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Experimenting with Alternative Futures in Cairo: Young Muslim Volunteers between God and the Nation

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Abstract

This article investigates young middle-class Egyptians' engagement with the religious and national visions of Resala, Egypt's largest Muslim youth NGO, and how they come to rethink themselves existentially and politically through this commitment, in the context of the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. I show how their volunteering through Resala, shaped by specific socio-political circumstances, paved the way for personal hopes to develop into utopian aspirations. Demonstrating the dynamic relationship between the formation of political subjectivities and how utopias emerge, develop and are sometimes shattered, I argue that while utopic aspirations continue to characterise parts of Egypt's 2011 youth generation, for others, such aspirations have to give way for other more personal concerns to establish a secure adult life. Therefore, activism and experiments with societal alternatives in contexts like the Egyptian continue to depend on inclusive and less risky spaces for civic engagement outside formal politics and institutions.

Introduction

During fieldwork in Egypt in February 2010, I was with a group of about twenty young Resala volunteers in a provincial town in Upper Egypt. We had been working all day, and by late afternoon it was time for an environmental campaign aimed at raising awareness among locals about pollution and hygiene in public places. The team leader provided each of us with plastic gloves, a dust mask, a yellow vest, a cap and an ID card with the familiar red and blue Resala logo. We were to collect garbage, sweep the dusty, unpaved street, and paint the curb. Everybody seemed anxious to have their turn, but due to limited equipment, some of us had to wait while the others worked. Aya¹, one of the female volunteers, managed to grab hold of a paintbrush and after having painted for a couple of minutes, she handed it over to me. 'Are you happy?' she probed me after a while, and continued smilingly: 'Everybody should have the chance to work for God.'

Exactly one year later in early February 2011, on Resala's Facebook site, I came across photos of smiling young people cleaning the streets and painting the curbs in Tahrir Square in Cairo. They were all wearing Resala t-shirts, masks and gloves like the ones from the environmental campaign. I recognised some of the faces. I was no longer in Egypt, but I had closely

followed the mass demonstrations leading to the ousting of Mubarak. Later the same year when I returned to Cairo, volunteers I knew showed me more photos and told me their stories from the demonstrations and the 'rebuilding Egypt' campaign. Omar, a male volunteer, said to me: 'When I cleaned the street that day, an old man came up to me and wanted to kiss me. I told him: "No!" He told me: "You did what we couldn't do."' Another volunteer said: 'I realised that we can really do things that we did not imagine. We can make change.'

Together, the two stories illustrate that something was in the making during the months and years leading up to the Egyptian uprising in early 2011. In both stories, young people clean and paint the streets, but due to the radical change of framework from the time of the first story to the next, this activity takes on completely different meanings and implications. In the first story, God and Egypt's poor are the primary receivers of their voluntary labour, but in the second, the situation is talked about within the framework of political change with young activists as the centre of public attention.

Tahrir Square has long since been cleared, and after the brief reign of Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood from 2012 to 2013, Egypt is again ruled by a man of high military rank. Instead of youth activists being publicly celebrated, they are now arrested and jailed, whether as supporters of the banned Muslim Brotherhood or as what was previously referred to as secular, 'revolutionary youth.' Such acts of repression and persecution are referred to as 'restoring order' or 'fighting terrorism.' Consequently, there is an increasing gap between political segments of society, and today, the Tahrir moment seems to be found somewhere between utopia and nostalgia. So if scholars 'are left trying to think the unthinkable through concepts that cannot adequately explain what is going on,' how is it for those living through the events and trying to 'fix meaning to the ongoing course of daily life' (Elyachar 2014, 466-47)?

There now exists a vast literature on the 'Arab Spring' in general and the Egyptian uprising in particular focusing on the Tahrir moment as a manifestation of or experimentation with some kind of utopia, often with a particular interest in the youth (e.g. Hamdy 2012, Sabea 2012, Schielke 2011, Telmissany 2014). This article consider not so much on the 2011 uprising as the atmosphere that preceded it, and the longer-term effects it has had on the ways organised youth express themselves politically. I came to see the 2011 uprising and its aftermath primarily through the eyes of Muslim middle-class youth from the youth volunteer organisation *Resala Association for Charity*. Drawing on nine months of fieldwork in Cairo in 2009-10 and short follow-up visits in 2011, 2012 and 2015, this article investigates these young Egyptians' engagement with Resala's

religious and national visions of a more solidary society before 2011, and how they came to rethink themselves existentially and politically through this engagement and the Egyptian uprising and its aftermath.² As such, this piece also contributes to the vast anthropological literature on Islamic movements, piety and subject formation. However, rather than focusing on women and gender as is the case with many of these studies, the present argument engages with the categories of age, generation and class in Egypt, without making these categories object of central theoretical inquiry. Focusing primarily on the narratives and practices of two volunteers, Aya and Omar, I show how their Resala experiences within specific socio-political circumstances of middle-class youth in the 2000s paved the way for personal hopes to develop into utopian aspirations of an alternative society, and eventually, how these aspirations were both strengthened and shattered throughout the Tahrir experience and its aftermath. As such, this article contributes with insight into how youth actively inscribe themselves into collective alternative narratives of the future, demonstrating how hope and utopia are constantly negotiated and modified in a close interplay between public events and private aspirations and anxieties.

Following a short introduction to Resala and the analytical framework, the article discusses reorientations towards possible futures that Aya and Omar experience and verbalise. While I do draw on other volunteers, these two cases highlight both similarities and differences in experiences and trajectories, which illustrate some of the dominant formative patterns among many more research informants in Resala.

Studying youth and experiments with alternative futures

Resala began as a student initiative in Cairo University in 1999. In a few years it expanded enormously, and with 63 branches and more than 200,000 volunteers, primarily in urban areas, it has for years been the largest Muslim youth NGO in the Arab world, providing services such as material aid, microloans, orphanages, medical assistance and education. Volunteers are mostly middle-class students and recent graduates of approximately 18 to 27 years. Throughout my main fieldwork from October 2009 to July 2010, I followed some of these young people and learned about their practices and considerations both inside and outside Resala. Many, like Aya and Omar, started volunteering a couple of years into their college education or when they had just graduated. As I show, and as others have argued (cf. Cole and Durham 2008, Schielke 2015), at this time of life the future is very much present, insofar as practices and thoughts are directed towards the future and how a person sees herself or himself privately, professionally and in terms of a larger collective. More than their elders, young people's choices are linked to their images of what the future holds

and what possible selves they imagine. Yet my analysis takes this a step further by focusing on how personal hopes intersect with and transform into utopias, or shared narratives, due to specific experiences and historical circumstances.

According to Karl Mannheim (1991 [1936], 173), ‘a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs.’ Furthermore, studies of the utopian are often closely connected to concepts of hope and desire (Levitas 1990). In Ernst Bloch’s seminal work *The Principle of Hope* (1995 [1938-1947]), the utopian is conceptualised as a quest for what is missing and an ‘expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become’ (7). Hope and the utopian is an ‘anticipatory consciousness,’ an awareness of the ‘not-yet’ in the unfolding of the present (13). As such, utopia as hope is more than an emotion; it is at the same time ‘a directing act of a cognitive kind’ (12). Drawing on the concepts and insights of mainly Bloch and others building on these conceptualisations as well as Cheryl Mattingly’s concept of the ‘moral laboratory experiment’ (2012), my approach is experience-oriented and with a strong focus on the intimacy of subjects’ everyday life. I show that young Egyptians’ passionate engagements with Resala can be seen as ‘experiments into possible futures, small inaugurations into something that might constitute a fleeting experience or might portend a future different than one had envisioned’ (318), or than others had envisioned for them. For the individual, personal hopes and shared utopias are deeply entangled, insofar as hope and utopia are both future-oriented yet imagined in the present. However, utopias are rather like shared narratives, in this case framed within the national and religious, whereas hope is more concerned with personal trajectories. This is a study of how a ‘concrete utopia’ (Bloch 1995) emerges, develops and changes, and what implications these processes have for the formation of political subjectivities among a particular group of Muslim youth in Cairo. As the following section shows, Resala is a means of striving towards divine life and a place which fosters ‘educated hope’ (Giroux 2011); i.e. it offers alternative models that give rise to new, yet context-dependent, questions, problems and possibilities.

Between God and the nation – glimpses of a better society

Like other Islamic charity organisations in Egypt, Resala builds on an old tradition of social welfare services and aid provision grounded on Muslim practices and an ethos of caring for the poor (Atia 2013). Other aspects, such as the youthfulness of its constituency and its strong emphasis on the practice of volunteering, set it apart from the more conventional charities, which rely more on paid staff or volunteers, who are either retired or homemakers. According to its chairperson, Sherif AbdelAzeem, Resala’s primary aim is to inculcate a culture of giving, especially among young

Egyptians, and thus be a vehicle through which youth can contribute to society: ‘My dream is to see the day in which everyone is helping everyone, voluntarily [*tawa ʿi*] and without asking for anything in return.’ Resala bears similarities with other faith-based youth volunteer organisations, charitable and developmental, established throughout the 2000s, working towards building Egypt and improving conditions of Egypt’s poor or marginalised (cf. Atia 2013, 135-157; Jung, Petersen and Sparre 2014). Yet, compared to many of these organisations targeting primarily Western-educated middle- and upper-middle class, Resala recruits young volunteers across a broader spectre of the Egyptian middle-class, including many who study at lower-ranging educational programmes at public universities and whose families are or have been struggling to keep their middle-class status (Sparre 2013b).

Aya and Omar were among the thousands of young Egyptians who were motivated by Resala’s call for volunteering. When I first met Aya in November 2009, she was 22 and a fresh graduate of Ain Shams University. Only a few months earlier she had signed up as a volunteer with Resala: ‘I went to Resala and I signed a volunteering application. I was very keen on going. I did this before even starting to search for jobs or starting courses. I just thought about Resala.’ Aya lived with her parents and two of her four sisters on the outskirts of Nasr City in Cairo. Both parents were retired, but their previous full-time employment in a ministry and a bank, respectively, had secured the family a modest but stable middle-class life. By the time I met her in November 2009, Aya was already involved in various activities. When I asked her why she had volunteered with Resala, she replied: ‘I always study for myself, go out for myself, travel for myself. It’s all about myself or my family. What about others?’ Throughout my fieldwork I observed how Aya constantly acquired new skills and how she was gradually entrusted with more responsibility. In only a few months, she was one of the key volunteers in both the aid campaigns and the micro-finance projects. Resala had become an important part of her life, and she spent as much time as possible there.

Omar, also 22, was already a key volunteer in his branch when we first met in November 2009. He had just graduated from college and had been volunteering with Resala for almost two years. Omar was born in Kuwait, where his father worked as an engineer, but he had grown up with his mother and sisters in a middle-class neighbourhood in Cairo. Like Aya, Omar enjoyed the aid campaigns outside Cairo, in particular hard manual work like repairing tin roofs and digging water canals. He also spent time in the orphanage. In fact, it was his first encounter with the orphanage that persuaded him to change the direction of his life, as he told me in November 2009:

When I first came to Resala, I went upstairs to the children and saw one of the orphans. His name was Ahmed. Then I started feeling how my life and how I spent it before I came here was so trivial. What did I use to look for?

Much in line with Aya, this last question hints at the new-born possibility of becoming a better person with wider concerns than his own personal life, a reorientation of hopes and aspirations which had already taken a certain direction due to Resala's model of volunteerism and social engagement.

In Resala, the ideal of volunteerism and giving is founded on a vision that, because of the social responsibility of the good Muslim to provide for the needy, one day everyone will be helping everyone without asking for anything in return. This opens up for imagining an alternative society guided by greater solidarity, while simultaneously offering a path to an afterlife in Paradise for the individual volunteer. More specifically, Resala's slogan 'the pleasure of giving' presupposes a particular model of social engagement where the good Muslim as an act of obedience towards God, *practically* engages with and takes responsibility in the larger community. For Aya, Omar and all the other volunteers I talked to, the interaction with recipients in poor neighbourhoods was an eye-opening experience. It made them realise the extent of poverty and suffering in Egypt, and they learned that they could make a difference and had a religious responsibility to do so: 'Imagine how much difference we make in somebody's life when we come all the way from Cairo and unite with these people and cooperate with them', Omar said in 2009. Unlike most charities in Egypt (Atia 2013, 145), Resala is mobile in the sense that volunteers engage with the poor in their neighbourhoods. Thus, there is in Resala an emphasis on sociality beyond the community of volunteers and beyond the relationship between the volunteer and God, manifesting itself primarily in the concrete and practical encounters between volunteers and poor recipients. Put differently, the intersubjective relationship across class divisions mediates the individualised experience of volunteering as a relationship of sacrificial giving or duty of the person towards God (cf. Sparre 2013a; Mittermaier 2014), on the one hand, and a more abstract ideal of giving as a 'humanitarian' imperative (Chouliaraki 2010), on the other.

Furthermore, Resala is a civic and national enterprise, and its vision of an alternative society is grounded in a model of social cohesion defined within the nation. In Resala, 'the poor' are Egyptian citizens in the broadest sense, and Egypt is talked about as one community. In 2010, during one of his recurrent speeches, AbdelAzeem called on volunteers to show their patriotism through improving the lives of Egypt's poor: 'If patriotism is not exerting every piece of effort you

can to raise the standard of this nation's people, then what is it?' With their time and labour they as middle-class youth are to provide the crucial link between resources and those in need, transforming monetary and in-kind donations from an upper middle-class with will and resources to donate into aid and services for Egypt's poor.

Below, I show how Aya and Omar's involvement in Resala both in itself has facilitated a reorientation towards a shared narrative and is dependent on a longer-term reorientation of personal hopes and aspirations, in ways that their parents' generation did not and was not. At the same time, there are elements of intergenerational continuity.

Reorientations towards alternative futures

Before Aya and Omar came to Resala, their thoughts and practices concerning the future centred mainly on education. Raised by parents who favoured educational achievements and economic security as a prerequisite for realising personal hopes and aspirations, they were, like their peers, urged to stay home and study to secure their future. Aya's parents, for example, did not allow her to start volunteering until she had completed her college education. Parents feared that by 'wasting their time doing useless things,' as one parent put it in 2010, their children would fall behind in the educational race and lose their middle-class status. Although many parents were gradually won over by how much Resala meant to their children, their fears of downward mobility weighed heavily. In April 2010, Omar said:

My father and mother want me to be a good person really, but they are a bit afraid of the whole Resala thing, because it might distract me. But in fact it encourages me to work more and more, because when I do something and I see happiness in the eyes of somebody, I think that what I am doing is actually good. So, may God help me, I just feel worried when they are not happy, but now they are more OK [with it] because I am studying well.

Omar's parents were afraid Resala would distract him from his primary task – completing his degree and finding a decent job. Like most parents of volunteers, Omar's parents had their formative years from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a period characterised by unusually high economic growth and inflation, work migration to the Gulf and the introduction of foreign consumer goods to the Egyptian middle class. These circumstances increased opportunities for wealth enhancement for some, while for many middle-class families it raised prices faster than wages, thus lowering their living standards (Osman 2011, 133-134). However, there was no

commensurate decline in ambition (Amin 2011, 72), and many, including Aya's and Omar's parents, took additional jobs or migrated temporarily to the Gulf to pay daily expenses and fund their children's private tutoring.

However, for Omar, Aya and many other young Egyptians, formal education was not the primary engagement that they built their hopes upon. Since the 1980s, the quality of public education had deteriorated (Herrera 2010, 132-133), and together with a steady rise in youth unemployment, they knew that their achievements in college would not determine their material success. Furthermore, corruption in Egyptian society had for decades been 'institutionalised' (Amin 2011, 38) to the extent that nothing was possible without a minimum of connections (Schielke 2015, 10). Therefore, confidence in formal education as a means of upward social mobility had little credibility; the volunteers were well aware of the reality awaiting them after college, especially those who had no access to private educational institutions and influential connections. Many volunteers 'just wanted to get college over with,' as expressed by another volunteer in 2010. Thus, the confidence in the promises of education was partly undermined, and the space carved out for other hopes to emerge. This reorientation across the two generations has its seeds in the young volunteers' specific historical location and their attempts to reconcile their sociocultural heritage with the demands of contemporary life. But it was further nurtured in Resala.

Aya and Omar's choice to volunteer in Resala was justified first in accordance with their obligations as Muslims to provide for the needy and a 'need to cultivate certain virtues [...] that [they did] not yet possess' (Mattingly 2012, 323). In late 2009, Aya said: 'There is actually a *hadīth*³ that I totally believe in: "No one completes his faith till he loves his brother the way he loves himself." If I don't do that, I am not a good believer; it's like my Islam is not complete.' Due to a promise of a better life on earth as well as a place in Paradise, they found in Resala a space where through becoming better moral subjects they could take more control over their personal future. This echoes findings by Saba Mahmood (2005) and others about Islamic charity and volunteering as part of an individual process of becoming a more pious person. Focusing particularly on 'how Resala volunteers articulate the "Islamicness" of their voluntarism', Amira Mittermaier (2014, 518) too points at self-cultivation and fulfilling of an individual religious duty as central in volunteers' motivations and intentions. Mona Atia (2013, 155) takes a slightly different path, placing Resala and the way volunteerism and Islam is linked as part of an encroaching pious neoliberal rhetoric of 'individual responsibility, proactiveness, self-help, choice and accountability', in which the subject is seen as responsible of its spiritual as well as material success. I propose an

additional reading of how volunteering in Resala has contributed to a reorientation of young Egyptians' hopes and aspirations towards the collective. In March 2010, Aya in particular expressed such an 'expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become' (Bloch 1995, 7):

I am at a crossroad. But I wish something good happens for me, my family and my country. I want something good to happen so that I would not become fed up with this country. [...] It's not the time to go away. It's not the time to go away. Maybe I will be the one who will make the change?

As reflected in the quote, hopes are not only centred on personal achievements or how the example of the individual would inspire others to become a better Muslim or a more self-dependent subject. The general state of the nation and possibility of a different society were also major concerns of Aya: 'It's about helping other people and so on, but there's also the love for my country. I know that we cannot make everybody happy, but we try.' Supported by their experiences of encounters with 'others' in society, Resala envisioned a different path for the nation organised according to ideals of social responsibility rather than competition between individual citizens with specific educational credentials and connections. For most volunteers I talked to, experiments with alternatives were very much practices of 'anticipatory consciousness' (Bloch 1995, 13) of what is missing in *Egyptian* society as a whole, namely social cohesion where people at the level of the national feel bound to one another by mutual responsibility, shared values and a sense of the greater good beyond particular group loyalties (cf. Brubaker 2004). In other words, the young volunteers seem to be looking at the nation as a redistributive system, where they take on the power as givers and do so in a benevolent rather than self-seeking way. From their middle-class experiences, they see themselves as good Muslim citizens who take on the role as 'liaisons' (Deeb 2006, 175) between 'the wealthy [seeking] to purify their wealth through charity and the poor [turning] to Islamic associations' (Atia 2013, xxxvi).

Thus, in their attempts to overcome an experience of despair about what the future seems to offer them, personally and as Egyptian citizens, both Aya and Omar searched for a place from which to critically evaluate the ideals of their parents as well as experiment with alternative futures, personally and for the society. But in fact their experiences also reflect elements of intergenerational continuity. Most volunteers have been raised by parents who regularly contribute to charity either by providing for poor in their neighbourhood or by donating money to a local mosque or charity association, understood as an act of personal piety.⁴ Furthermore, going through similar middle-class experiences as their parents, the young volunteers' worries about their own and

the nation's future mirrors their parents' concern with managing distribution of benefits from a corrupt state and society (cf. Dahlgren 2011, 75). But what distinguishes the young volunteers from their parents is that their personal hopes and aspirations developed into something collective with themselves, the contemporary generation of youth, as presumed agents of change. Unlike the majority of charity organisations led by middle-aged men who see youth as a target group that needs help and guidance rather than as a resource in itself (El Rouby et al. 2007), Resala's leadership speaks directly to the young generation. And the message has resonance because they are looking for more than charity as an Islamic economic practice and act of piety. Furthermore, regular encounters with poor fellow citizens contributed to keeping the vision of an alternative society meaningful. Thus, Resala's call for a specific balance between giving and receiving provided the vocabulary and the practical foundation for the emergence of a concrete utopia, and as such, for the formation of another kind of subject – a more hopeful and collective agentive one than the generational subjects of their parents.

Tahrir – a moment of utopia

This was in 2010. Only a few months later, in early 2011, the youth suddenly moved from the periphery to the centre in Egyptian politics and public debate. For Aya, Omar and other young Resala volunteers, this change resulted in another and much more radical reorientation towards collective imagined futures, which in turn had further implications for their formation as political subjects.

The primary forces behind the mass mobilisation in January 2011 were young oppositional activists from protest groups such as the 6 April Youth Movement. They managed to formulate their discontent into a political message and in a form that within a few days was capable of mobilising hundreds of thousands of supporters and threatening the existing regime. Consequently, in the immediate period after the 18 days of revolt, Egyptian youth were in the centre of public celebration, in strong contrast to previous images, portraying them as marginalised and politically apathetic (El-Sharnouby 2015). While Aya and Omar were already engaged in civic activities, the uprising and subsequent celebration of Egyptian youth added to their reorientation a narrative that emphasised the possibilities of the future in the here-and-now. The mass demonstrations and the success of the crowd in overthrowing Mubarak and demanding justice swept Egyptians into a present that few had thought possible.

Omar went to Tahrir once during the 18 days. He would have liked to go every day, not least on the day of Mubarak's resignation. But as the only son of two aging parents, he felt the

responsibility to stay at home when his mother fell ill. When I asked him how he felt when he heard the news, he said: 'I was happy and sad. I was happy because he had stepped down, but I was sad because I didn't experience it.' This was followed by a deep sigh, which to me hinted at a feeling shared by many who had missed out on the most important event in the new national narrative. Aya didn't go to Tahrir during what she describes as the 'revolution days.' Her parents didn't let her. Yet she went there together with family members in the weeks that followed to celebrate, and later, during what she calls the 'rule of Tantawi and the SCAF' to protest against military rule.⁵ Among the Resala volunteers I talked to, some participated in the demonstrations during the 18 days, but most went to Tahrir after 11 February to celebrate the 'victory of the crowd' and in order to experience the atmosphere at the square.

The success of the crowds in forcing Mubarak to step down provided the framework and vocabulary for how the 18 days were addressed in the months that followed. I sensed much frustration, anger and sometimes fear in the messages I received from activist friends, yet the stories that I heard upon my return to Cairo in December 2011 reflected feelings of joy, patriotism, unity and solidarity. In retrospect, and no matter what form and intensity the individual volunteer's participation took, the Tahrir moment was later engulfed with nostalgia because of the futures lost. In December 2011, one volunteer said: 'In the demonstrations we felt the unity and the love for Egypt.' In particular, volunteers emphasised national unity and solidarity between rich and poor, Muslims and Christians – the feeling of 'a whole new Egypt.' Everyone helped everyone without considering previous boundaries and differences. According to Hussein Ali Agrama (2012), the extraordinary thing about the Tahrir moment was that it was guided by important 'asecular' principles contesting the dominant discourse on the religious-secular divide in Egyptian politics and public discussions. Along with an 'ethos of democratic sensibility,' it opened up spaces to think beyond current predicaments (30). It was an experience that in retrospect – as much as in the actual moment – went beyond their wildest dreams. It was a 'time out of time' (Sabea 2012) and 'a moment of utopia turned into material reality' (Schielke 2011), because 'the idealism and euphoria in Tahrir generated an image ... of what Egyptians could be' (Hamdy 2012, 46). Shortly, Resala initiated activities that reflected the organisation's direct support of the uprising. As described in the introductory example, volunteers wearing Resala t-shirts started cleaning Tahrir Square, and at some point Resala officially provided blood bags and medicine to the wounded protesters at nearby hospitals.⁶ Due to previous experiences with social service work, these were activities that the volunteers understood and where they felt that they could contribute. Furthermore, the asecular

principles of the uprising had resonance among them due to similarities with Resala's vision of giving as simultaneously an enhancement of piety and a practice of solidarity, challenging an otherwise widespread reservation of inter-religious benevolence among Egyptians (cf. Atia 2013, 17). Suddenly, where before there was only their hope towards a society of citizens showing social sensibility as ethical subjects, that society now seemed to be what Egyptians were struggling for.

But it soon became clear that the (Tahrir) moment, when everything seemed possible, had passed. Largely, the old power structure remained, and 'the revolutionary euphoria [...] soon gave way to surveillance, polarisation, and counterrevolution' (Herrera 2015, 355). Tahrir was indeed a moment, but it became a story told in nostalgic terms and with a perspective on the future oscillating between cautious hope and despair. Volunteers' accounts of the actual 18 days continued to reflect the optimism experienced, but when conversations in 2011 and 2012 turned to the current situation in the country, I sensed deep disappointment and to some extent an existential crisis. How could they still be hopeful if what they experienced in early 2011 was not real? In December 2011, Omar said in : 'Nothing in Egypt has changed. After the revolution, we thought that Egypt is like Paradise. But I don't see it. Many young people went to the streets. But we think that nothing has changed.' Aya and most other volunteers questioned the outcome of the uprising in much the same way.

Events and decisions in both Aya's and Omar's lives have been and continued to be closely entangled with Egypt's political situation and their efforts to succeed as moral beings and responsible citizens in a post-Tahrir Egypt. They and the other volunteers I followed continued 'to revise and critique their past selves or revise and critique their future hopes in light of the things that have happened to them' (Mattingly 2012, 309) and their country. As a preliminary analytical closure in the unfinished lives of Aya and Omar, I will show how hope and utopia are renegotiated, both personally and in terms of the future of Egypt after 2011. This also points to the importance of age, life stages and the social and political spaces needed to shift people's focus from personal aspirations and family security to shared utopias.

The entanglement of shared utopias and personal hopes

One afternoon in March 2015, I waited outside the Resala branch to meet Aya. I recognised her from afar. Her outward appearance had not changed much since I had last seen her in 2012. But I knew that she had been through a lot since then. That fresh young graduate of 22 was now 27 and engaged to be married. Her upcoming wedding was one major life event, which like other events and decisions were closely entangled with the political ups and downs in Egypt. From 2009 to

2010, Aya had been deeply involved in Resala and its visionary enterprise, hoping for both divine rewards and a more solidary society. In early 2011, she had experienced the euphoria of a nationwide uprising against the Mubarak regime. This was followed by a brief involvement in political activism, first as part of the 6 April Youth Movement, and later, during the 2012 presidential elections, supporting one of the liberal candidates. In August 2013, a close family member was shot dead while helping injured protesters during the violent clearing of a pro-Morsi sit-in. Later, another was forced into exile. Aya started to question the possibilities of change – at least in the short term. Furthermore, the violent crackdowns on all forms of opposition kept her from acting: ‘It’s very frustrating really to have to accept the situation without being able to change it.’ Along with others I spoke to, she expressed a fear that the revolution had been ‘reduced [...] to being merely a historical event that ended with the overthrow of Mubarak even though his regime remained intact’ (Telmissany 2014, 38). However, she still had aspirations over the longer term: ‘If I cannot change anything now because I don’t have many people supporting me, I may wait, but I may never change my thinking. I can never change my thinking.’ In fact, in 2015 it seemed like her particular experiences had contributed to her formation as a political subject with much outspoken oppositional and protest statements, and thus moved her beyond the practices and vocabulary of civic engagement in Resala:

For me, I will not go down to call for Morsi to return. But I’ll definitely go down some day to defend my country against the military rule, and I’ll defend it till the last breath. Because we deserve not to be enslaved and controlled like puppets. We deserve freedom and people have to rule.

While Aya and some of the other volunteers had left Resala and insisted on holding on to the revolutionary spirit and vocabulary, talking about change and the future in terms of rights and freedom, Omar’s latest trajectory as a political subject was somewhat different. Despite his initial pro-revolution statements and mobilisation to go to Tahrir, he later decided to concentrate on his personal development, both professionally and in terms of moral religious conduct: ‘My strategy now is to work with myself, because if I’m a good person, I will help a lot of people to become good. [...] When we start individually and improve ourselves individually, all our societies will be improved,’ he said in 2012. Such statements bear witness to a reorientation more towards the ideals of pious neoliberalism (cf. Atia 2013). Omar increasingly explained his engagement in Resala as a way to improve himself piously and be a good role model for others, while at the same time he gradually invested more in ‘the promise of social and personal advancement in the shape of

education and cultivation, salaried work, and middle-class status and comfort' (Schielke 2015, 173). Omar graduated with a diploma, and in 2014 he got married and soon had his first child. Other volunteers took similar or slightly different trajectories in terms of renegotiating hope after 2011. Amr, another male volunteer, decided early on that his 'role in Resala is more important than just going down to Tahrir and protesting.' In his understanding, 'only people who believe that there is room for change in this country will come back to Resala and will stay sharing in charity' (December 2011). The strength of an organisation like Resala lies in having created an inclusive space for civic engagement outside formal politics, and despite an uprising, a military coup and changing political alliances, its leadership has managed to balance their position by not supporting any of the groupings. But due to what many experienced as even stronger divisions in society than under Mubarak, orientations towards the possible for Egyptian society, notwithstanding the available 'avenues of participation' (Singerman 1996), increasingly reflects a 'struggle to hope' (Mattingly and Jensen 2015, 45).

Furthermore, the latest development in Aya's and Omar's narratives illustrate that engagement with concrete utopias is for the majority something related to the formative years of their youth, when they 'come into contact anew' and start reformulating, directly and indirectly, what their parents have taught them through the lens of their contemporary experiences (Mannheim 1964, 293). Resala as a space of civic engagement is dominated by the conditions of young people at just that point when they are freed from some of the obligations to their natal family and not yet harnessed to the obligations and interests of a new one. In most cases, volunteers downscale or stop their involvement in the organisation once they get married or have their first child. Many also find it difficult to continue volunteering when obtaining a fulltime job. Similar to when I first met them, Aya and Omar continued to orient themselves towards possibilities that had not yet come in their orientations towards the future. Omar seemed to concentrate more on building his new family and becoming a better person, spiritually and professionally, perhaps because he saw himself as fortunate to have moved beyond 'being stuck in a position of youth' (Vigh 2006, 32) before passing the age of adulthood. Despite his visions for Egypt, volunteering became practically difficult, and with the latest crackdowns on civil society by the al-Sisi regime, engaging in oppositional politics could put all what he had worked for personally at risk. Aya continued to apply the oppositional vocabulary of the uprising, but with her upcoming marriage and her own family's concerns, she hesitated acting on her frustrations as to Egyptian politics.

Thus, experiments into possible futures are always momentary practices in people's larger trajectories. Engagement in Resala and later during the 2011 uprising and its aftermath are necessary backgrounds for understanding the subject formation of these young Egyptians individually and as belonging to the 2011 youth generation. But more personal hopes and fears related to being in and moving beyond the position of youth likewise continue to shape their and other Resala volunteers' political subjectivities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how experiments with alternative futures and moral orders contributed to the formation of particular political subjectivities among young Muslim volunteers in Egypt during the political turbulent years from 2009 to 2015. For thousands of middle-class youth like Aya and Omar, volunteering and giving through Resala provided the foundation of a concrete utopia of a more unified and solidary Egypt, while also opening possibilities to become ethical, pious subjects. The utopia was nurtured by a vision of social responsibility and civic engagement founded on an ideal of the good Muslim as someone who provides for others, but it was the regular encounters and interactions with poor fellow citizens that kept this vision meaningful, illustrating how turning inward does not necessarily mean turning away from society. Consequently, from their middle-class position, Aya, Omar and other young volunteers gradually came to look at the nation as a redistributive system, where they would take on the role as liaisons between the more privileged seeking to purify their wealth through charity and the poor seeking assistance through Islamic associations. As such, their practice in some aspects departs from charity analytically categorised within the movement of pious neoliberalism in Egypt.

Hence, for many middle-class youth belonging to the generation coming of age in the 2000s, Resala's call spurred the hopes and facilitated its utopian enactment. Due to decades of high unemployment and gradual undermining of the educational system, they had lost hope in the promises of formal education, and unlike their parents, they were not afraid of engaging in civil society, because they never experienced the terrorist attacks of the early 1990s and the state crackdown on the militant Islamists. While there are important continuities in the outlooks across the generations of the parents and their children, Resala and the particular experiences of these young volunteers enabled the emergence of a concrete utopia, and as such, the formation of a more hopeful subject whose religiosity became an investment in the future of the Egyptian nation through a focus on cross-class solidarity.

With the 2011 uprising, a political space for a better future materialised, resulting in the strengthening of the young volunteers' belief in the possibility of a society in which its citizens showed social sensibility as ethical agents. Yet the moment that initially provided hope, recognition and inclusion, soon turned out to be the source of their frustration, despair and marginalisation. Again they had to renegotiate their hopes. While Omar's trajectory as a political and moral subject reflects a more circular movement in which he partly returned to the hopes and aspirations characterising his upbringing and the influence of the powerful contemporary pious neoliberal movement, Aya continued to hope for the possibility of a different society. At least in the short run, Aya's example illustrates how utopia and the revolutionary spirit continues to live in some of Egypt's 2011 youth generation, while for others, like Omar, the shared narratives gave away for other more personal strivings, spiritual or economic, to live a good life. In contexts like the Egyptian, experiments with collective alternatives always compete with more personal concerns regarding moving past the category of youth to establish a secure life. Similar to other 'revolutionary generations,' these young Egyptians will cease to be youth and many will trade their forward-looking, utopian sentiments for a more backward-looking vision predicated upon vested interest. But the article also demonstrates the potential of longer-term change in societies like the Egyptian through the dialectic between the local emergence of new narratives of alternative futures and people's active effort in experimenting with these ideas by transforming themselves into what they see as better and more ethical selves. And eventually, such experiments might influence the intergenerational dialogue, more particularly the kind of questions, problems and possibilities that this generation will present to their children.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² With the term '2011 uprising', I refer to the mass demonstrations in January and February 2011, including the immediate period of popular political euphoria following the ousting of Mubarak. The 'aftermath' refer to the political instable period following this and until approx. August 2013. Due widespread scholarly debate on analytical vagueness of the terms 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' in the Egyptian context, I apply these concepts only emically.

³ *Hadīth* refers to an account of a saying of the prophet Muhammad.

⁴ In 2010, Egyptian families spent almost 800 million USD on charity donations

(<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2010/09/egypt-islamic-charity-spending-is-also-an-economic-pillar-figures-show.html>, retrieved 18 November 2016).

⁵ From 12 February 2011 and until the inauguration of Mohamed Morsi on 30 June 2012, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, was the leading political authority of the country.

⁶ Such activities only lasted for a short while. After the removal of Mohamed Morsi in June 2013 and the increased public antagonism towards everything associated with Islamism, Resala returned to its previous strategy of providing only services for the poor.

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