egyptians' public interactions with one another since President Sisi's ascent to power in 2014. Malmström summarizes her findings as follows:

Bodies have changed — from collective (in 2011) to individual (today). They have been transformed from a collective confident body of change and an imagined better future to an individual insecure body of control, suspicion, and protection. (p. 122)

Indeed, during my own trip to Egypt, I was encouraged to monitor myself in public, and I was warned of the presence of undercover police spies (*mukhbireen*) in cafés, as well as in Cairo's streets and squares at large. On my first visit to Tahrir Square, while in the company of two close acquaintances, I was instructed to leave my phone in my pocket while traversing the square, and to refrain from taking photos of the surrounding area, including of the many nearby *ahawi*. Among my own acquaintances, conversations about politics never took place within cafés. Malmström's and my own accounts, in tandem with Abdelrahman's (2016) findings, evoke a Foucauldian disciplinary society which "enlists [its own] citizens as participants in an omnipresent police regime" (p. 193) of surveillance and repression.

As illustrated above, the state's attempt to employ a panoptic enlistment within the *ahawi* themselves has fluctuated throughout Egyptian history, coming to a head during and after the 2011 uprisings. Yet this strategy's relative lack of success *during* the Arab Spring versus in its *aftermath* indicates the hitherto failure of the regime's coercive apparatus to successfully infiltrate civilians' solidarity networks and seize control of public space. Among café-owners in the post-Arab Spring era, however, unconditional solidarity struggles against a different kind of survivalist impulse: that of the individual. In 2015, when the Egyptian police shut down *el-Borsa*, some café owners blamed other managers: "The problem is the young guys," one owner said, "the cafés in *el-Borsa* were stupid for letting customers do what they wanted" (Rios, 2015). As Bayat (1997) illustrates, once returned to the role of atomized "quiet encroachers," the ordinary and the dispossessed are more inclined to prioritize their particularistic needs, even at the expense of their colleagues. In his own study, Bayat notes the tendency of urban street vendors to "discourage [others] from settling in the same vicinity" (p. 58), an observation which mirrors the frustration expressed by many café owners towards the previously unmitigated expansion of the *ahawi* in Egypt's downtown areas (Rios). In the contestation between people and state, therefore, the regime has reasserted its authority over the café-space.

Conclusion

During the Arab Spring (2010-11), Egyptian cafés facilitated revolutionary activity by providing space for protesters to organize campaigns, shelter from law enforcement, and cultivate solidarity networks that surpassed traditional social divisions, like gender and socioeconomic class. In exploring the politicization of the *ahwa* at the onset of the Arab Spring, I pose the question: *under what conditions are seemingly apolitical spaces rendered political in periods of social unrest?* In my analysis, I prioritize the *processes* which facilitated the Egyptian café's transformation from an everyday space into a setting for political mobilization. To this end, I approach the *ahwa* first at the level of an insulated space (Part I: The Café as a Space), then at that of the sociopolitical environment in which the *ahwa* operates (Part II: The Café Within a Space). I argue that the *ahwa*'s politicization in the lead-up to the revolution reflected a shift in ordinary Egyptians' experience of political repression from atomized and particularistic to general and collective. This process served to 'activate' the *ahwa* within a broad network of politicized everyday spaces which facilitated 'hidden in plain sight' mobilization activity along the "periphery" of Egyptian politics (Wickham, 2002).

To begin with, I examine competing narratives about the value of the café-space to Egyptian youth activists in the pre-Arab Spring era, accounting specifically for variations in gender and socioeconomic context. I argue that the café as a platform for the expression of patriarchal norms of behavior may have presented an inconvenience to young, educated male activists who, in turn, preferred to discuss politics in the relatively homogenous surroundings of their campus and home environments. At the other end of the spectrum, I demonstrate that some female youth activists considered the café-space a unique opportunity to engage in a broader Egyptian collectivism by socializing publicly alongside Egyptian men. For male youth prior to the 2011 uprisings, the café-space presented a threat to existing friendships and acquaintance networks as it was seen to promote individualism and personal gain. For female youth, on the other hand, the decision to frequent the *ahwa* in the face of peers' open disapproval strengthened their intimate social networks. At the onset of the 2011 uprisings, however, the Egyptian *ahwa* was widely considered a politicized space notwithstanding the divergent experiences reflected

above. Embodying a broad Egyptian collectivism which surpassed traditional social barriers, scores of ordinary Egyptians gathered at downtown *ahawi* in 2011 to mobilize in the face of political repression.

Secondly, I examine the *ahwa* according to a Habermasian public sphere model, exploring its role in revolutionary politics through its relationship to the state, the city, and the street. To this end, I demonstrate that the *ahwa* operates on the periphery of Egyptian political activity, where unorthodox participation may be less vulnerable to state repression relative to the country's center and semiperiphery. Then, I illustrate that during the Arab Spring, the Egyptian café and other politicized everyday spaces became transformed from individual units into a "*patogh-network*" (Khorshidifard, 2011) of semi-public spaces, through which ordinary citizens were able to exchange ideas and news while remaining 'hidden in plain sight.' I argue that such politicization took place, in part, through ordinary citizens' use of subversive "tactics" (de Certeau, 1988) deemed valuable tools for political participation in Egypt's highly surveilled political climate, where everyday spaces are fraught with contention concerning who — the people or the state — bears "the right" (Bayat, 2013) to occupy them. As such, citizens' attempts to *reinforce* public ownership of these spaces, by reappropriating them for political purposes, served to politicize them. Ultimately, I argue that the transformation of Egyptians' political consciousness from the level of the particularistic to that of the collective both politicized the *ahwa*, as well as 'activated' the politicized spatial *network* in which the *ahwa* operates.

Before concluding, I examine the contemporary conditions of the politicized *ahwa*, arguing that the regime has successfully reasserted its authority over the café-space since the military takeover of 2013. I utilize Abdelrahman's (2016) "securocratic state" framework to illustrate how ordinary citizens have lost the "unified language of revolution" (Bayat, 2021) that had permitted such extraordinary mobilization during the Arab Spring. Providing insight from my own fieldwork, I reveal how a panoptic enlistment of the Egyptian public in the process of their own surveillance has damaged the solidarity ties which the *ahwa* had helped cultivate in 2011. Although the present study has prioritized cafés in its analysis, my findings bear larger implications for the politicization of everyday spaces in authoritarian settings. Ultimately, I maintain that spatial politicization depends upon a certain degree of allowance by

the state's security apparatus, as well as the agency of those who reappropriate such spaces for political purposes. Politicization occurs when ordinary citizens within a space develop a collective solidarity that surpasses members' particularistic claims in favor of broad, all-inclusive mobilization. In these moments, people feel sufficient "trust, loyalty, and solidarity" (Bayat, 2021) with one another to reappropriate everyday spaces for political purposes. Further study that would enrich my findings include comparative explorations of the politicization of coffeehouses throughout the MENA region. Also, an analysis of the modern café's potential to emerge as a politicized public sphere in Egypt, while accounting for cultural 'authenticity' and women's specific political context, would prove highly informative.

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