

Hassan Khan

“A Monster Was Born”: Notes on the Rebirth of the “Corrupt Intellectual”

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In the late nineteenth century, a monster was born. This monster did not know what it was exactly. It knew that it needed to articulate, describe, prescribe, and communicate. It knew it was supposed to play a public role in the birth of a new historical order. It knew it had a precise function in the articulation of power within the transforming social order. This monster was a speculator of knowledge, a peddler of identities, a fantasist, a cunning operator, an extrovert with a bloated ego, a necessary structural regulator.

Almost a century and a half later, I now call the direct descendant of this figure the “corrupt intellectual.” It is not a very accurate term. However, I like it because it is polemical, because it describes and judges at the same time. After first using the term while speaking on a panel at Art Dubai, in 2010 I wrote an essay titled “In Defense of the Corrupt Intellectual”¹ in which I wrongly assumed that this figure was almost dead, and I saw value in resuscitating it as a counterweight to the forces of a market that consciously presents itself as ahistorical, a cycle of circulation where the spectacular becomes both currency and function. The defense I mounted was grounded in a loose analysis of Egyptian intellectual history and was an attempt at understanding the role and meaning of that figure in the formation of a social order. I now, due to the events of the past three years, clearly recognize that I was wrong to defend this figure. This essay is an attempt to rewrite a position without completely disavowing it. I still lean strongly on my previous analysis, although with the new recognition that calcified power structures are not as easily dismantled as I first imagined. This essay looks at the role of this figure in cementing, reaffirming, and producing a regime of power and subjugation. It attempts to provide some historical context, as well as to analyze the tools and methods of those I label as “corrupt intellectuals.” My intention in this essay is not to condemn this figure (although this figure is to be damned), but rather to chart out the stormy territories we are forced to navigate on a daily basis in our present reality. Needless to say, this moment of transformation involves a committed attempt to comprehend the complex and dangerous present as well as to sincerely propose possibilities.

The appearance of this figure is deeply entwined with the emergence of what is known as “the modern Egyptian state,” which most historians agree was formed over the long forty-three years of Khedive Mohamed Ali’s rule over Egypt (1805–1848). The years under Ali’s reign saw a concerted effort at creating a bureaucracy that organized and managed what it perceived as assets more efficiently. What implicitly marked that state as “modern” was in fact a side effect

of the creation of its bureaucracy: the relationship between the population and its administration became more intimate and intrusive, and with time it became impossible to distinguish the border between them. The process of constructing this new relationship demanded a new discursive order that would help explain and locate the subject and the regime.² In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the weakening of the Alawiyya Dynasty and the increasingly complex character of the state under British occupation (and then protection), the state apparatus began focusing on the production of a new asset: “Egyptian identity.”

The story of how this asset was managed, regulated, sold, and bought over the following century is a tragic and complex one that I will not delve into here. However, it might be useful to roughly sketch out the present iteration of this construction, and the mechanisms through which this insidious strain operates, as it is indicative of a wider cultural malaise. Less specific and more dangerous than a local corruption, it contains something endemic to the idea of systems themselves.

In the period between the massive uprising of 1919 and the 1952 coup, the Egyptian state maintained a tense relationship with a segment of its subjects. This period was marked by an outpouring of public discourse, the spread of diverse political ideas (Islamism as a political alternative; nationalism, with its fascist and socialist connotations; various strands of Marxism), as well as constant demonstrations and upheavals. The rise of an educated cadre of functionaries working within the state (and sometimes in opposition to its hierarchy) necessitated a new framework that would regulate the relationship between this cadre of bureaucrats and the institutions and organizations they functioned within.³ Polemical disputes around the definitions of “the nation” and “the people” were fought out on the pages of magazines, inside cafes, and in published treatises. In this charged atmosphere, power was denoted by the ability to impose a definition of the terms, but it is interesting to note that the terms themselves were not questioned. All players accepted and operated on the same playing field. Therefore, the system of power and its opposition were in conflict not over what the possibilities of a society could be as much as who was to control the definition of the nation itself.⁴

The “corrupt intellectual” refers to those functionaries, poets, novelists, museum directors, and artists who claimed to speak Egypt, those who shaped public discourse, established rules, coined terms, and justified the

nature of things. Under their careful guidance, a social order was constructed. However, another order exists, seemingly invisible yet highly flexible and adaptable. It is this indefinable, unspoken order, which tensely shares the shared social space with official constructions, that interests me.⁵

What makes a discourse official in centralized systems is that it is structured upon one dominant foundational referent that categorizes what is valuable and what is not – regardless of its nature – and that effectively produces a fixed horizon of possible meanings that can only function within set parameters. In actual fact, even if the subject officially pronounces an allegiance to this official discourse, their actions, decisions, and daily routines stand in stark opposition to the very tenets of the discursive order. It may be that this paradox characterizes all social orders, but it is more marked and visible in places where a popular culture is strident, loud, and hysterical.⁶ The rupture and the reconstruction that Egypt has experienced over the past three years can be understood as emerging exactly from this gap between a discursive and a lived order.

To further elucidate how these mechanisms actually develop and operate, it is necessary to consider the particularities of what I call “the crowd.” The term is meant to be seen as the prime unit within a social order that balances the presence of the individual with that of the collective. In my previous essay, I defined the term in this way: “The crowd is where a seething mass with a unified understanding of its own presence is born, a conglomeration of frictions and tensions that manages to resolve itself into an identifiable entity.” The “crowd” is a unified entity that is a site of conflict as well as resolution. It possesses self-consciousness and the ability to identify itself as a unit. This “crowd” is dense rather than simple, as its complex nature does not make it reducible to an image one can possess. Although it is a manifestation of the collective, it is not the representation of the collective, and is therefore more metonym than metaphor, i.e., it is part of the collective and not merely something that stands for it.⁷ The corrupt intellectual, through writings, statements, and propositions, continuously strives to simplify, possess, and represent the crowd, insistently attempting to treat it as a metaphor rather than a metonym. However, the crowd’s inherent complexity and density remain necessary for the construction of a regime of power. The shape of the argument, the terms of the rhetoric, and the elements of the metaphor need to be grounded in real experience in order to function effectively as a tool of power. To give itself a shot at history and to produce the

necessary mystifications, the regime must rely upon what is “real” (i.e., historical and material conditions) at its core. Most insidiously, it manages to achieve this by denying the very complexity that it instrumentalizes.

It is the nature of this “density” to actually appear in some visible form on the surface of the “crowd.” “Density” has a series of different registers. First, there are the various discursive regimes under which the crowd has historically lived and “the imprint” they leave on that crowd. This means that the crowd is historical and possesses an intuitive understanding of what surrounds it – an intuition that is not metaphysical but formed through the accumulation of lived experience over centuries. Paradoxically, this sediment of experience and historicity is precisely what ahistorical discourses need in order to refer to a constructed and eternally unchanging past that transforms into the future.⁸

The second property of the crowd is its detailed intensity, produced from the individual gestures of each single individual in the crowd and their personal history. This intensity communicates both the collective gesture and isolated intentions. Since it arises from the individual, it is also an expression of selfish desire and need. In that sense, the collective is the sum total of each individual in relation to each other, and individual desires and collective identification are always in a polyphonic tension, sharing space and contradicting each other.

Furthermore, since the collective is ruled by desires and intentions, it is not blind; it is capable of the self-consciousness, confidence, and willpower necessary to assert its selfish demands. As such, the crowd is just as able to generate powerful, creative, and even sublime mass resistance as it is to fall into xenophobia, mass lynching, and the schizoid neurosis of simultaneous self-aggrandizement and subjugation.

Finally, for the crowd to come into being, there has to be a state of consensus between each of these individuals. This density operates in two distinct fashions. On the one hand, it relies on a “discursive article of faith” – which is the sedimentation of the legacies of (failed) discourses (a mix of modern dreams and old superstitions, all of which have both opposed and legitimized the status quo). The discursive article of faith gives the crowd an identity. On the other hand, it is also the actual direct sociopolitical practice of these ideologies as forms of behavior that are often contradictory to the actual article of faith. In other words, we have a crowd that is a sort of battery of potential (the ammunition of the nation), yet its very characteristics are what allows it to be

subjugated in the first place. And it is that contradiction, that delicate discursive operation, which the “corrupt intellectual” has identified and has become adept at managing with deadly skill.

In a sense, I am trying to point to the very basis of a daily experience of exclusion, definition, and self-regulation that latently operates in all discursive orders, based upon the contradictions of identity and crowd formation. To produce that discourse and to place it in the public arena, a language that resonates with the public must be used. Therefore, a space and a context is made available for the pronouncements of functionaries, for the opinions of journalists, for the banalities of official songsmiths, so that all acquire meaning. This a public space but it is not the space of the “public intellectual,” who might be critical or raise pertinent questions. It is rather the space of the ideologue, whose pronouncements are essential for the transformation of the present into history. What I mean is that these pronouncements are aware of the crowd’s specificities and they know how to address it effectively. As a result, they can describe what we all share (our public space) by arguing for a specific idea of what is happening.

If Egypt in 2011 experienced a moment of real rupture, it must have also been an attempt to disconnect from this system of discursive orders. So far, however, it is truly and bitterly ironic that this act of rupture has in fact managed to rejuvenate these forms of narrativizing. Forms that a mere three years earlier had become hollowed out and vacant have today regained significance. Why did this happen? I suspect there are reasons that reach beyond the usual answers (lack of education, lack of a political cadre, lack of collective experience). It is the public space constructed by those “corrupt intellectuals” (those demagogues, those ignorant theorizers of mediocrity, those self-satisfied complicit servants of power) that has maintained and safe-guarded a system of power after it has been shaken. They have reconstituted their discursive order by propagating a language of “stability,” which includes terms like “the venerated patriarch,” “the honored institution,” and “Egypt Eternal.”

Although “the people” continues to be an essential phrase in these formulations, it is only to bestow the people with empty honorifics and to address them as passive subjects.

It is possible to read the “rupture” in 2011 not as an event that occurred, but rather as a sort of manifestation or sublimation of an existing condition. As previously described, a social order that is messily divided between a practiced daily routine and an out-of-touch

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discursive regimen will reach a point where it can only represent itself in the form of mass action. At that moment, significant actions can indeed come to embody meaning, but what they embody is not a symbol of something that exists in society; it is rather an idea of what that could potentially be.⁹ The gap between the rules and regulations produced by public discourse, and the actual implementation of these regulations in daily life, is exactly the space that is both full of promise and conducive to the renewal and reconstruction of the dominant order.

The corrupt intellectual is aware of this gap and thus deals in the market of phantasmatic ideas. He inhabits a world of agreements, between the intellectuals and themselves (for what role they should play), and between the different competing fantasies of what things represent or *stand for*. These agreements exist alongside the “master” set of agreements that make a social order possible in the first place. Official discourse backed by, and expressing, existing power structures acquires its significance through an implicit violence wrought on the total discursive field. It demands, orders, and fixes what surrounds it. A moment of rupture is the search for a new agreement. It is the demand for an agreement that would be more congruent with the structural changes that are taking place economically, socially, and culturally. In contrast, what happened in Egypt in 2011 is a prime example of an act of communication between subjects that accrues its power and exerts its transformative violence through its openness and lack of fixity. It therefore acts as an oppositional correlative (latent and awaiting fulfillment) to the unsublimated agreements that order and categorize our definitions. What this means is that at the basis of both acts – that of subjugation and that of revolution – is a coming to terms with an unspoken yet essential component of historical experience. My argument is that our historical experience is constituted by a morphology of the agreements that order our social experience. The difference between both poles is that subjugation fulfills the desire for the sublimation of agreements on the level of phantasm, while communication attempts to fulfill that same desire on the plane of the “real.” Phantasm is always more comfortable, as the symbolic world it constructs is distant and disengaged from the actual desires of each individual. The real is dangerous and conflicted. It is where desire has not discovered a symbolic language with which to represent itself and can therefore become unsettling and potentially transformational. Yet again, it is those double-faced sycophants, those slaves of order, those vampires of dreams, who

manage to confuse these two opposing acts. Their role is to publicly express subjugation as an act of popular communication.

However, right next to every such pronouncement is an apparition of hope. We should never forget that there are at least two modes operating here: a parallel “social reality” that manages to exist under the tightest conditions, and the fact that that reality’s appearance can shake the very foundations upon which the discursive regime is organized. In this parallel world, potentialities that can never be achieved under the existing discursive regime of power are possible and unconscious *and* exist in real time. And it is exactly because it is not labeled or celebrated that makes this parallel world so pertinent and powerful. We should not over-romanticize it. We should recognize that although this is a space of great potential, it is an amoral space that doesn’t care about the well-being of the individual, but that strives to find a moment of correlation between the productions of the collective (with their latencies: whether the horror of collective hysteria, fear, and paranoia or the incredible power of the autonomous, anonymous, formal articulation of unknown realities) and the superstructure they live under.¹⁰ What I am attempting to describe is not the power of the collective, as much as the very material ability of a condition to exist that surpasses the dynamics that attempt to produce and order it.

What interests me here is some sort of formalism rather than an expressionistic celebration of subjectivity. This is the space where collectively produced culture takes its material and sources from the existing structure and manages to produce forms that do not go beyond the narrow confines of a strategic maneuver within the field of their production, i.e., they are designed to fulfill their roles as entertainment, or as jokes, or as wedding songs, or as markers of territory. Yet at the same time, these forms almost unintentionally manage to escape the horizon of their functionality and take on an accidental formalism, in the form of songs, sayings, magic spells, or bodily gestures. These secret moments of formalism exist across all sectors in society and are not only the domain of the popular classes.¹¹ However, we are now at a moment where the narrative of class fulfillment itself has been shaken. The revolution did not shake it, but the revolution came as a development out of the narrative’s actual collapse.

I still believe in the absolute significance of what happened in January 2011. It is almost a tribute to the power of that moment that the reconstitution of the dominant order is so extreme. The popular imaginary has been

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disturbed and longs for the calm, stagnant stability of the known. The revolution has therefore succeeded.

As such, any sort of politics invested in transformation and taking rupture as its starting point will have to take into account the resonance produced by making a statement within a closed horizon of meaning that has been determined by the functionaries of the dominant order. This is not to support the statements of these functionaries, but to realize that their historical density is constitutive of the idea of meaning itself, at least in our present context. To attempt to step out of that, to practice rupture, would be to recognize this idea of meaning for what it is. One must abandon claims of “liberation” and transcendent doxas of “progress.” One must abandon the “people,” “hope,” “the dream,” “possibility” – all in the name of the transformation itself.

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1
The first version of this text appeared in *How to Begin? Envisioning the Impact of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi*, a thesis project edited by Ozge Ersoy at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. A second version appeared in issue 18 of *e-flux journal* in September 2010. See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-corrupt-intellectual/>

2
Under Mohamed Ali this production of discourse was driven by an expansionist ambition as well as the need to establish a dynasty.

3
The deeply orientalist views institutionalized within the educational and cultural system and initiated by the presence of mainly foreign “experts” who held the highest positions within the Egyptian bureaucracy in the first half of the twentieth century introduced another element to this system of definitions. Therefore what we had was a three-way argument around the nature of the state and its peoples.

4
In the future, this was to have dire consequences: the very idea of national liberation and independence was evacuated of any potential it might have had.

5
In the systems of power I am attempting to engage here, the regime and its opposition are closer to each other than they imagine, as they share a deep investment in strengthening an allegiance to a national identity regardless of what that identity is supposed to be.

6
It is important to note that this texture, this loud, strident hysteria, is not some sort of innate quality of the “people” but rather a very sophisticated transmutation of the material conditions those same people live under.

7
This seemingly minor difference in linguistics is actually highly significant and is the trademark of the discursive order that the corrupt intellectual produces – in service to the regime of power for which he deliberately produces this confusion.

8
Witness the rhetorical arguments that disingenuously portray injustice and subjugation as the eternal lot of the people. This argument gains credibility by referring to an experience that is innately known to be true, yet it is disingenuous because it portrays it as a static unchanging condition, while it is actually a highly nuanced, continuously mutating condition that has been met with (conveniently forgotten)

unwavering resistance.

9
However, this is not the simple binary of ideals believed in and strived for on one side, and the reality of daily life on the other. Nor is it merely a simple moral hypocrisy. It’s rather a structural property of the social reality that exists in a shared space we can call Egypt.

10
In a sense, this is the opposite of the dynamics of reification and alienation, the domain of phantasm. I know that I come dangerously close to populism here by proposing some kind of naive belief in the power of the collective to produce real experiences.

11
But it might be that the popular classes are the least invested in the dominant narrative (as it ultimately serves them the least), while the middle classes are instrumental in forging this narrative, and the wealthy classes directly benefit from it.

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