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REFLECTIONS: MIDDLE EAST STUDIES AT THE BARRICADES

Basic Ethnography at the Barricades

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We did not see them growing up. We did not think these jaded middle-class boys and girls would one day be resilient and hold their ground. We did not realize that they would be brave, supremely articulate, and driven by aspirations beyond our dreams. The whole thing started with the desperate act of self-immolation by a young Tunisian man. His death sparked a wave of rage against poverty, social exclusion, and corruption. Almost overnight, young men and women created spaces in squares, streets, and alleys where we could imagine new Arab countries. Enraged yet nonviolent, they used technology and the vocabulary of democracy to connect and mobilize ordinary Arab citizens of all walks of life and capture the attention of the world. In Egypt, Tahrir Square became the epicenter of the people's demands for bread, dignity, and social justice. Without leaders or a timetable, but with unconditional demands for immediate change, online activists provided us with physical and social grounds to imagine a new country. We all brought something to the square: blood, medicines, bandages, food, water, blankets, generators, diapers, mobile-phone chargers, garbage bags, wipes, and our own personal notes to the regime (and the world) written in bold letters. Mine just said: "Leave."

Tahrir, close to the barricades, became the ultimate space, the focal point, of politics, social activity, commensality, and artistic manifestations. This was an "ethnographic moment" in the most basic sense of the term. Performances by young people, social media, public settings, neighborhoods, and *the gift* took on new dimensions. We know that neither youth nor technology will go away, and now is the time to carefully analyze their movements and arenas. Vitality and drama played out in public spaces, while neighborhood cleaning committees, the human shields that defended Egypt's cultural heritage, and notions of the gifts that were circulated gave us renewed insights into relationships in the Middle East. Of course, these were only fragmentary and evanescent events, but this remarkable moment will inspire us and open up long, energetic conversations about forms of sociability and the complexities of living in the Middle East.

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