Cultural revolutions start early

According to several observers, the discontent with Mubarak's Regime's neo liberal policies, on one hand, and with the corrupt bureaucracy, on the other hand, were behind the January revolution. The slogans raised by the people during the revolution bears witness to this hypothesis. People chanted (Bread – Freedom – Social Justice). Egyptian demonstrators at that time did not mention the need for modernization.

After the revolution, however, most political powers in Egypt, while trying to win the votes of the Egyptians, stressed the importance of developing Egypt into a modern democratic country. Maybe because they realized that freedom and democracy require first a modern state.

Even Islamic tendencies in Egypt stressed also this fact. But nobody explained what they meant by modernity and what they considered as the conditions of a modern democratic society.

In my opinion, the development towards modern societies in Europe required indispensable conditions: cultural, social and economic conditions. Developed technologies, economic system based on conquering markets outside and inside the country, strong belief in science, domination of civil law instead of religious instructions, secularity, respect of human rights…. are some of these conditions vital for developing a modern society. It is my understanding that realizing the conditions of modernity implies certain cultural changes; I will try to focus on cultural indications of modernity, which were present before the revolution and partly – enhanced the outbreak of the revolution. I will also try to shed light on the cultural development after the revolution, especially in the field of popular culture, because the pro-

1. The indications of modernity in the Egyptian society

I claim that Cultural Revolution (the need and desire to reach out for modernity) has started already in the nineteenth century in the Egyptian (and some Arab) society, but has slowed down because the society was not ready for this move, socially and culturally.

During and after the French Expedition in Egypt in the nineteenth century, the Egyptians were confronted for the first time with the European model of renaissance and modernity. Since then, the intellectual elite as well as the rulers of Egypt (Mohamed Aly Pasha) had one goal: To be able to reach modernity as it was manifested in the French Model. Egyptian rulers and Egyptian intellectuals had for sure different motivation. While Mohamed Aly Pasha for example aimed to establish a strong army and a rich country to ensure his dominance over Egypt and parts of the region, the Egyptian elite wanted democracy, freedom and emancipation. Whatever the motivations, the truth remains that since then, thoughts of reforms and renovation have developed. They had different approaches (liberal – religious, national and socialist).

These thoughts of reform, however, did not lead to modernity at the end. This, according to some political observers, is partly because of the predominance of the official discourse, which made the liberalization from the British colonization the main goal of all reform attempts. But to a great extend, these attempts failed because Egyptians, who criticized the ideas of political and social reform were no more than a small intellectual elite, who were drawn into the circles of the political regime they were criticizing, becoming at the end part of this regime. Step by step, the ruling regime, before or after Nasser's era, could win these

rebellious elites through offering them social and economic privileges. They got excellent public posts and their economic status was protected all along. They became harmless.

The revolution of January 2011 on the contrary could win a lot of people on its side. The ideas of reform and modernization that arose during and after the January revolution could find great resonance among the Egyptians. Hence, one should ask how Egyptian activists this time could reach all these people and how were they able make their ideas popular among big groups of the society? This time, the desire for change became popular thanks to the modern and postmodern global condition. To me, the most important change took place in the cultural sector. In this sector, some popular cultural products and expressions appeared and enhanced a distinguished change in some values and helped at the end resume the old struggle for modernity. These products could not have been popular if the Egyptian state did not allow a small margin of freedom and started introducing the free market economic policy, both important conditions of modernity. Moreover, Egypt witnessed big developments in the system of communication since the nineties and a bigger margin of freedom could be won. Using this margin of freedom, cultural products have been circulating easier and faster among Egyptians since then and they spread the ideas of reform and the necessity of change.

 I shall focus on the changes happened in the field of popular cultural products in the media (mass media or social media), as well as in the book industry. I chose these cultural expressions, because they reflect a genuine expression of people's thoughts, beliefs, and values.

New media, new concepts

In the late nineties Egypt had to undertake some changes in the media: the printed; the electronic and the audio-visual media to cope with the huge international developments taking place in the field of communication in order to open new chances for investments in the country. Hence, Egypt launched its first private TV channels and it had also to allow the ex-

change of information via the internet. This openness was on one hand enforced by the era of globalization and trans-national companies, where money, goods and information had to move freely and quickly in the whole planet; On the other hand, the pressure of western countries and international bodies (like the International Bank, USA and the European Union) on Egypt and other Arab countries forced Egypt to allow a small margin of freedom to show flexibility. But for sure, the main pressure came from inside the Egyptian society. The Egyptians compared their status with other countries, pushed for better access to information. The broadcasting of the Qatari Al Jazeera news channel had a strong impact on the Egyptian media. This channel, established 1996 by the Qatari ruling family, reached high level of success during the Iraqi War. Al Jazeera managed to provide viewers with information that other Western and American news channels kept hidden. The pictures and news broadcasted live in Al Jazeera from Iraq were the opposite of the official American stories. Al Jazeera showed, for example, that the Iraqi Regime, which was described by American Politicians as the axis of evil, formed a real threat only to its own people. Via Al Jazeera, Arabs could see, how this war did not really free the Iraqi people, but it killed instead more Iraqi civilians than soldiers. Al Jazeera's goal is to reach all Arabs and afterwards all Muslims in the world. Therefore, it adapted the strategy of combining news and entertainment to attract as many viewers as it could. This strategy made them present talk shows that broke some taboos: homosexuality and Jews in the Arab World for example. Al Jazeera even did what other Arabic TV channels could not do; it established their first office in Israel and could bring live news from the Palestinian occupied territories and the Israeli society.

When other Arab countries realized that Al Jazeera is broadcasting news and information, which contradict the official information allowed by its governments, they allowed establishing private TV channels. Trying to compete with Al Jazeera, the Egyptian government al-

lowed a small margin of freedom for the private Egyptian channels to win the audience back. The Egyptian state, nevertheless, could keep its strong control over these channels through some legislation, which allowed the government to stop any of these channels at any moment, when the red lines were crossed. Nevertheless, these channels, made good use of this small margin of freedom and started to invite renown opponents to the Mubarak Regime from all tendencies even from the Political Islamic tendencies. Freedom as an important condition for modernity has started in this field.

Political talk shows and programs shown in these channels were not the only attractive aspects for the audience. The modern and soft new religious discourse presented in these channels was another important factor for winning more audience. Eventually, these new religious programs managed to contribute in initiating modernization of religious discourse.

1.1. New religious discourse in the audio-visual media

For a long time and until the late nineties, TV broadcasters of religious programs in the Egyptian official TV used to look, speak and perform in a very traditional way. Most of these broadcasters were clergymen (Sheiks) dressed in the traditional outfit of traditional Sheiks. They spoke the Fusha Arabic language, (a high-level language), which is the language of the Koran and did not allow even a single word in colloquial Arabic to penetrate their speeches. The traditional Sheik was always seated behind a big classic desk and gave a frontal speech. The decoration of the studio used symbols associated with the traditional image we have of an Islamic surroundings: Islamic ornament, traditional Islamic lamps and colors were either white or green. The content of these speeches were not far away from their appearance: the Sheiks addressed very common topics, though in no way directly relevant to the current everyday life of the Muslims. They would, for example, speak about the biography of the proph-

et Mohamed , his relatives and close followers. Other Sheiks addressed the notion of Right and Wrong in executing the rituals, especially prayers, fasting, Zakat, (alms) the money the Muslims should pay out of their income, etc. They never addressed controversial topics and avoided raising any questions related to new interpretation of the religion.

The private TV channels launched in the late nineties had to provide creative and innovative new programs to attract more audience and thus sustain their existence which depended on commercials. Films, political talk shows and soap operas formed the main part of this program. The audience of religious programs had to be addressed too. Hence, a new concept of religious programs was developed. The new religious program addressed, in an attractive form, topics relevant to everyday life. Within this new concept, young broadcasters were hired. These young broadcasters of new religious program looked different from the traditional Sheiks in an attempt to address the largest group in society, which the official TV failed to reach: namely the youth. The new private TV Sheiks wore casual cloths, used simple and easy Arabic, often colloquial Arabic, and appeared within a total new and innovative decoration. Some of them even broadcasted their program in the open air. (

The private TV channels started to address another audience, also not reachable for the official TV, and which formed half of the Egyptian society: the Egyptian women. New religious programs dedicated mainly to women and broadcasted by women started to appear on private TV channels. They tackled topics relevant to Muslim women, like marriage, polygamy, inheritance, raising children, Islamic dress code, etc. The female broadcasters of these programs had the outfit of a modern Muslim woman, they were elegantly dressed in colorful cloths and did not abide by the traditional dress of the Muslim woman namely very loose outfits of black, blue or brown. The new TV religious programs adapted also a new unconventional interactive form through receiving phone calls and questions on air from the audience.

The new image of young broadcasters whether men or women and the topics addressed in these channels contributed to the establishment of a new religious discourse that takes the needs of the ordinary people and everyday problems into consideration. Eventually, a new religious discourse arose slowly and carefully. It not only questioned the rigid and outdated official discourse of the religious institutions, but it also raised doubts about the relation between these institutions and the political regime. The authority of the traditional religious discourse started to shake, and thus a younger and innovative religious discourse occupied more space. This slow change in the religious discourse led to other developments afterwards as we will see. But now, I will continue tracing the developments in the media.

1.2. <u>The introduction of the new media in the Egyptian society</u>

Mid of the nineties, the Egyptian government had to undertake necessary developments in the field of communication to be able to create new investment chances, that depended strongly on fast interactions via the internet. The young generation quickly grabbed this opportunity and they declared the internet as their own space for exchanging information and posting important statements. They created facebook pages and twitter accounts, and used the youtube for spreading photos and videos overcoming controlling and protective measures taken by the regime. The most famous facebook pages, which played a big role in the calls for the revolution were for example (We are all Khaled Said), (6th April page), Ultras White Knights and Ultras Ahlawy (the two biggest football teams in Egypt).

Because the internet was a space, where users could place not only texts and photos, but also videos and their own comments, it soon became the most visited space among young people when searching for information. The internet became the most popular space for receiving and exchanging information, which were not given through the official channels of the Egyptian state. It became the most reliable source even for private TV channels, which started to

broadcast uploaded videos on the internet to reveal the suppressive character of the government before, during and after the revolution. This space was also the place, where Egyptian writers could publish their articles, books and express their opinion freely away from governmental control. But the Egyptian writers did not only use the internet to publish their books or articles. A remarkable change in the book industry in Egypt starting from the second millennium, gave the Egyptian writers the chance to reach more readers than before.

1.3. <u>Popular books. Listening to the voices of the ordinary people</u>

Since the fifties, successive Egyptian regimes have strongly controlled book and publishing industry. Nasser nationalized private publishing houses and newspapers, the most important place, where Egyptian writers posted their critics and comments. These institutions became under total control of the government, turning the majority of Egyptian writers into employees for governmental newspapers. Private publishing houses were very few and they focused mostly on religious and educational books. Because the book industry was mainly governed by the state, Egyptian writers have never been familiar with the rules of the book market and how to make their books popular. Trying to avoid provoking the regime, they wrote mainly difficult analytical books, consumed by a tiny group of intellectuals and did not therefore form any threat to the regime. The regime even used these books to promote itself as a democratic regime.

Because the publishing industry lacked important skills like marketing, studies on readerships and the reader market, Egypt did not develop into a "reading country. Moreover a large percentage of the Egyptian population is illiterate, whereas the educational system is so bad that its graduates are no more than semi-literate who are not used to reading. The majority of Egyptian readers did not consume books for the general knowledge or for aesthetic reasons. They mostly read either religious or educational books related to their study. The intellectual

books, which reflected the difficult situation in Egypt and criticized it, did not reach larger groups of the society.

But in the beginning of the 21st century, some books, which analyzed and criticized the regime, could unexpectedly reach the masses like the books of Alaa Al Aswani and Khaled Elkhamisi. This success indicated a real change in the reading culture and book industry in Egypt.

The "Jacobean Building byAlaaAlaswani was first published in 2002, and was reprinted in 2006. This novel sold approximately 200 000 copies, which is very unusual in the Egyptian book market. Other successful books were published after this novel and sold also a lot of copies. (Khaled El Khamisi's book "Taxi" was reprinted 21 times. Ghada Abdel Aal, who wrote first in a blog called Ï want to marry" has published her articles afterwards in a book. Her book was adapted for a successful TV series.

This new phase in the Egyptian book industry and market started in the same time when the famous "Diwan Book Store" opened in Cairo in 2002. The store opened in Zamalek, a high middle class district in Cairo, introduced a new solid concept, based on modern marketing strategies: The store sells Arabic and Foreign books in the same place to serve also the foreign community in Egypt. It organized for the first time in Egypt book signing events, and offered a place for beverages , where clients could sit comfortably and take a deeper look at the books. Diwan Book Store soon opened other branches in Cairo and Alexandria. Other book stores, like, Kutub Khan, for example, followed the footsteps of Diwan and became also successful.

In addition to the opening of new book stores, which marked a new era in the book industry in Egypt, Egyptian writers have started adapting different, more popular aspects , in their books.

The readership in Egypt consists mainly of the young generation, people under 40, who belong to the middle or high middle class. Those readers could not consume heavy analytical books and prefer books which relate to their own context using attractive elements like sarcasm, easy language, excitement and mystery. It can be noticed, for example, that all the successful afore mentioned books tackled the social and political situation in an easy way, using a mixture of easy Fusha Arabic and colloquial Arabic. They also use sarcasm and irony in dissecting the Egyptian society, thus allowing the readers to view their own society from some distance. Alaa Al Aswani's book "Jacobean Building" for example reflects the Egyptian society and its problems in an easy way breaking taboos, when he addresses for example issues like homosexuality or prostitution. Khaled Al Khamisi's language is a mixture between colloquial and Fusha Arabic and his book "Taxi" reflects the voice of ordinary people like the taxi driver. Ghada Abld El Aal also addresses an important topic for a large group of the society: She criticizes the pressure put on young women pushing them sometimes to unhappy marriages just to fit within the traditional accepted image of the Egyptian woman.

The writers of these successful books could identify for the first time what is attractive for the Egyptian young readership. Hence their books became Bestsellers. Creating and conquering the local market is an important pre-condition in modern societies. The Egyptian market for books, audio-visual media and new media was finally created based on modern marketing strategies and an analysis of the consumers' needs.

Meeting the needs of the consumers of cultural products was one very important factor in spreading the ideas of social and political reform among wide groups of the society. This wide circulation was not possible in the first attempts to reform the society, because some important conditions of the modern state were not realized yet, namely the free market for cultural products, the technological development and a bigger margin for free expressions.

But we should raise the question about the future of the ideas of reform and modernity. What will happen? Will they fade out? Will the new political authority be able to stop them? Will they be limited again to the tiny group of Egyptian intellectuals?

2.   <u>Future of cultural changes. Continuation or rupture</u>

These indications of modernity in the field of cultural production   in Egypt all contributed in enhancing cultural changes. This change in its turn prepared the Egyptian ground for revolution and made the idea of realizing modernity present and possible on the long run. But one would ask, whether these signs of cultural changes would continue to exist and become a solid part of the Egyptian society or would the struggle for modernity fade away like it did back in the fifties?

After revolutions, a fierce struggle of power starts and each social and political group would try to enforce its own norms and visions. Once one social group has succeeded in this, it shapes the structure and the face of the society for a long time. Until now, the Egyptian society is in the middle of this struggle. Ideas, values and ideologies are struggling and conflicting. We cannot assume that any of these struggling parties in the Egyptian society has succeeded in setting its own norms yet. Besides, the big margin of freedom in the public sphere, which is achieved after revolutions will no longer allow suppressing criticism and protests. All parties involved in this struggle make use of the freedom achieved, so that the conflict of ideas become public. In addition, the era of globalization, with the vast and immediate exchange of information, news and pictures, \formed an international public opinion, which most politicians take into consideration when making political and public statements or declaration.

The case of the satirist, BassimYussuf, is evidence to how influential this global public opinion could be.

In the following paragraph, I try to make clear how the media (audio-visual media, internet, printed media) as well as the book industry), have continued to develop faster and became even stronger.

2.1. <u>The struggle between the old and the new, between heritage and modernity became public</u>

Since the revolution, we have witnessed an increase in the use of the internet to upload and comment on statements of politicians, measures undertaken by the government or interviews with politicians and political activists. Every Egyptian is now capable of commenting and criticizing in public on the performance of the government or the politicians

Sarcasm, the favorite style of the young Egyptians, who also form the majority of the Egyptian voters, became a strong weapon in the hands of young bloggers or writers on the social media or even in the audio-visual media. Sarcastic TV programs making fun of the president, important politicians and public figures became an important part of most of the TV private channels. The statements of Islamists in particular form now the core of each sarcastic TV show on private channels.

Criticizing and mocking the Islamists, their rigid discourse and positions appear in public for the first time in 80 years. To me, this is a clear sign that the Egyptian society has started (again) its struggle between Tradition and Modernity. The conflict of ideas became public among even ordinary people. This conflict of ideas was in the last 6 decades a battle not fought by the Egyptians themselves; it was rather the regime, who kept on one hand, the Islamic movements under control either in prisons or forbid them to participate publicly in the political life, and on the other hand it did not enhance any reform of the Islamic discourse and thoughts trying to avoid the resentments and attacks of the Islamic activists and knowing in the same time that any enlightened religious discourse will lead eventually to the end of the

regime. This policy prevented the development of a real dialogue among the different groups in the Egyptian society, which could have developed the different position

Expressing their opinions in public allowed the Islamists to start a dialogue with other groups in the society. Liberals, communists, Copts, moderate Muslims and even ordinary people started to understand and question several Islamic existing ideas. Talk shows and programs in private and official TV channels, started to invite guests representing different points of view. For the first time, the Islamist and Islamic discourse is discussed not only by experts and intellectuals. The Islamic political ideology revealed itself as a political power and people started to see that they do not represent any religious authority. I believe that this sometimes aggressive conflict of ideas will help eventually in finding a common ground shared and respected by all parties.

Another struggle between the rigid and conservative Islamic approach and the moderate official approach of religious institutions like AlAzhar, has also started. Egyptian Muslims started to see and distinguish between the different Islamic positions, while most of the active Islamic groups have started reviewing their discourse.

2.2. <u>The development in the official religious institution Al Azhar</u>

Al Azhar reflected always the official religious point of view. It never contradicted the decisions of the rulers, and kept itself always far from politics. This institution, whose Grand Imam was appointed by the president, found itself after the revolution without any support from the state or the rulers in the face of the political Islamists. Al Azhar was subject to several attacks started by the Muslim brotherhood and the salafis. Astonishingly enough, Al Azhar got its support from the liberal and secular groups in society, because they saw in it the reflection of a moderate Islamic point of view, which they need to face the authority of the conservative and extreme ideas of other Islamic groups. Because of this support, Al Azhar became more powerful and influential in the public and political life. Whenever a dispute or

conflict of interests between the secular and the religious Islamic groups in the society appear, Al Azhar steps in and makes a clear statement. Out of fear to lose the last moderate Islamic institution, Egyptians have pushed Al Azhhar to play an important and effective role in the constitution assembly. It also had its word in declaring its support for the freedom of belief and expression. Azhar is now in a totally new position, which forced it to undertake a different strategy in the research and discussion of some Islamic ideas and doctrines.

2.3. <u>The development in the discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood:</u>

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 as an Islamic movement, which focused on reforming morals in Egyptian society. The movement has developed to become the biggest and most important opposition group in the Arab World. The Muslim Brotherhood no longer focused solely on social reform, but the group has also started to call for political and economic reforms based on Islamic principles.

After the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood could establish a political party, a TV channel, a newspaper and facebook page. Both, the newspaper (Freedom and Justice) and the TV channel (Misr 25) started as very traditional and conventional in their concept, the topics tackled and the program broadcasted. With time, Brotherhood media became more open and more attractive. To start with both media channels (TV channel and newspaper) did not include any females, based on the belief that Islamic principles put restriction on women to appear publicly. At the time being, however, one can find female TV broadcasters and pictures of female public figures in the newspaper. A deeper look into the Misr 25 TV channel makes obvious, how this channel, after entering the media market and acting according to the marketing rules, have changed parts of the content of its program to attract larger groups of the society. TV programs about social topics like marriage, cooking and health and beauty are now a permanent part of the programs presented. The channel also presents some music and

songs (no expressions of passions nevertheless). Female TV broadcasters are no longer dressed in the usual Muslim Brotherhood dress code, which is loose one colored dresses. They appear with a slight make up in a more modern and colorful outfit, with shawls in bright colors following the latest fashion designs. Entering the market of private TV channels has hence pushed the Muslim Brotherhood to adapt new concepts and ideas to attract more audience. One would ask where this adaptation will lead after several years.

The struggle between heritage and modernity in popular books

Using popular aspects and marketing strategies in the book industry has become more and more useful for writers who want to raise the awareness about certain topics in the Egyptian society. Ezzedine Choukri Fishere and Ibrahim Issa, for example, have started to discuss important topics and cases in the Egyptian society using popular elements I mentioned before. They intentionally used these elements to spread their ideas among young readers, who are the most effective group in the society capable of enforcing political and cultural changes. The conflict of ideas between Old and New, tradition and Modernity, has become one important subject in some of these books. Ibrahim Issa, has written his novel "Mawlana"(Our Sheikhh), where he tackles some of controversial Islamic topics: women emancipation in Islamic societies, the status of non-Muslim citizens in Islam, polygamy, etc. He tries to point out that there are different interpretation of Islam and most of these interpretation are not divine or holy, because they all reflect the point of view of the interpreters. This novel had been reprinted three times in the duration of 6 months only. This shows willingness in the society to stand up against the dominancy of the conservative clerics. Al Azhar, which usually banns these controversial books when they appear, did not criticize the book and thus made a clear statement that a new era in the Islamic discourse has started. I am stressing here the word started, because the long battle between tradition and modernity, between old and new, will

not end soon. This struggle has not come to an end in Europe. This struggle will always be a necessity in the human history.

However, the important role the private cultural sector played in Egypt in protecting and spreading the ideas of renovation makes us question the public and governmental cultural sector, its role and its importance in the life of the Egyptians over the last decades and in the future. It is also important to point out the threats, which this private cultural sector could form to the Egyptian culture on the long run, although it has protected to a certain extend the freedom of expression. It also has served most of the social groups in the Egyptian society presenting them different cultural products. Yet, it is not clear whether this private sector should be the main production sector for cultural expression. Will it lead at the end of the dominance of commercial and superficial products?   What could be done to face the threats, which the private sector forms to the Egyptian culture? What is the ideal mixture between private and public in the cultural field?

These questions will not be answered within a short period of time, especially after the military intervention in Egypt by deposing the elected president, Mohamed Morsi. Clear and deep analysis of the cultural scene need a stable political environment. I think, new ideas of a healthy balance between the private and the public sphere in culture is not the priority now in the Egyptian scene.