

The Reproduction of Political Agency for Activists in post  
2014 Egypt

*an account of ignorance as a necessity for politics in  
traumatic contexts.*

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Mohamed Elshirazy

UCL Institute of Education  
University College London

I, Mohamed Elshirazy, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

In this thesis I examine the process of maintaining political engagement among Egyptian activists who were affected by the political traumas that accompanied the military's return to power after the 2013 popular uprising. As the political field in Egypt dramatically changed, some political activists were able to reproduce their political agency, while others were not able to maintain their political engagement and have forsaken political activism. This thesis examines why some activists were able to reproduce their political agency while others were not able to do so in response to the dramatic changes in the Egyptian political context.

I derive from Žižek's psychosocial reading of the Lacanian big Other a particular analytical tool, I called it ignorance analysis. Ignorance analysis allows me to examine how participants may come to not-know particular aspects of what they already knew from their traumatic encounters. Hence, this thesis investigates two intertwined aspects of subjectivity in traumatic contexts: one how the subject comes to not-know what it already knew in a traumatic encounter, i.e., the production of ignorance; and two, how that re-production of ignorance affects the subject's re-production of agency in traumatic contexts. For this investigation I interviewed 3 male and 3 female activists. Each activist was interviewed at least three times. The interviews involved autobiographical narratives that were enhanced with elements of free association interviewing techniques.

Comparing and contrasting the different dynamics of re-production of ignorance that appeared in the discursive formulations produced within the interviews, the thesis identifies the discursive conditions that facilitated or hindered the re-production of political agency for those Egyptian activists in the politically traumatic context of Egypt. The analysis shows how some subjects in traumatic contexts become politically active by not-knowing particular aspects of what they already knew in their encounter with politically traumatic context.

## Impact Statement

In this research I outlined an analytical tool, which I called 'ignorance analysis'. This analytical tool helps in analysing the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts. Such a tool may be used by other researchers interested in examining the reproduction of political agency in similar contexts such as: studies in areas of protracted conflicts (like communities in Yemen), forced migration (like Syrian refugees), or post-war communities (like in Afghanistan). Ignorance analysis may also inform researchers interested in developing similar analytical tools to examine the reproduction of other types of subject's agency like the reproduction of scientific agency or the reproduction of economic agency of employers within different institutions.

On the practical side this research may inform individuals working in fields concerned with providing post-conflict social/psychological care and rehabilitation. For instance, social workers in aid organizations working with refugees may appreciate the coping potential of some of the discursive strategies that are highlighted in this research. Hence, they may appreciate that some refugees may need to attach themselves to similar discursive strategies in their attempt to reproduce their agency after their encounter with political trauma. Also, psychotherapists dealing with post-trauma clients may examine the lack or the presence of the discursive strategies highlighted in this research and link it to their client's struggle in reproducing their agency after their traumatic encounter.

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And for the participants, who offered parts of their lives, inner thoughts, and private feelings for this research, without your precious offerings this research would not be possible; and I am forever grateful for your gifts. I hope this research achieves what you always intended, to leave a guiding note for those who walk the path behind us.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

In July 2017 Aya Hegazi, an Egyptian-American activist, was sitting next to President Trump in the Oval Office facing international media to celebrate her release from an Egyptian prison (BBC, 2017; New York Times, 2017). Only a few weeks before this press conference, president Al Sisi of Egypt was in the same Oval Office next to President Trump conducting a similar press conference; President Trump called him 'a great friend' (ABC NEWS, 2017). Aya was then 29-years old, an American-Egyptian citizen and one of the many activists who participated in the January 2011 uprising at Al Tahrir Square. After their initial success in ousting President Mubarak, Aya, like many others had high hopes, big visions, and a renewed sense of citizenship and responsibility towards Egypt. Aya moved to Cairo, founded her organization and began participating in building the new Egypt envisioned in AL Tahrir Square. She started by addressing an issue she felt strongly about: homeless street children (Podcast11, 2021).

After Mubarak's resignation in 2011, power was temporarily transferred to the Supreme Committee of Armed Forces (SCAF). Activists continued to organize mass demonstrations to pressure the SCAF to hold elections and transfer power to an elected civilian government. They succeeded, and Morsi was democratically elected as the president of Egypt in June 2012. However, the political upheavals continued. Morsi tried to manipulate the democratic process to give himself and his party (the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)) controversial autocratic powers which resulted in several mass demonstrations on the streets again. When Morsi persisted, activists from different political perspectives organized another mass uprising to force Morsi to resign and hold early elections. They seemed to succeed again. But Morsi refused to resign and the head of the Military forces, Al Sisi, ordered his forces to detain Morsi and he was removed from office by force. A few Months later, Al Sisi was elected president of Egypt.

Interpreting the goal of the popular uprising against Morsi as the will of the Egyptian people to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from the political sphere in Egyptian

society and using this as a pretext for action, Al Sisi began a campaign of detaining members of the MB. By early 2014 many activists who had opposed the MB's politics, organized to reject Al Sisi's interpretation of the people's will and oppose his oppressive techniques against the MB members; they branded Al Sisi a Military Ruler. Al Sisi responded by widening his detention campaign to include activists from the wider political spectrum who opposed the return of the Military to power (Bassiouni, 2016). Aya was one of the activists who were both against the MB's rule and the military's rule. She was detained, accused of child trafficking, put on trial, and spent years in prison.

Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that tens of thousands of activists had been falsely detained and faced trials that did not meet acceptable standards of justice (Human Rights Watch, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2021; Amnesty International, 2014). Aya was Egyptian American, her family actively brought her case to USA government officials and policy makers. The USA government requested Aya's release along with other American citizens detained in Egypt (Yuhas, 2016). Yet the Egyptian government did not release her, and Aya spent three years in jail until president Trump came to power and requested her release from his good friend president Al Sisi (BBC, 2017). Two weeks after Al Sisi's visit with Trump in the Whitehouse, Aya was acquitted of all charges and sent back to America to be presented to the international media as an example of President Trump's effective foreign policy.

Aya (PBS, 2017) described how her life has taken a sudden dramatic turn. She had not only been accused of hideous crimes, but in a few short days she had found herself, her husband, and the staff of her organization imprisoned. Activists like her were publicly and politically punished to serve as an example to others who were political engaged in ways the government did not like. However, Aya's political agency survived these traumatic events. After her release, Aya resumed her political engagement from Washington D.C. She became a strong advocate for the release of political prisoners in Egypt and raised awareness among American policy makers of the grave human rights violations of the Al Sisi regime, whose government was one of the biggest recipients of USA foreign aid (US department of State, 2022). Aya also made vlogs on her social media accounts in Arabic addressing Egyptians inside

Egypt and raising their political awareness. (See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HADkqIWPIuw&t=86s> for English advocacy and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN\\_CCZ8y-Dg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN_CCZ8y-Dg) for Arabic vlogs).

Not all activists were able to overcome this politically traumatic context in the same way Aya did.

In 2014 when the Al Sisi regime started its campaign against political activists opposing military rule (during which Aya was detained), there was another group of activists who took on the task of documenting the cases of all female political prisoners, their aim was to raise public awareness of these cases and the conditions of their trials and detention. Among those activists was the 24-year-old Zeinab Al Mahdi. Like Aya, Zeinab was an activist who opposed both the MB's politics and the military rule of Egypt (Middle East Eye, 2015). She was not imprisoned herself and used her freedom to expose the military regime's grave human rights violations focussing her attention on female political prisoners. In November 2014, to the shock of her friends and fellow activists, Zeinab took her own life. Her last post on her Facebook page translates as follows:

I am tired . . . I am consumed... and there is no hope  
 They are sons of bitches . . . we are digging in water  
 There is no law that will give anyone any right  
 We are just doing what we can. . . to speak the truth . . . just to be able to look  
 at ourselves in the mirror without spitting on our own image  
 There is no justice and I fully recognise this  
 There is no victory coming  
 We are fooling ourselves just to keep on living (Youm7, 2014)

Zeinab was never imprisoned or tortured by the police, yet she was clearly traumatized. It is not easy to continue being politically engaged in such politically traumatic environment. Yet Zeinab, like Aya, never let go of her political agency until she gave up her life. Maintaining one's political agency in a politically traumatic context is an intricate and hazardous affair. Sarah Hegazi is another example that illuminates the complexity and the acuteness involved in maintaining political agency

in such traumatic contexts. In 2017, Sarah, a leftist and queer activist, raised the rainbow flag at a public event in Cairo. She was detained by the police and in prison she was verbally and physically abused. After her release, Sarah left the country and immigrated to Canada. There she was granted political asylum. Unlike Zeinab, Sarah reached safety, in Canada she found a safe political environment to live as both a gay person and queer activist. From Canada, she continued raising awareness about LGBTQ+ issues in Egypt and the Middle East (CBC, 2020; DW, 2020; MIRP, 2020). Unlike Zeinab, Sarah seemed to have physically escaped the politically traumatic context. But very much like Zeinab, the unthinkable happened. In June 2020, Sarah took her own life in Canada and left a short note. It translates:

To my siblings: I have tried to survive and I failed, forgive me.

To my friends: The journey was cruel and I am too weak to resist, forgive me.

To the world: You were horrifically cruel, but I forgive. (BBC Arabic, 2020)

This is the site of my research: political agency and political trauma. In this research I examine how activists in Egypt deal with their political agency in response to the politically traumatic aftermath of the military's return to power in 2014. Aya, Zainab and Sarah are all salient cases, however, they are only points in a wider constellation of different ways of dealing with political agency in response to political trauma. This thesis examines the intricacies of the process of the reproduction of political agency in response to political trauma.

I approached this research from a particular professional background: I am an educator. I joined the education profession with a perception that education is a medium in which to foster agency in students and I was particularly interested in fostering political agency. I educated with an objective to enable students to become engaged citizens who would work to improve conditions in their society. To that end I developed citizenship education programmes within formal and informal education settings in Cairo to promote social responsibility and community engagement among students; in other words, I worked to promote political agency. In those programmes I invited many activists to talk about their life, ideas, work, successes, and failures. I thought their lived examples would be catalysts for inspiring and nurturing political agency in students. These programmes continued up until the 2011 uprising, and

through them I got to know many activists from across the wider Egyptian political spectrum, most of them became highly engaged in the political upheavals that followed.

In this introductory chapter I elaborate further on my area of research by shedding light on some relevant literature. There are two key concepts that define the area of this research: political agency and political trauma. To examine these areas, I need to ground my investigation within a theoretical perspective that has both trauma and agency as central topics of its study, I also need this theoretical perspective to be politically grounded. So, in the rest of this chapter, I briefly review some literature on political trauma and other literature on political agency to further illuminate my area of research and to position my research within a particular psychosocial theoretical perspective.

## **Political Trauma**

Clinical Psychology is one of the leading fields in conceptualizing trauma.

Hamburger (2018, 2020a, 2020b) has noted the wider impact of publishing a clear definition of trauma together with a behavioural definition of the associated post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD) in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) of the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Many critical discussions around the wider implications of the concept beyond the clinical setting have expanded the use of the term into many fields in social science (Hamburger, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Hence, the concept of trauma continues to evolve both within and outside clinical psychology. The fourth edition of the DSM-IV defines trauma as a:

direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve

disorganized or agitated behaviour) (Criterion A2). (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p.463)

Rinker and Lawler (2018) note how this latest definition of trauma had already moved away from restricting trauma to direct personal experience, to include witnessing and even learning about the traumatic encounter of another individual. This move was in part a response to overwhelming research affirming the impact of trauma beyond direct personal encounters. Take for instance research documenting many cases of transmission of traumatic-stress disorder from grandparents to parents and children. Cases of such intergenerational transmission of trauma have been documented within, for example, Native Americans and Native Alaskans (Evans-Campbell, 2008), post-Holocaust survivors (Gottschalk, 2003), post-war citizens of El Salvador (Dickson-Gómez, 2002), Australian Aboriginals (Quinn, 2007), survivors of the Armenian Genocide (Danielian, 2010), Palestinians (Barron & Abdallah, 2015; Palosaari, Punamäki, Qouta, & Diab, 2013). This strongly indicates a social dimension to trauma which clinical psychology had been criticized as providing a limited understanding of (Venn, 2003). For instance, Donoso (2018), in her review of the therapeutic approaches offered to survivors of political traumas in Ecuador, noted that within clinical settings there was a powerful lack of awareness of the political dimensions of PTSD cases, often leading to what she called the 'psychologization of political issues'. Donoso's analysis of data from focus groups of survivors of political traumas showed how important the inclusion of the political dimension was in understanding trauma for successful rehabilitation. Similarly, Monteil's (2000) study on psychotherapies provided to survivors of political trauma in the Philippines also confirmed a missing political dimension in the understanding of trauma in clinical settings.

This research focuses particularly on the subject's struggle to maintain its political engagement within a traumatic context, which is different than clinical psychology's wider focus on mental disorders associated with traumatic encounters. The subject of my research is both politically formulated and politically traumatized; hence this lack of a political dimension in the conceptualization of trauma makes a clinical psychology perspective unhelpful as a guide for my research. However, outside clinical settings there are many helpful concepts of trauma, especially those drawn

from a psychoanalytical theoretical perspective. For instance, Donoso (2018) offers a definition of political trauma as “the psychosocial destruction of the individual and/or the social and political structures of a society. It impacts the subject but also affects whole communities” (p.420). Hamburger (2020a) includes political trauma within a wider definition of social trauma, defined as:

Social trauma is a clinical as well as a sociopsychological category: (1) as a clinical category it defines a group of posttraumatic disorders caused by organized societal violence or genocide where a social group is the target of planned persecution and therefore not only the individual but also its social environment is afflicted. Therefore, the concept of social trauma also describes (2) the shadowing of the original trauma on long-term social processes, be it on the family, group, or inter-group level. (p.3)

Parger (2011) draws from D.W. Winnicott's object relations psychoanalytical perspective to offer a more detailed understanding of social trauma. He argues that social trauma needs to be further categorized to capture the different impacts on different individuals. He introduces three types of social trauma: 1- traumas of lethality, which threatens the continuation of the person's particular concept of the self, i.e., the loving self, 2 - traumas of violence, which threatens the continuity of the physical integrity of the person, 3 - traumas of personal invisibility, which threatens the continuity of the person's recognition of a social space where she can perceive herself as a unique individual within the social group. These are useful definitions of trauma. However, in my area of research, Parger's three types of social-trauma seem to be interlinked and combined into one traumatic experience, hence my research requires a more detailed understanding of how these three types of traumas are interlinked. Moreover, my research is about a traumatic context that lasted for years; hence my research requires a more detailed understanding of the critical role time plays in trauma and the repetition of trauma.

Rinke and Lawler (2018) have examined trauma in protracted social conflicts. They combine both the clinical and the social understandings of trauma. They note how therapists distinguish between recurring traumatic experiences, which usually elicits PTSD symptoms in clients, and the original traumatic event(s). They define a traumatic experience as when the individual's experience in the here and now



resembles some aspects of past traumatic event(s). They further suggest that recovery (for most clinical psychologists) means that the individual becomes proficient in reality testing so as to distinguish between the present resemblance of a traumatic experience and the past actual traumatic event(s). This highlights a dimension of repetition for trauma, where an original traumatic event recurs in the psychological life in different forms over time. Rinke and Lawler combine this understanding with the studies of transgenerational transmission of trauma to explain how trauma, untreated, can fuel vicious cycles of violence over generations in the protracted conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. This raises an important question about the nature of trauma: if traumatic experiences are recurrences of an original traumatic event, then how far back in time might one have to go to identify the original trauma?

Two theoretical perspectives address the question of the origin of trauma within their conceptualization of trauma and the subject. The first perspective is the existential humanistic perspective pioneered by authors like Otto Rank (1999), Viktor Frankl (1992) and Rollo May (2009). They see trauma as part of the human condition, Otto Rank called it 'the trauma of birth'. Trauma from this perspective becomes an experience that every human has to go through and the way we deal with it reflects our psychological formation. The second theoretical perspective is Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan (1977, 1992, 1993, 2011) offers an ontology of the subject where the subject comes into being by dealing with the traumatic site of its inception. Lacan introduces the Real order of the subject as the space where the subject cannot render itself possible; that is, the Real of the subject is a traumatic context (Homer, 2005). The subject then becomes as it develops two other orders (the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders) overlapping the Real in a Borromean knot-like structure (Zizek, 1989). I elaborate further on these concepts below. In chapter two, I explore a debate between the existential-humanistic and the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspectives and how they differ in understanding the subject and its traumatic origins. I chose to locate this research within the Lacanian psychoanalytic ontology of the subject. The Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective has another key feature about the subject that is very useful for my research. The subject in this perspective is not-knowing, or as Lacan puts it: 'there is no such thing as a knowing subject' (Lacan, Seminar XX, (114/126) cited in Barnard and Fink, 2012, p.30).The

subject for Lacan comes into being by not knowing (parts) of what it already knew in its encounter with its Real, i.e., it comes into being by misrecognizing the traumatic site of its inception (Fink, 2013; Žižek, 1989). In other words, the Lacanian subject comes into being by exterminating knowledge it already had. I found this ontology of the subject to be quite generative for my area of study. It offers detailed analysis of how the subject may be formulated out of a traumatic site. In the next chapter, chapter two, I elaborate on this ontology and call it: ignorance as an ontology of the subject. I build on this ontology to develop a conceptualization of the process of reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts.

Now to progress with this introduction, let me shed some light on the second important concept of my research, political agency.

## **Political Agency**

The term agency is loaded with significations such as: human freedom, choice, rational action, moral actions, initiative, intentionality, etc. And when the adjective *political* is added to agency the term carries even more significations including activism, political engagement, community development, charity, change agents, collective action, etc. Hence, the breadth of literature studying political agency. In addition, the depth of the debates around the nature of human agency is as deep and as old as the discipline of philosophy itself. My focus in this research is on literature studying political agency in Egypt before and after 2011. My aim in this brief introduction is not to give an extensive literature review on political agency, but to shed light on some literature on political agency in order to broadly outline and distinguish the scope of my study within the vast and diverse approaches of studying political agency in Egypt.

Political activism, political engagement, and political agency in the Middle East are topics that were intensively researched after what became known as the Arab Spring in 2011 (Jose Sánchez García and Elena Sánchez-Montijano, 2019). Some researchers, like Khaled Shaalan (2014), study the political-economic conditions that shaped political agency in Egypt. Shaalan provides an extensive analysis of the

political agency of the Egyptian upper middle class from 2008 until 2013. He shows how, over the years, the political and economic policies of the state eroded the social contract between the Egyptian upper middle class and the Egyptian state, which in turn led to a shift in the political agency among the youth of this class. His analysis shows how political agency is produced as a result of the tension between class interests and the state interests.

Other researchers look at how political agency is developed within social movements. For example, Nadine Sika (2017) examines how youth movements in Egypt developed and how youth activism developed within the development of these movements. She examines the conditions of youth activism in Egypt before and after the 2011 uprising. She shows how the authoritarian regime before 2011 needed to provide some space for youth movements in order to contain and utilize the rising youth population in Egypt, and how the youth movements used the available space to evolve, hence a new kind of political agency developed among Egyptian youth. Her analysis shows how the interplay between the authoritarian regime and youth movements before 2011 shaped the political agency of youth in Egypt which led to the uprising in 2011. Sika shows how youth activism in Egypt developed out of these structural dynamics; she explains: "youth movements arise when the state prevents young people from living out their own youthfulness" (p.5). Ahmed Tohamy (2016) also analyses the development of youth activism in Egypt over the same period. He focuses his analysis on the youth activism among two particular groups of Egyptian youth: the Muslim-Brotherhood youth wing and the 6<sup>th</sup> of April youth movement. He combines empirical interviews with activists from these two groups with historical examples of other youth protest in Egypt since 1952 "in order to work out the rules that governed the emergence of youth activism in these five decades, and from this to develop an analytical framework to explain similar examples that have emerged and developed in the last decade" (p.44). Tohamy's study identifies common political-economic conditions that preceded the surge of political activism among Egyptian youth between 1952 and 2011.

Other studies look at the ideological/discursive conditions that shaped the production of political agency in Egypt during this period. For example, Jung, Peterson and Sparre (2014) investigated the formation of political subjectivities in Egypt for a few

years before the 2011 uprising. They showed how the leaders of different local organizations were shaping their political agency as a response to a global ideology/discourse, while grappling with local challenges. They showed that consecutive forms of modernity (started and modelled by Western Europe) constituted a global discourse/ ideology, which affected the formation of political agency within different Middle Eastern local cultures. Hence Agency for them is formulated by the interplay of two factors, (1) the local challenges, history and culture, and (2) the subjects' response to the global ideology of successive modernities. On the other hand, Brecht De Smet (2015) looks into the ideological conditions shaping political agency in Egypt more from a local perspective. He employs both Gramsci's political theory and Vygotsky's social pedagogy to develop a pedagogy of revolt that explains how political agency was formulated among the labouring classes in Egypt who were very active in the 2011 uprising. For De Smet, political agency was formulated through a pedagogy of revolt that evolved over years within local communities of Egyptian labour and which finally culminated in the political agency that was witnessed in Tahrir square. For him, it was the awareness, developed through practices of local communal pedagogy, that developed the labouring class conscious in Egypt that ultimately shaped the political agency of the labouring class in Egypt.

A common thread among these studies is that they study political agency by examining the conditions of production of agency, whether under economic, political, historical, or ideological conditions. The above studies are only few examples of a myriad of studies that focus on examining the different conditions of production of agency that led to the surge in political agency in Egypt which led to the 2011 uprising and the upheavals that followed; further examples include: Abdallah 2015, Haddad, Bsheer, & Abu-Rish 2012, Bayat 2013, Koraney & El Mahdi 2012, El Mahdi 2012, Herrera 2014, Murphy 2012, Schielke 2015, Sánchez García & Sánchez-Montijano 2019, Sika 2012. Another common thread among these studies is a tendency to take the subject's agentic capacity itself for granted (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In other words, many studies approach political agency with an implicit assumption that once specific conditions of production are made available for the subject, the subject's ability to produce and develop its political agency is taken for granted. A good example that shows this tendency to study political agency is Levinson et al. (2011) who defined agency as the "inherent creativity of the human

being given expression through subjectivities that both fashion and are fashioned by the structures they encounter” (p.116). This definition reveals the scope of study of agency embedded in such an approach; agency is fashioned by structure so there is a need to examine how structures affect agency, and agency also fashions structures so there is also a need to examine how acts of agency affects structures, and of course the link between acts of agency and structural conditions needs to be studied too. Yet according to Levinson’s definition the agentic capacity itself is inherent. Metaphorically, the subject’s agentic capacity within this approach is treated as a black box and the approach studies the relation between the different inputs and outputs this closed, black box. Such an approach to studying agency has been successfully utilized in many areas of research, however, it is not sufficiently useful in my particular area of research.

By assuming agentic capacity to be inherent, (taken for granted), such an approach does not offer a theoretical ground to examine incidents when the subject’s capacity to produce its agency is put into question. That is, when there are struggles that are internal to the black box that stop it from functioning; as might happen in politically traumatic contexts and as happened to Aya, Zainab and Sarah (above), where the subject’s ability to produce its agency faces existential threats, assuming agentic capacity provides no way of thinking. In this research I need to examine the subject’s agentic capacity when political trauma ensues. That is, I need to examine the different iterations of the subject’s struggle to produce its own agency, where it sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds to maintain its agency in response to trauma. Hence my area of research requires a different theoretical approach to study political agency – to open the ‘black box’.

## **This Thesis**

This research studies a particular area between political agency and political trauma. To do this, I study individuals (like Aya, Zainab, and Sarah) who have already developed their political agency. That is, they had already been engaged in political activities to improve the conditions of particular groups among Egyptians, whether it was street children like Aya, female political-prisoners like Zainab, or gay-community

rights like Sarah. I research the response of these individuals when the political system changed in a way that did not allow them to continue to be the subjects they had already come to be and that they were invested in. Hence, this research does not study the conditions for political agency to flourish in general terms, rather, it studies the struggle to maintain already existing political agency in a context that makes it increasingly impossible for the subject to maintain that political agency. Metaphorically, it is a study of the morning after a tyrant succeeds in taking over a country, when being a political agent for liberty and freedom becomes an existential threat. These moments of defiance, of ordinary subjects confronting a powerful tyranny, are rare but repetitive in human history; and like Aya, Zainab, and Sarah, these moments of defiance show inspiring heroism. But they also show extreme vulnerability, fragility, and extreme danger embedded in a complicated and intricate process of reproducing one's political agency in response to political trauma. Hence, this research studies the subject when it is put in a situation where it becomes impossible for subjectivity to continue as is; it studies the subject's response when it is demanded by big Other(s) to shift its agency and reproduce its subjectivity anew. This site of research resembles the Lacanian story of the inception of the subject.

Hence, I locate my research within the Lacanian psychosocial theoretical perspective. One reason for this, as I mentioned before, is the centrality of trauma to the Lacanian ontology of a not-knowing subject. Recalling from the trauma section above, in the Lacanian ontology of the subject, the subject comes into being in a site of impossibility and it only becomes by exterminating parts of its knowledge of its encounter with this impossibility. In this research I study the link between the inception of the Lacanian subject through producing ignorance (i.e., exterminating knowledge) and my research subjects who struggled to reproduce their agency in a site that made it impossible for them to continue with their subjectivity as it was. In other words, I will study the link between the subject's (re)production of ignorance and the subject's (re)production of agency in a traumatic context.

Another reason for choosing the Lacanian psychosocial perspective is the particularity of the topic of my research, where the political-social dynamics could not be separated from subjective psychological dynamics. Hence my topic does not fall neatly into ordinary academic disciplinary divisions. Frosh and Baraitser (2008)

describe the psychosocial studies perspective as: “a critical approach interested in articulating a place of ‘suture’ between elements whose contribution to the production of the human subject is normally theorized separately” (p.348). Hence, the psychosocial perspective offers a theoretical horizon that examines my topic of research without the constraints of disciplinary divisions between psychology and political sociology. Slavoj Žižek’s writing exemplifies a Lacanian psychosocial perspective that this research needs. Žižek offers a reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis from a Hegelian and Marxist perspective, hence with Žižek the political is strongly present within the formation of the subject. In the following chapters I will draw much from Žižek’s psychosocial literature.

In the next chapter, chapter two, I elaborate Žižek’s reading of the Lacanian subject and compare it to the existential ontology of the subject. Hence, I outline the ontology of the subject that informs this research, I call it: ignorance as an ontology of the subject. Chapter two also builds on this ontology a conceptualization of the process of the reproduction of political agency in a traumatic context. Then in chapter three I discuss the question of how the subject comes to not-know parts of what it already knew in its encounter with its traumatic context. In this discussion I develop, from the Lacanian psychosocial perspective, a methodology for this research, I call it an ‘ignorance analysis.’ Following these two theoretical chapters on ignorance as ontology and ignorance analysis, in chapter four I outline the research-method I used to produce empirical data. The research-method also drew heavily from the Lacanian psychosocial perspective. Then, in chapters five to eight, I present detailed analysis of three empirical cases of political activists in Egypt. Finally, I draw the research together in chapter nine to outline my main conclusions and key implications of this research.

### **Finally: a word of caution**

In this research I discuss significations associated to the notion of ‘God’ and given the socio-political context that my participants and myself live in, I feel a clarification of my use of this notion is necessary. In this research, I use a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to analyse how different psychodynamics associate

different significations at different times to notions of big Others like: 'God', 'Nation', 'People', etc. That is, I will be giving accounts of flows of significations associated to the signifier of 'God' that facilitate the production of ignorance and agency in the context of trauma. This should not be misunderstood as a value judgment about the attributes of God, nor as an assertion about the role God play in the psychological life of individuals. This is psychosocial research, it examines particular psychosocial dynamics associated with signifiers (like 'God') and how they may be used for particular psychosocial objectives; this research does not foreclose the many other possible psychosocial dynamics in relation to God. As such, this research does not examine the existence, or the attributes of any meta-physical realities associated with the signifier 'God'.

More importantly when I analyse the speech of my participants and I identify, for example, a signification of lack being associated with the signifier 'God', this should not be misunderstood as a judgement about my participant's belief in God. The accounts I will give, are accounts of a single frame in a moving and evolving bigger picture; the psychodynamics are dynamics, in the sense that they keep moving and shifting playing different roles at different times and in different contexts. Hence, this research does not offer any tool to examine my participants' beliefs in the existence, or the attributes of 'God'.

With this in mind, let us start this research by using Zizek's Lacanian psychosocial perspective to conceptualize the topic of this investigation, namely: to conceptualize the reproduction of political agency in a traumatic context. I initiate this ontological discussion by examining the reproduction of agency of a famous survivor of the worst political trauma in modern history. In the next chapter I use the Lacanian psychosocial perspective to examine Viktor Frankl's (1992) account of his own experience in the Auschwitz concentration camp. I will question how Frankl came out of Auschwitz with such strong sense of agency and keen to change the field of psychotherapy. I use Frankl's case to highlight ignorance as an ontology of the subject and build on it a conceptualization of the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts.



## Chapter Two

### Ignorance as an ontology of the subject

#### Introduction

This chapter and the next one present the theoretical perspective in which I position my research. My research is about investigating the reproduction of political agency in response to political trauma. The two theoretical constructs of my research are highly contested concepts. The conceptualization of political agency and political trauma are contextualized by key ontological debates about subjectivity, as well as key debates about social research methodologies. While these debates cannot be resolved as such, it is important for me to be clear in mapping my own position within the theoretical space that frames the subject of my research. This chapter outlines the ontological debate that formulated my choice regarding the conceptualisation of the subject of this research; hence this chapter offers a conceptualization of the reproduction of political agency in response to political trauma. Similarly, my aim for the next chapter is to outline the methodological debate that formulated my choice of methodology to investigate the concept of reproduction of political agency that will be outlined in this chapter.

The theoretical discussions in these two chapters reflect the intellectual journey that I have gone through in the course of this research. I entered this research with a theoretical orientation that was formulated by my MA studies in counselling and psychotherapy and my activism in Egypt which was mostly grounded in a socialist perspective. At the beginning of this research, I held a theoretical orientation that was highly influenced by object-relation psychoanalysis and by a version of existential psychotherapy pioneered by Emmy van Deurzen, whose classes I attended in the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling which she founded in London. On the political side of this research, I started with a theoretical orientation that was highly influenced by Foucault and by the Marxist literature popular among the seminars and discussion circles of the Egyptian revolutionary socialists. On the

Education side, I was influenced by the Project Zero of Harvard University, where I had attended their summer school in Boston, USA, before I started my PhD. Project Zero offered, among many other goals, an understanding of thinking dispositions as a way to foster students' thinking (Perkins et al., 2000, Ritchhart & Perkins, 2005). The project investigates thinking dispositions beyond the training of critical thinking skills. It examines how particular thinking skills are being deployed on particular occasions and suggests ways of fostering thinking dispositions by enhancing the students' sensitivity to occasions where the appropriate thinking skills are being deployed at the right occasions. These different domains of theory (the psychological, the political, and the educational) lived somehow separately in my head until I was introduced to the psychosocial literature in Claudia's Lapping psychosocial classes at the Institute of Education. I initially appreciated the space of theoretical suture that the psychosocial perspective offered especially between the political and the psychological dimensions of my research. Hence, I decided to approach my research from a psychosocial perspective.

However, as I immersed myself into the psychosocial literature, I became more influenced by the Lacanian perspective of the subject. My approach started to lean more and more towards the Lacanian psychosocial theoretical perspective. In addition to reading key literature of this perspective, I attended classes at the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck led by Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraister. I also attended workshops led by Yannis Stavrakakis at the Theory LAB of Queen Mary University of London, and I attended the Institute of Education psychosocial methodology classes and reading groups led by Claudia Lapping, as well as listening to most of the online lectures delivered by Slavoj Žižek, and other key figures from this approach. However, this newly gained Lacanian perspective was both a source of theoretical enrichment and a source of confusion in carrying out this investigation.

Early in my research, I realized that the diverse theoretical perspectives I carried from my MA studies, my activist and educational orientations, and my new Lacanian psychosocial perspective have two competing ontological assumptions about the subject of my research. One ontological perspective guides me to approach the subject of my research as a subject that needs to discover more about its traumatic

context in order to successfully deal with trauma, and the other ontological perspective guides me to approach the subject of my research as a subject that needs to not-know, i.e., to misrecognize particular aspects of its traumatic context in order to successfully deal with trauma. In other words, one ontology brings the subject closer to its traumatic context to examine it and understand it more, while the other ontology brings the subject further away from its traumatic context in order to misrecognize it. These contested ontological assumptions created theoretical and ethical confusion in the early stage of this research, which pushed me to make key theoretical choices in order to carry out this investigation with theoretical and ethical coherence. I found the ontological direction that directs me to bring the subject closer to its traumatic context both ethically and theoretically troubling. In this chapter I will elaborate the rationale behind the ontological choice I made, and I will present this choice and its rationale in a form of debate between the two ontological perspectives that were both influential on my thinking at the initial stage of this investigation.

Moreover, in the middle stage of this investigation I faced another key theoretical junction. After I settled my own position within the ontological debate in favour of a Lacanian ontology, as will be outlined in this chapter, I started to analyse the data collected from interviews. There I faced another key theoretical junction between the different Lacanian analytical frames that can be used to interpret data. And again, I needed to go back to the Lacanian literature, as read by Žižek, in order to make a key methodological choice. In the next chapter, I will present this methodological junction and outline the rationale of my choice. And, as in this chapter, I will present the rationale of my choice in a form of debate between the two Lacanian analytical approaches that were competing in my thinking as I started to analyse the data collected in this research. The discussion of the ontological debate presented in this chapter, and the discussion of the methodological debate of the next chapter together present the theoretical perspective of this research; both chapters also show how the theoretical perspective that informs this research was developed through a frequent return to Lacan to resolve key theoretical and methodological challenges that I faced in the course of carrying out this research. So as these two chapters present the theoretical perspective that guided this research, they also reflect my particular intellectual journey that made this research so firmly grounded in a Lacanian subject ontology.

Let me start the ontological debate by posing the following initial set of questions that I faced as I initially approached the main question of my research:

- When the subject encounters political trauma does it need to seek knowledge, find new meanings, and develop new understandings to be able to reproduce its political agency?
- Or does the subject need to kill knowledge and produce ignorance, that is, to repress / disavow / foreclose part of its traumatic experience, to be able to reproduce its own political agency?
- Hence does the failure of reproduction of political agency have to do with the subject's lack of knowledge (i.e., learning/discovering/knowing) or lack of ignorance (i.e., repression/ disavowal / foreclosure dynamics)?
- Or is it about finding a critical balance of both? Then what kind of balance between ignorance and knowledge does the specific political trauma of Egypt require for the reproduction of political agency?

One influential theoretical perspective that addresses the above ontological questions is that of Viktor Frankl. I was influenced by Frankl's perspective at the beginning of this research. Frankl is not only a psychiatrist who offers an influential ontological perspective on the subject and the reproduction of agency in traumatic context, he himself is a survivor of the worst political traumas in modern history. Victor Frankl survived the Nazi's concentration camps and came out of it with a strong scientific agency to improve the field of psychotherapy. He used his traumatic experience to develop a new therapy; he called it 'logotherapy'. His influential book 'Man's Search for Meaning' (Frankl, 1992) offers a compelling memoir about his own turmoil in reproducing his own agency within the Nazi's concentration camps where he encountered the threat of death every day. On the second part of his book, he developed the logotherapy, a psychotherapy technique that is informed by his own experience in surviving the camp while drawing heavily from existential philosophy. In his presentation of 'Logotherapy' he exemplifies one side of the debate on the above ontological questions.

Frankl expresses his ontological proposition clearly: for the subject to reproduce its agency in response to a political trauma it needs to find new meaning for its traumatic situation. And the signifier 'find' here is critical. 'Meaning' – for Frankl – is something the subject seeks and finds. It is not a projection of the psyche inner dynamics and struggles (Frankl, 1962). Meaning is something that transcends the subject's own dynamic, it is related to a greater good that the subject associates itself to. Frankl (1962) describes the therapist as more like an eye doctor and far from being a preacher or a teacher. For him, the therapist does not give meaning to clients, the therapist rather empowers clients to be able to see the fullness of their experience, so they can *find* the meaning that transcends their traumatic situation.

Regardless of the methods and techniques Frankl developed in 'logotherapy', he presents an ontology of the subject's agency in relation to trauma that is quite influential, way beyond logotherapy. Many psychoanalysts subscribe to the same ontology although they use psychoanalytical techniques and terminologies. My research is informed by a different ontology of the subject, hence a different understanding of what the reproduction of political agency means. I position my research within the Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective; for Lacan "There is no such thing as a knowing subject" (Lacan, Seminar XX, (114/126), in Barnard and Fink (2012) P.30). In contrast to Frankl's ontology Lacan organizes the subject around the subject's production of ignorance. In this chapter I will elaborate Ignorance as an ontology of the subject and how it influences my understanding and investigation of the reproduction of political agency in relation to political trauma.

My interest in this debate is not in the philosophical roots of the debate or the therapeutic implications of it, instead I am interested in how such ontological difference affects the understanding of what reproduction of political agency is and is not. And how such difference affects the methodological choices I have to make to investigate the reproduction of political agency.

Hence to keep the ontological discussion focused on the analysis of the reproduction of agency, I will elaborate the ontological debate by contrasting Zizek's analysis of the subject to Van Deurzen's analysis of the subject. Zizek represents the Lacanian

ontology applied to the analysis of subjectivity. He is a prominent contemporary Lacanian / Marxist / Hegelian theorist. While Van Deurzen is a prominent and contemporary existential psychotherapists and theorist. Her work represents the existential ontology as it is applied on the analysis of the subject. Her work – in a way— represents a contemporary application of Frankl's ontology.

The ontological debate of this chapter and the methodological debate of the next chapter will define the theoretical perspective of my research; I will call this theoretical perspective: 'ignorance perspective'. The need to name and outline such theoretical perspective is not due to the novelty of its content ideas, but rather due to the highly contested and slippery grounds in which it stands. As I will elaborate in both chapters, the set of theoretical choices I had to make are multi-layered; I made choices of theoretical junctions within theoretical junctions; the naming is also important because some of the theoretical choices I needed to make have already been conflated or subverted by more dominant close by theoretical positions (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). Hence the naming is to flag the theoretical ground of my research and to also protect my ground from being taken over by theoretical hegemony of dominant academic perspectives.

Let me start this discussion by recalling the ontology of the subject as a contested ground within the field of psychoanalysis and offer a reading of the psychoanalytical subject as a subject of ignorance.

### **The Psychoanalytical subject**

Freud initiated a paradigm shift in understanding of who we are. His scientific revolution had shifted the ontological ground of which we think of, perceive and research the human subject. Out of such radical ontology emanated innovative frames of analysis, methods and techniques, which were revolutionary for their times but also controversial. Fink (in Fink and Barnard, 2012) perceptively noted how the Freudian ontological revolution can be easily altered and conflated by the Freudian psychoanalysis methods and techniques. Fink says:

The radicality of Freud's initial move has been lost or covered over and it is difficult to keep such fantasies from sneaking in the back door. Lacan suggests that the importance of the unknowing subject is found virtually every step of the way in Freud's work. . . . Oedipus was thus a perfect model for the unknowing subject, for a subject who acts without knowing why, in any conscious sense of the word 'knowing'. From the vintage point of psychoanalysis, "There is no such thing as a knowing subject" (Lacan, Seminar XX, (114/126)) (Barnard and Fink (2012) P.30)

The Lacanian return to Freud can be described as rescuing the Freud's ontology of the subject from a regression to the pre-Freudian ontology within psychoanalysis itself. Lacan brilliantly capture the Freudian subject in one sentence: 'there is no such thing as a knowing subject'. That sentence summarizes a highly contested ontological ground. Let me take an initial attempt to unpack the Lacanian return to the revolutionary Freudian subject ontology.

The Freudian subject has a unique quality; when it encounters a traumatic experience that threatens its existence, significance, or agency it exterminates its own knowledge of that encounter – with different degrees of knowledge extermination relevant to the severity of the encounter. That is, when the subject is confronted with its own impossibility it kills its knowledge of the critical encounter that renders it impossible. Psychoanalysis calls this encounter with the impossibility of being a subject *trauma* (Zizek, 1989, 1999). Hence, the subject of Freud's unconscious is developed by its own ignorance of its own trauma, where critical encounters are taken out of conscious – out of knowledge – and replaced with a symptom (Zizek, 1992, 1998, 2002a; Evans, 2006; Fink, 1999).

Now at this point there is a theoretical junction: one can either reduce unconscious dynamics to the level of methods and techniques or to elevate it to the level of ontology. On one side of this junction there are psychoanalysts like Leiper and Maltby (2004), whose textbook is used in the training of psychoanalysts at the University of Edinburgh; they say:

The process of understanding or interpreting the meaning latent in the material that emerges in therapy is central to 'analytic' work. Freud saw this

as part of the broad task of 'making the unconscious conscious'. The therapeutic aim is to increase the range of conscious awareness, particularly with regard to our mind. This has come to be referred to as the development of 'insight'. Encompassed in this term is the idea of becoming more aware of our own hidden motives and impulses, and more generally perhaps, of the dynamic process that underpin all aspects of our behaviour.

(Leiper and Maltby, 2004, p.52-3)

The above quote is an example of a reading of psychoanalysis that reduces unconscious dynamics to a tool to find deeper/hidden meaning to address the (pre-supposed) client's need for meaning. It shows an embedded subject ontology that shapes the utilization of psychoanalysis. An ontology that is highly influenced by Frankl's existential ontology of the subject, albeit using psychoanalytic concepts and techniques. Leiper and Maltby are an example of how some psychoanalysts use psychoanalytic techniques while subscribing to a different subject's ontology; one in which the unconscious dynamic is a subject's capacity not a subject's ontology. That is, they look at the unconscious as a defence mechanism which is available for the subject to defend itself in challenging/traumatic situations. The unconscious becomes a by-product of a defence mechanism that the subject has to overcome after it bypasses its traumatic encounter. Hence the crucial therapeutic factor (i.e., the reproduction of agency) for this perspective is for the subject to clarify its hidden unconscious desires and motives so it can return to being the normally knowing – consciously controlling– subject.

On the other side of this junction, there is Lacan saying: 'there is no such thing as a knowing subject'. On Lacan's side the unconscious for the Freudian subject is not something the subject can create to defend itself, or something the subject has to undo to return to 'normality'. For Lacan, the unconscious is that which makes the subject; in other words, ignorance is an ontology of the subject not a mechanism deployed by the subject, hence: 'there is no such thing a knowing subject'. Similarly, trauma, as the encounter of the impossibility of being a subject, is not an unfortunate incident, it is the ground upon which we are all instantiated as subjects.



To further illustrate the difference, let me compare Frankl's analysis of the reproduction of agency, which is based on an existential ontology, to that of a Lacanian analysis which is based on the Freudian ontology of ignorance.

Frankl's corporeal survival of the concentration camp was due to a pure chance. The severity of the Nazi's concentration camps made one point clear: that nothing he did or thought of effected the traumatic reality he was put in; his survival of this traumatic reality was due to factors that he had no control or influence over. The memoir part of his book (*ibid*) shows that Frankl was aware of the futility of his situation. However, we cannot say the same about the survival of his agency. The brilliance of Frankl story lies, not in his corporeal survival, but in how he managed to rescue his agency from such a traumatic experience. Hence there are two intertwined survival trajectories in Frankl's story: one trajectory is the survival of Frankl the corporeal and the second is the survival of Frankl the subject, i.e., his reproduction of his agency in the traumatic context.

Frankl shifted the futile corporeal traumatic situation to an imaginary/ fantasy world. He crafted imaginary (and lovely) dialogues with his wife. In his imaginary world his life mattered – to his wife; he felt he needed to survive for her. Ironically, at that point of his imprisonment he had no knowledge of his wife's survival, yet he kept holding himself responsible to his own survival for her own sake. He also used his role as a physician to offer what help he could to the helpless camp victims and to extend his imaginary significance. For those helpless people, his was the only care they could get. He then imagined a book that he would write in the future, after the camp, and he got busy recording observations about human behaviour in the camp. The whole camp experience then changed signification to Frankl, it became a unique laboratory (for Frankl the social scientist), and he imagined how this terrible experience gave him access to knowledge about the human psyche that had never been accessed before. If he survived the camp, he would have knowledge about the human psyche that topped even Freud's. This imaginary was echoed in the last pages of his book when he compared his experience with Freud's:

Sigmund Freud once asserted, "Let one attempt to expose a number of the most diverse people uniformly to hunger. With the increase of the imperative

urge of hunger all individual differences will blur, and in their stead will appear the uniform expression of the one unstilled urge." Thank heaven, Sigmund Freud was spared knowing the concentration camps from the inside. His subjects lay on a couch designed in the plush style of Victorian culture, not in the filth of Auschwitz. *There*, the "individual differences" did *not* "blur" but, on the contrary, people became more different; people unmasked themselves, both the swine and the saints. (Frankl, 1992, p.153 -154).

Being in Auschwitz was signified with access of knowledge and with authority that superseded that of Freud himself. Albeit written years after the camp, his memoirs show that such resignification started in the camp. Frankl also reported that later in the camp he found himself numbed to some encounters which originally triggered a terrifying affect within him, like scenes in which dead human bodies were treated like rubbish. Later in the camp he was able to detach the traumatic affect that was originally associated with such encounters. That is, after a lot of brilliant mental work, Frankl was able to not feel the original signification associated to his traumatic corporeal situation; that is, at some point in the camp Frankl was able not to feel the affect associated with the impossibility of being a subject anymore.

Frankl's interpretation of his own experience is that: he survived the camps because he was able to find meaning – Frankl generalized his interpretation: if he was able to find meaning that transcended the traumatic situation of Auschwitz, surely any less traumatic experience could be overcome by finding meaning that transcends it. Frankl saw meaning as something bigger than himself; meaning was out there, it had to be found and embraced.

Let me re-interpret Frankl's experience differently and with a Lacanian twist. Frankl survived because he immersed in an imaginary fantasy-world of his own making, i.e., ignorance. He survived because he was able to exterminate his own knowledge of the traumatic kernel of his Real experience, that is, to exterminate his knowledge of the kernel of his Real that rendered him impossible as a subject in Auschwitz. Frankl explained on several occasions in his memoir his different thoughts about who the Nazi's kept out of the gas chambers. The conclusions he reached were out of

character for a critical minded person like Frankl. The Nazi's plan was clear: to kill all the Jews in the camps regardless, their rhetoric was confirmed by their actions which Frankl was aware of. Yet he clung to fantasies that he might be spared; these fantasies of possible escape served as points of misrecognition that conflated his corporeal survival with the survival of his agency. This misrecognition gave him space in which to rescue his agency. He used this conflated space to develop other fantasies that enabled him to shift the signification of the Auschwitz camp, i.e., to shift the signification of the traumatic context in which he was living.

The two trajectories in Frankl's survival account were in fact separate. The corporeal Frankl survived the camp via incidents that he had no control over, he was among the lucky few, his thoughts and actions had nothing to do with his corporeal survival. Everyone in the camps would eventually have been killed had the Nazis continued their project. His corporeal survival had to do with the events of a world war which Frankl had no influence over. Frankl was smart enough to realize this. However, Frankl the subject needed not to know the full extent of his Real. Saving Frankl - the subject – did not happen by chance, this had a totally different trajectory. Frankl's agency was saved through his amazing work of ignorance, of mis-recognizing the fact that none of his thoughts or actions had any agency over his corporeal survival. His extermination of knowledge of the futility of his corporeal situation was what gave him space to keep engaging in the reproduction of his subjectivity and agency. So, on the off chance that he got lucky and survived the camp, he would also survive with his agency intact. Frankl's agency reproduction was based on a subtle conflation of the two trajectories: saving Frankl the subject was subtly misrecognized as saving the corporeal Frankl.

Frankl survived the camp and died many years later. The traumatic effects of Auschwitz did not end with the end of the camp. For the rest of his life Frankl had to manage the re-emergence of past traumatic affects. For the rest of his life, he has to maintain his ignorance to keep reproducing his agency for his life post Auschwitz. Hence the subtle intensity noticed in the quote about Freud's easy life which he wrote years after Auschwitz. The traumatic kernel he had (re)encountered in the camp had to be kept at bay for life. So at least for Frankl, as a post- Auschwitz

subject, we can begin to understand Lacan's statement: 'there is no such thing as a knowing subject'.

Now let me use Frankl's experience to symbolically illustrate Lacan's not-knowing subject. For Lacan, the subject's encounter with the impossibility of its existence, i.e., trauma, is not an odd/unlucky experience. It is something every subject has encountered in its pre-symbolic world. For Lacan, the subject is ontologically Lacking; that is, the subject's pre-symbolic encounter with the Real reveals the impossibility of the subject (Fink, 1997, 2004; Evans, 2006; Homer, 2005; Zizek, 2002b). Hence the subject is initiated only when it is able to exterminate its knowledge of its encounter with a traumatic kernel of its own Real. So, the pre-symbolic encounter is like Frankl in Auschwitz, the subject only becomes a subject when it does not know, that is, when it has symbolic and imaginary worlds that are conflated with its Real. And within this conflation, this knotting of the three dimensions, some critical knowledge is forever lost. For Lacan it is only via such deep ignorance the subject is instantiated.

Hence for Lacan all human subjects are (in a way) like Frankl – 'there is no such thing as a knowing subject'. Because all of us (in the Real order) have encountered trauma, as the encounter of the impossibility of our being as a subject with agency and significance, and we all had to put it out of sight, out of knowledge, to rescue our subjects in case we got lucky and survived our Real. However, Frankl is not like all of us. Frankl is among the few whom (post their symbolic initiation into a subject) had to re-encounter the traumatic kernel within his post-symbolic subject world. The symbolic world is supposed to alter the subject's pre-symbolic encounter with its Real traumatic kernel for good. Frankl was retraumatized because of the reappearance of the traumatic kernel within the symbolic world itself. Hence a traumatic event can be understood as the intrusive reappearance of a traumatic kernel of the Real in the Symbolic world. Frankl's encounter with the traumatic kernel was not like any other encounter. Auschwitz forced an intense, persistent, and prolonged encounter with several traumatic kernels. This is why Frankl's experience was remarkable; it highlighted the human's capacity to produce sophisticated types of ignorance to rescue agency in an extremely traumatic context—where the crafting of misrecognitions became a work of art, pure human brilliance.

The above discussion highlights two types of intertwined traumas: One is ontological, i.e., the trauma of the subject's Lacanian Real (pre-symbolic), and the second is the post-symbolic trauma, i.e., the re-appearance of a traumatic kernel within the Symbolic order itself. The two types are intertwined, and later in this chapter I will discuss more of the ontological trauma. However, at this point in the discussion, it is important to note that political trauma is a symbolic trauma that is intertwined with an ontological trauma. As in the case of Frankl: he was an Austrian Jew, and that particular symbolic identification was not allowed to exist in the Nazi's Germany. Frankl as a Symbolic subject was not allowed to exist, and that was what constituted his political trauma. Political trauma therefore may be understood as the re-appearance of the impossibility of being a subject within the Symbolic of the subject: that is, it is the re-appearance of a traumatic kernel from the Real of the subject into the symbolic of the subject, as in the impossibility of being a Jew (a symbolic identification) in Nazi Austria (another symbolic identification). Hence political trauma is intertwined with the ontological trauma of the subject while remaining different from it.

The Lacanian subject is ontologically traumatized and ignorant, hence there is an ontological ground for the subject to draw from when it comes to dealing with political (or symbolic) trauma. In this section I discussed ignorance as a common thread between the two types of traumas. That is, as ignorance brings the subject out of its ontological trauma, ignorance too (as in Frankl's case) can be reproduced and extended to enable the subject to overcome a political trauma. The above discussion of Frankl's case from a Lacanian perspective indicates that the reproduction of the subject's agency in a traumatic context depends (among other factors) on the subject's ability to reproduce and extend its own ignorance.

I need to develop this discussion further to conceptualize the core constructs of my research, namely: the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts. I therefore move the discussion on to contrast two theoretical perspectives that exam how the subject reproduce its agency as it encounters trauma. One of the two perspectives is informed by Frankl's ontology of the subject and the other is informed by Lacan's ontology of the subject. In the following section, I will contrast

the analysis of the subject reproduction of agency in Emmy Van Duerzen's literature (as a contemporary Frankl) in contrast with the analysis of subjectivity in Slavoj Žižek's literature (as a contemporary Lacanian).

### **Ignorance as a subject ontology**

In seminar XX Lacan (2011) presented the sexuation formula to discuss two modes of subjectivity within the ontology of the subject in psychoanalysis, namely: the Feminine mode and the Masculine mode. In the Masculine mode the subject identifies with a universal law – a regime that governs All – while simultaneously acknowledges exceptions from that All-encompassing agency– Lacan calls it the non-All — The masculine mode considers the non-All as an exception (that may need to be corrected/cured or re-ordered within the order of the All). Frankl's analysis is an example of the Masculine mode of subjectivity. Lacan calls the analysis produced from such a mode of subjectivity, 'phallic analysis.' On the other hand, Lacan presents the Feminine mode of subjectivity in which the subject identifies with the non-All as the rule not the exception, i.e., the subject identifies with lack as constitutive of itself rather than an exception to be overcome/corrected/cured. The feminine mode of the subject is often subverted for the sake of the Masculine mode. Lacan however frequently brings up the feminine mode to highlight the subverted side of the subject and to bring the Freudian subject ontology to the centre of analysis.

The rest of this chapter will elaborate these two categories and the sexuation formula to further develop ignorance as an ontology of the Lacanian subject. I will then use this ontological ground to conceptualize the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts. I will organize the rest of the discussion in this chapter into four parts. In the first part, I elaborate on the Masculine mode of subjectivity and the

phallic analysis it yields as I examine van Deurzen's analysis of reproduction of agency in traumatic contexts. The second section elaborates the Feminine mode as I discuss Zizek's definition of the Lacanian subject. I divide the second section into two subsections to address the two types of Lacanian causes associated with the feminine subjectivity. In the third section, I link the Lacanian sexualization formula to the Lacanian neurotic psyche structure. I discuss both the obsessive mode of the neurotic subject and the hysteric mode of the neurotic subject. I close the chapter with section four, where I bring all the ontological elements of this chapter together to offer a conceptualization of the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

### ***1- The Masculine subjectivity***

Existential psychotherapy is a good example of a phallic analysis that asserts the masculine mode of subjectivity while subverting the feminine mode of subjectivity. In this section I use Van Deurzen's (2005, 2008, 2012, 2016) therapeutic technique for overcoming trauma to illustrate the masculine subject ontology. In her book 'Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness', she says:

In the final analysis, overcoming trauma and crisis is about transformation, transmutation, and transcendence. We need to go beyond our troubles and turn them into something worthwhile, becoming a better person in some way. In other words: we have to find a way to put our suffering to good use (2008, p.125).

Van Deurzen describes overcoming trauma successfully as that which transforms, transmutes, and transcends trauma in a way that makes the person better. Now let us examine: what does becoming a better person entail for this type of therapy? and how does the existential psychotherapy envision the way for the person to become better going through trauma? Van Deurzen describes her therapy as:

And this is what therapy is all about: taking time to take stock of our lives, not in order to accomplish and achieve even more, but in order to relearn to see things and reflect on who we have become and how we want to be. It is about getting out of our hiding places and daring to lift the veil that keeps out the

light. .... It returns governance to a person and enhances their authority to know what they are capable of so that they dare experiment once more and savour the variety and spice of life without too much fear and too much random desire. It is about learning to lead one's own expedition or captain one's own ship once more. (2008, p.163)

Existential psychotherapy characterizes the human condition with a set of existential challenges that apply to all humans in all cultures and in all circumstances; for example, existential psychotherapy claims to identify challenges related to being a human irrespective of culture (May, 1969, 1994). Such a therapeutic approach draws from a particular set of philosophical (existentialist) conclusions which suppose certain unchangeable facts about all human communities in all circumstances and throughout all time (Yalom, 1980; Becker, 1997, 2010). Hence, existential psychotherapy implies a critical claim to truth. This therapy claims that it guides its clients to deal with the reality of their particular situation by dealing with the truth about the human condition in general (Van Deurzen, 2009), hence Van Deurzen expression: 'To lift the veil that keeps out the light'. For her, the therapy offers its clients a new understanding and a re-contextualization of their particular challenges from an existential philosophical perspective. Through such re-contextualization, clients are introduced to key existential philosophical principles. Furthermore, clients are instructed to look back at their lives and take a stock to find the existential 'truth' about the human condition within their own biography (Van Deurzen, 2012, 2016). From a logical perspective this way of thinking is like fishing for evidence of a pre-existing, fixed conclusion. That is, this therapy first introduces clients to an existential perspective on the human condition, then asks clients to survey their own life to find evidence from their own biography that supports the existential view of the human condition. By going through and talking about several incidents from the client's life and using them as examples to establish a new way of thinking, following the existentialist philosophy, clients are trained to use their newly established perspective to find meaning for the particular traumatic situation they are facing – in a way that is very similar to Frankl experience in the Nazi camps. Hence, despite their claims, existential psychotherapy does not look for the truth of the human condition, nor does it not generate random meaning (Shannon, 2019). Existential psychotherapy fixes a specific perspective of the human condition and generates



specific types of meanings. Van Deurzen (2008, above) stated the kind of meaning or truth that existential therapy yields: 'it returns governance to a person and enhances their authority to know what they are capable of so that they dare experiment once more and savour the variety and spice of life without too much fear and too much random desire.' (p.163). The envisioned result of this therapeutic journey is control, governance, and re-confirmation of the significance of the client's life over trauma. The truth is fixed before the journey has begun so calling it a journey of discovery is not accurate; it is more like a journey to develop a belief in in a philosophical creed that this therapy thinks will help humans overcome any type of trauma.

There is an underlying masculine subject ontology assumed in this approach of overcoming trauma. This therapy assumes that the aim of the subject facing trauma must be to regain control and governance over its traumatic situation. In other words, the subject's assumed aim is to overcome its lack and become complete, or in a sexuation formula terms: to return to the All, or as Van Deurzen puts it to "captain one's own ship once more' (ibid). This exemplifies the masculine subjectivity. In the masculine mode of subjectivity, the default objective for the subject when it encounters trauma is to regain control; hence the Lack, which is revealed by the trauma, is perceived as an exception that challenges the subject's presumed mastery over its own-life, hence recovery is then to regain control over its ship once more.

Here is another quote of van Deurzen that captures the underlying masculine subjectivity in her therapeutic approach:

Without suffering our lives would have less meaning. To be human is to be conscious and aware of lack, trouble and strife. Paradoxes, conflicts, dilemmas, contradictions, alternatives, dialectics, and experiments in living are all the very stuff of the human condition and they are ultimately the only stuff that we thrive on. . . . . So What? That is what being alive is about. We are not here to rest in peace and suppress all of our experiences and feelings. . . . . we can make sense of it all and come to some kind of integration and

understanding as we begin to achieve mastery over our lives. (2008, pp.151 - 152)

The above quote shows another key point about masculine subjectivity: the perception of lack as external. Lack is signified in the above quote as moments when the subject is not in control and has no governance nor mastery over its own being (or in the Lacanian sexuation formula terms: the subject's non-All moments). These moments of lack are perceived as external to the subject, as conditions of the life the subject is thrown into (not the subject itself). Hence the subject's goal is to transcend these external conditions to reach its full potential by its mastery over life. The moments of lack are "the only stuff we thrive on" so trauma, for Van Deurzen, is a challenge for the subject's mastery. It is therefore the subject's responsibility, on encountering trauma, to succeed with this challenge and confirm that it has control and mastery 'over its own ship'. Trauma, from this perspective, is there to enrich the subject, to make it stronger and ultimately enable it to gain deeper mastery. In Lacanian sexuation terms, the non-All is made an exception (external) to the masculine subject, so that the masculine subject remains essentially identified with the All. Similarly, in existential psychotherapy, lack (the non-All) is positioned as an external condition of the subject, which needs to be overcome.

If I choose to position my research in this masculine ontology of the subject, the reproduction of political agency could be conceptualized as a struggle to regain mastery over the traumatic situation. But according to Lacan's sexuation formula this is a distorted subject ontology; it is a masculine subjectivity that reveals part of the story while subverting important parts of the subject.

Next, I will move to discuss the feminine subjectivity while continuing my engagement with Van Deurzen's phallic analysis to show how the masculine subjectivity strengthens its claims by subverting the feminine mode of subjectivity.

## ***2- The Feminine Subjectivity***

Zizek (1994a) offers a brilliant definition of the subject that is embedded in Lacan's literature, he says:

"Thus we arrive at the most concise definition of the subject: the subject is an effect that entirely posits its own cause." (p.37). This definition captures the Lacanian return to the Freudian revolutionary subject-ontology in the most concise way. In this section I will use this definition to elaborate the Feminine subjectivity and show how it is being subverted within the masculine subjectivity. I will divide this section into two subsections, each will discuss a different cause posited by the subject.

### *2.1 Lack as a subject's cause*

To bring out the subverted feminine subjectivity in van Deurzen's phallic analysis let me pose the following question to the masculine ontology presented by existential psychotherapy: where does the subject's need for meaning come from?

Existentialists' answers would vary, but there is a common theme to their answers, that is: this is how we found humans to be – i.e., it is part of the human condition (May, 1994). That is, the subject's need for meaning is elevated to the level of destiny/ a matter of fact/ a human condition (Van Duerzen, 2009; Yalom, 1980). The subject is spared from any responsibility for creating its need for meaning, i.e., its own lack. The Masculine existentialist insists on externalizing the lack, for them the universe is essentially meaningless (lacks meaning), and it is the subject's responsibility to find meaning. To put this in terms of Zizek's definition of the subject, for Van Deurzen the subject's striving for meaning is an effect of an external cause, i.e., the meaninglessness of the universe. The subject has nothing to do with the lack of meaning in the world it finds itself in it, hence it is the subject's responsibility to find meaning and complete the condition of lack. Van Deurzen's subject is purely an effect for an external cause.

Here Zizek would differ. The subject not only finds meaning in response to a meaninglessness world, but the subject also actually posits the lack of meaning in

the world as a cause so they can enjoy finding meaning for the meaninglessness already posited. Existential psychotherapy assumes meaninglessness is a human condition and finding meaning is a result of the subject's efforts to transcending this condition (Van Deurzen, 2008; May, 1969). Zizek however would assume 'meaninglessness' is a cause posited by the subject on itself to produce its own appearance (effect) as a subject that needs/desires meaning. Hence, unlike van Deurzen, Zizek would see the need for meaning not as an external given condition the subject has to deal with; it is rather a cause posited by the subject on itself and for itself. The meaninglessness of the universe did not come from heaven, from external human conditions or from anywhere else, the subject invented meaninglessness to create its own cause to become subject of meaning. For Zizek the subject is not only an effect for an external cause (as Masculine subjectivity assumes), the subject is surely an effect but not of an external cause, it is an effect that entirely posits its own cause. The Feminine subjectivity identifies with its own creation of lack, it maintains its ownership of the production of its own lack. For the Feminine subjectivity lack is not an exception to be borne, it is what makes it a subject, the Feminine subject is aware that it is its own lack.

However, to become a purely Masculine subject of meaning (like Van Deurzen or Frankl) the masculine subverts his own creation of the lack of meaning. That is, the masculine subjectivity subverts its own feminine subjectivity. Zizek's brilliant definition of the Lacanian subject as 'an effect that entirely posits its own cause'(ibid) disrupts Van Deurzen and Frankl's pure masculine subjectivity; it brings out the subverted feminine subjectivity within the purely masculine ontology of the subject. But why does masculine subjectivity subvert and externalize its own Lack? One way of answering this is hegemony. By subverting its own creation of lack, the masculine subject can elevate its own desired pursuits to the level of destiny/truth/absolute/divine. The masculine subversion of the creation of lack gives their own desired pursuits a sense of divine destiny over all other possible pursuits. Hence the masculine subject would want to appear as an effect to an externalized cause in order to essentialize its own created cause which in turn makes its desires to fill this particular hole a matter of fact / nature / divine /etc. Let me go back to Frankl to illustrate the utility of such subversion for the pure Masculine subjectivity.

Frankl's life before the Nazi's was quite privileged. He had trained as a physician and psychiatrist and was well versed in philosophical thinking. It is no surprise therefore that he tried to use those skills that were available to him to rescue his agency in the traumatic situation he was put in. Hence, it is no coincidence that Frankl heard trauma as an invitation to find meaning and imbue meaning creation with stronger, deeper forms of agency. It is as if some superpower magically felt bad about Frankl's situation in Auschwitz and whispered to him in his dreams at night, asking: 'what would you like this particular traumatic situation to be lacking?' and 'how would you like to signify the recovery of agency against trauma?' And Frankl whispered back: 'I am good in philosophizing and symbolizing events so let the world lack meaning, and let recovery be the act of giving meaning to traumatic situation; this way you will give me a better chance of overcoming this traumatic event.' The superpower disappeared and Frankl did not pay much attention to their conversation and, with time, he mostly forgot it altogether. But after a while the superpower returned at night and organized the traumatic world exactly as Frankl had asked. The next day, when Frankl woke up, he was surprised that trauma actually meant what he had always wanted it to mean. Over time, the superpower had secretly organized the traumatic world to fulfil Frankl's wishes; it made the traumatic world lack what Frankl could replace so Frankl could enjoy some meaning creation from Auschwitz's futile trauma.

It worked, Frankl created meaning as he was good at it and his subjectivity was saved by the gift of lack of meaning. By pure chance, Frankl also survived the camp and announced to the world his discovery made inside the camp; he had discovered the secret to overcoming the traumatic situation he faced. That meant, if he knew how to overcome Auschwitz, he knew how to overcome any lesser trauma too. This gained him a lot of attention and academic authority among people looking to overcome simpler traumas. Having been busy with survival in the camp and the attention he got after his survival, Frankl totally subverted the wish he had told the superpower, and the possibility that he had only succeeded because the superpower had fulfilled *Frankel's* wish, had organized the world in such a way as to give him a big advantage. With academic and professional fame, Frankl had even more reason to subvert the encounter he had had with the superpower. If this had been revealed, the glory of his scientific discovery would have been diminished because he did not 'discover' anything, he would not have solved the secret of trauma as he was

professing to have done. His success was all the result of set up by a superpower that organized the traumatic world according to Frankl's deep and secret wishes.

This imagined fairy tale is not far from what happened to Frankl. Zizek's definition reveals a similar subversion within existential psychotherapy. Of course, there was no encounter with a superpower, but instead there was a creative by the subject for itself. The subject was the superpower that organized the world for itself so that it would lack exactly what it wished to lack, so it could have a desire and enjoy fulfilling it. The subject then used its ability to kill knowledge, to make it appear as if the lack of meaning in the world (the cause) was an act of external agency, a destiny / a human condition the subject had nothing to do with. The subject's agency however was signified as resolving this externally imposed lack of meaning. Zizek's definition of the subject tells the existentialist: your therapy is a good game that works for some, but it is one of many other good games. It is not, as you claim, the one remedy for all people in all traumatic situations.

There is another name for this superpower which creates the lack that the subject desires; it is Lacan's Feminine subjectivity, which he insists is superior with its ability to reveal what the subject truly is. We can see from Frankl fairy tale analogy that subverting the feminine may lead to a bigger claim of agency for the subject. Subverting the feminine hides the depth of the subject's ontological ignorance: if there was no encounter with the feminine side, if there is no super power that cheats for us, then the masculine can claim that it has found the one thing that the world is missing, that it can master the world by winning a self-invented game made to win, like Frankl's game of finding the correct meaning. And what a brilliant trick this is; Frankl did find meaning and magically everything fell in place, he felt back in control and was full of agency. Now exposing the subject's development of its own lack, i.e., exposing the feminine subjectivity dims the extra glory and the essentializing hegemony the masculine subjectivity would give its own desires.

This ontological distinction opens a new dimension for an analysis of the reproduction of political agency. If the subject posits its own cause, then why is 'meaning' essentialized in the analysis of reproduction of agency. Can not the subject posit different kinds of cause (lacks/needs)? According to Zizek's definition

the answer is clearly yes. Hence the analysis of the reproduction of political agency is significantly shifted to include examining the (re)production of lack (where 'the need for meaning' will be read as just one possible type of lack) in addition to the (re)production of a corresponding object cause of desire (like 'meaning' is one object cause of desire among many possible others).

A note of caution is due here. The pure masculine subjectivity and its phallic analysis may be a dangerous route to follow in the analysis of the reproduction of agency in traumatic contexts. Finding the right meaning for trauma (as in the existential therapy) is no different than finding the right stone for trauma (as in some cultures), or the right rituals (as in some religions), or a specific body move that pushes evil away, or the right alignment between stars, or any other lack the feminine subjectivity could create. Different religious traditions, for example, have produced 'fairy-tale tricks' similar to Frankl's. Throughout history they have successfully developed different types of lack to make desire and agency possible in the harshest of situations. The danger is in claiming that one stone is better than another, or in the existential case, claiming finding philosophical/existential meaning is better than finding a stone. The masculine danger is in hegemonizing its own invented lack over others' invented lack, so that some group may enjoy fulfilling their invented lack a bit more (perhaps claiming they have found the 'truth' for the rest of humanity, i.e., the human condition) at the expense of another group getting lost in trauma.

This is not to say that any lack will do for any subject in any circumstance, on the contrary, developing a lack is a complicated psychosocial process; it requires the subject delve into critical psychosocial dialectics within its own traumatic context. However, the caution I am highlighting here is that of essentializing one lack over all other possible lacks making the already complicated process of developing a lack even more difficult and rarer. The development of lack will be discussed further later in this thesis. However, the objective of this section is to bring the subverted feminine subjectivity to the centre of analysis, to set it side by side with the masculine subjectivity so as to broaden the ontological horizon of the reproduction of agency.

The discussion so far may be used to identify a critical shift in conceptualizing the reproduction of political agency. The concept of the reproduction of political agency

is starting to move from a linear logic to a circular logic. The concept is moving from a subject that is given a set of needs and compelled to respond to these externally installed needs, to a subject that creates and subverts its own needs: a subject that posits the very cause that it strives to achieve and at times may discover that it is impossible to achieve. In psychoanalytical terms, the reproduction argument is moving from the linearity of finding a phallic object, to the circularity of creating the lack that ordains certain objects to be a phallus. In this circular logic the subject appears as if it is on a mission to fulfil the very hole that it created at the first place. Hence the reproduction of political agency seems to be like the reproduction of a vicious circle. So far, the description of the reproduction cycle may seem to be purely psychological, the next section will discuss how Žižek shifts the perception of this initial approach to subjectivity to highlight the psychosocial nature of the Lacanian subject.

## *2.2 the traumatic hole as a social Cause*

Žižek takes his definition of the subject, as an effect that *entirely* posits its cause, to a deeper level. He shows that the lack which the subject develops as its own cause is not the only cause that the subject posits. The subject's posited lack is circumscribed by another more fundamental Cause (emphasized by capital C), which the subject also posits. Žižek (1994a) introduces the second Cause the subject posits in his reading of the Lacanian and Freudian trauma:

The symbolic order is 'barred', the signifying chain is inherently inconsistent, 'non-all', structured around a hole. This inherent non-symbolizable reef maintains the gap between the Symbolic and the Real – that is, it prevents the Symbolic from 'falling into' the Real – and, again, what is ultimately at stake in this decentrement of the Real with regard to the Symbolic is the Cause: the Real is the absent cause of the Symbolic. The Freudian and Lacanian name for this cause is, of course, *trauma*. In this sense, Lacan's theoretical enterprise already lies 'beyond **hermeneutics** and structuralism' (the subtitle of Dreyfus and Rabinow book on Foucault). (p.30)



This Zizek quote is densely packed with critical concepts. In this section I un-pack this quote to appreciate how Zizek identifies a ‘capital C’ Cause and associates it with trauma. Let me start with his first sentence and ask: what is the symbolic order barred from? The following sentences offer an answer. The symbolic order is barred from becoming an all -- ‘the symbolic is ‘non-all’’. In other words, the subject is barred from a full Symbolization of the Real – there must be a hole left within the Symbolic fabric – an un-symbolized hole. A glimpse of the Real has to be left within the Symbolic; hence, the symbolic is ‘structured around a hole’.

It may be helpful to recall at this point, a couple of characteristics that are associated with the Lacanian notions of the Real and Symbolic. The Real and the Symbolic are two of Lacan’s dimensions of the subject’s three dimensions (namely: the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary). In overly simplified terms, the Real is associated with the impossibility of the subject. It is the dimension where the subject cannot be rendered possible. The Symbolic on the other hand is where the subject becomes possible, and it is also the domain where the subjugation to big Other(s) takes place (Zizek, 1989; Homer, 2005; Evans, 2006). In this sense, the Symbolic in a way cancels out the effect of the Real, it forecloses the essential elements of the Real that renders the subject impossible. The Lacanian big Other may be read as a super powerful agency (or agencies) that organizes the universe in a way that makes the subject possible, hence the Symbolic order is the discourse of the big Other (Salecl, 1988; Hook, 2008; Zizek, 1989).

In the above quote Zizek uses three main concepts: Trauma, the Symbolic (which is the discourse of the Other) and the Real. He suggests a particular overlap between those three concepts. They must be organized so that the Symbolic does not totally forecloses the Real, and that means a hole has to be left in the Symbolic that belongs to the Real. In Zizek’s description of this hole, it seems to be circumscribed by the Symbolic, yet it does not belong to it; it remains an opening into the Real. Zizek describes this hole as an ontological feature of the subject that is associated with the Freudian and Lacanian subject’s initiating trauma. Hence, to distinguish this ontological notion of trauma from the notion of trauma as an event, I will call this ontological structure of the subject: ‘the traumatic hole’.

Zizek also suggests a purpose for this barring of full Symbolization. The traumatic hole at the heart of the Symbolic acts as a Cause (with a capital C). Although the quote above does not elaborate on this Cause, elsewhere Zizek seems to indicate that this traumatic hole constitutes the subject with a social Cause, i.e., it forces the subjugation of the subject by the big Other of social structure (Zizek, 1996, 1994a, 1994b). This social Cause needs a more detailed elaboration.

To start appreciating the social function of this Cause, let us ask what happens when it is not there? That is, what kind of a subject we might have if there were no unsymbolized hole within its Symbolic? That is, what happens when the subject does not abstain from full symbolization? The closest to such a subject is the Lacanian psychotic psyche structure. For Lacan the psychotic is stuck in foreclosure (Fink, 1999), the psychotic forecloses All. The Symbolic order for the psychotic is not barred; the psychotic subject did not abstain from symbolizing the traumatic hole. The result is that the psychotic is a subject that does not subjugate itself to any socially constructed discourse of the big Other. The psychotic subject makes its own big Others with its own discourse. For instance, a psychotic subject may organize its subjectivity around a discourse of talking to an angel (big Other) who provides superpowers so death can be defeated and the future seen. The non-psychotic calls this 'crazy'. Yet the line between the 'crazy' psychotic and the 'normal' non-psychotic subjects is thinner than it may appear (Leader, 2011). One could say that Frankl had a fantasy similar to that of the psychotic who talks to an angel. Frankl believed that giving philosophical meaning to his situation associated him with a 'super meaning power' that enabled him to survive the horrors of Auschwitz. However, there is one major difference between Frankl's meaning fantasy and the psychotic fantasy: Frankl used philosophy, a social discourse of a big Other, while the psychotic made up his own discourse of a big Other. Hence, the difference is not that the psychotic forecloses the Real, and the non-psychotic does not completely foreclose its Real. On the contrary, both have a Symbolic that forecloses the Real, and both have a Symbolic that is a discourse of a big Other(s). The difference is in the unique Symbolic structure of the psychotic subject (Fink, 1999); the psychotic Symbolic order is not structured around a traumatic hole; hence the psychotic does not have a social Cause, they are not compelled to organize their subjectivity around the social discourses of big Others.

Zizek's argument for the traumatic hole as Cause can then be read as follows: the subject's abstinence from full symbolization posits a traumatic hole as a Cause within its symbolic order. The hole is traumatic because it is an opening into the Real where the subject is rendered impossible. Banning the subject from symbolizing the traumatic hole does not mean that the subject can co-exist with its Real, on the contrary having this traumatic hole compels the subject to find a social solution that continuously diverts the subject from facing the traumatic hole in its Symbolic. Hence the traumatic hole compels the subject to subjugate itself to the big Others of social structures, including community, family, country, corporate or any other social structure that is organized around a socially constructed discourses of a big Other. What at stake (in leaving out this traumatic hole or foreclosing it) is psychosis, where the Symbolic falls into the Real. By foreclosing this traumatic hole, as a psychotic subject would, the subject then is no longer compelled to be subjugated to the big Other of a social structure; hence the psychotic creates its own big Others with their own discourses. Hence the traumatic hole functions as the social Cause creating a subject's Symbolic associated with the social discourses of big Others.

However, that is not to say that for the non-psychotic subject, subjugated to a socially constructed big Other, the traumatic hole will finally be symbolized. On the contrary, the hole will stay unsymbolized within the Symbolic structure for the subject to keep having a reason to re-castrate (re-produce) itself as a subject of the Law / the discourse of the Other. The non-psychotic subject feels that without identifying with a social discourse of an Other (a social structure) it has no identity, it is in danger of not-being, and that is exactly what the traumatic hole is: a glimpse of the Real – the impossibility of the subject – which compels the subject to do something to divert from it. In this way, as long as the hole is there, the subject is compelled to develop a social identity.

Now, let me return to Frankl to illustrate this abstinence of full symbolization and how it compels the subject to associate to a socially constructed Other. In Frankl's memoir, we can see a specific direction of signification. Frankl uses language to point at the traumatic kernel of his experience. Yet, before coming close to bring it

fully into language, he used philosophy to move away from full symbolization: he abruptly moved the topic from the Real of the camp to the meaning of the camp. His intensive engagement with finding philosophical meaning might be read as a misrecognition, an act of abstinence from fully symbolizing his trauma. According to Žižek's discussion (above), this abstinence could be a key factor in Frankl's successful reproduction of his own political agency in Auschwitz.

Frankl's act of abstinence was associated with a specific type of diversion. He diverted himself to philosophy, a socially constructed field of knowledge, i.e., a discourse of Other(s). I can imagine other survivors of the camp might have diverted to religion, or nationalism, or another social/political ideology, i.e., they may have diverted to any social discourse that might render their agency possible within Auschwitz's traumatic context. I can also imagine that, when faced the horrors of Auschwitz, some did not abstain from fully foreclosing the traumatic hole (that persistently reappeared at Auschwitz) and tipped towards psychosis. Frankl is a good example of those who abstained from full symbolization and diverting to a social discourse of an Other. As a result, Frankl not only survived the camp, but he also came out of it with a very strong social Cause; he established a whole new school of psychotherapy. Frankl's traumatic hole was diverted to humanistic/existential philosophy, which can be interpreted as a socially constructed discourse of 'Humanity' as a big Other, and within such social discourse of a big Other, Frankl developed his own lack as that of finding meaning for the traumatic human condition.

So, in a way, when Van Deurzen and Frankl talk about seeking the 'truth' and facing reality as guiding principles, they were not 100% wrong. There is an element of that in what they did. There was a small hole in the Real that they had to keep if they were to succeed in overcoming trauma. However, this glimpse of reality was only witnessed and never symbolized. It was only brought into language through a misrecognition, through diversion to a social discourse of a big Other: philosophy, scientism, religion, nationalism, or whatever ignorance structure the subject chose to avoid symbolizing it All.

In the previous section I discussed Frankl positing his own cause as a lack of meaning, in this section I am pointing out that Frankl did not conjure the lack of meaning out of nowhere. He derived it from a specific branch of philosophy i.e., from the social discourse of a big Other – that he had already subscribed to by subjugating himself to this Other. Hence the positing of individual lack was worked out within a bigger context of social subjugation. The previous section was about the subject's positing lack as cause with a small c, and this section is about the subject positing social Cause (with a capital C). Now we can illuminate the psychosocial nature of the social Cause as follows:

The subject posits its social Cause – qua traumatic hole – by an act of abstinence from full symbolization. The barring of full symbolization is a psychosocial act. That is, it cannot be associated with the subject alone or the social alone, it is both. However, this act compels the subject to both identify with a social discourse of a big Other(s) and to position itself within that social discourse as a lacking subject. Hence, this act of abstinence becomes the subject posited Cause for the subject to have a Symbolic order. Hence Žižek's assertion (above): 'the Real is the absent cause of the Symbolic'. The flip side of this is psychosis, that is: the traumatic hole also protects the subject from becoming psychotic; or in Žižek terms, it prevents the Symbolic from 'falling into' the Real.

Finally, before ending this section, I would like to note a distinction between the traumatic hole and the traumatic event. As discussed above, the traumatic hole is part of the ontology of the subject, it is not alien to, or novel to the subject. The traumatic event however is different, it disrupts the subject's divergence dynamics from the traumatic hole. This section has mainly covered the traumatic hole, the traumatic event as a symbolic trauma that brings the subject back to encounter its traumatic hole will be discussed further later.

The discussion in this section has shown trauma to be much more than an event that need to be borne; trauma is (in part at least) an ontology that has to be properly placed and contained within the subject's reproduction of agency. In other words, trauma is not something that goes away. And since trauma compels the subject to identify with discourses of big Others, the reproduction of agency in traumatic

contexts cannot be understood in isolation of the subject's ongoing social subjugation process. The next section will examine the subject's ontology in relation to the big Other.

### **3. The subject as an effect: It is all about the Other**

Although Žižek's definition of the subject highlights the subject positing its own cause, it equally emphasizes the subject as an effect. Žižek's definition offers the subject as a dialectic between cause and effect, as he stated: 'the subject is an effect that entirely posits its own cause' (Žižek, 1994a). In this section I will examine the subject as an effect of its posited causes. In the next section I will sum up the discussion by bring out the subject as an unresolvable dialectic between posited causes and effects.

In discussing the Feminine subjectivity, I outlined two types of cause that the subject posits. The first was the subject positing its own lack as an individualized cause, which is contextualized by the second type of cause, the social Cause that the subject posits by its abstinence from fully symbolizing its Real. To bring out the subject as a dialectic, I will discuss here how the subject appears as an effect of its posited causes. Let me start the discussion by posing a question to the Feminine subjectivity: If the subject Symbolic is developed around a traumatic hole, how does the subject ensure that this traumatic hole is used as a cause and does not turn into a sinkhole into which the subject vanishes as the impossibility of its own Real?

One way to delve into this question is to examine how Žižek links trauma to the object cause of desire. Žižek (1994a) presents the object cause of desire as an effect of a vicious cycle working around the subject's traumatic hole, he says:

Herein lies the trauma's vicious cycle: the trauma is the Cause which perturbs the smooth engine of symbolization and throws it off balance; it gives rise to an indelible inconsistency in the symbolic field; but for all that, the trauma has no existence of its own prior to symbolization; it remains an anamorphic entity that gains its consistency only in retrospect, viewed from within the symbolic horizon. ... Therefore, in order to apprehend this paradox of the traumatic object-cause (the Lacanian object *petit a*), a topological model is needed in which the limit that separates Inside from Outside coincides with the internal limit. Viewed from within the symbolic order, the object appears as its irreducible/constitutive Outside, as a reef that bends the symbolic space, disturbs the symbolic circuit; ... However, the moment we 'step out' in order to grasp the trauma as it is in itself and not through its distorted reflections within the symbolic space, the traumatic object evaporates into nothingness. This paradox of trauma qua cause that it does not pre-exist its effects but is itself retroactively 'posited' by them involves a kind of temporal loop: it is through its 'repetition', through its echoes within the signifying structure, that the cause retroactively becomes what it always-already was. ... Herein resides the sense of Lacan's obsession with topological models of 'curved' space in the 1960s and 1970s ... (pp.31-32)

This is another of Žižek's quotes that is packed with critical concepts, here again I need to unpack these from the above dense quotation. First, we need to recall from the last section that Žižek uses trauma as a notion of the ontological traumatic hole rather than a traumatic event. Žižek suggests that to understand how the object cause of desire is linked to the traumatic hole we need to approximate it with topological models. Topological models are models of spatial illusion, they trick the senses so that following the outside surface of the model will lead to the inside surface, hence confusing the boundary between what is outside and what is inside. Žižek suggests that what the subject has over its traumatic hole is a Symbolic topological illusion. To appreciate this Symbolic topological illusion let me recall the

Lacanian Borromean knot. Lacan suggests that the subject's three dimensions (the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary) are organized like a Borromean knot (Fink, 1999; Nobus, 1998) where the three orders overlap in such a way that in places what belongs to one dimension cannot be separated from the other two orders. This overlapping topology of the three orders renders a space ready for a Symbolic topological illusion. Now let me bring back Van Deurzen's therapeutic approach to offer a reading of her approach as an example of such Symbolic illusion.

Van Deurzen guides her clients to first accept troubling facts about human life which she calls 'the human condition' (2005, 2008, 2012). Van Deurzen encourages her clients to summon their courage to face the 'truth' about their traumatic situation. In other words, she instructs them to look towards the traumatic hole from a safe Symbolic distance, shifting their attention from the traumatic event they encountered to the traumatic hole that is part of their subject ontology. Very often clients had already developed a safe symbolic perspective from which to encounter the traumatic hole as part of their subject ontology. After this shift of focus, she trains her clients to enrich their symbolic order by using simplified existential philosophy to develop deeper meaning. But not just any kind of meaning. Meaning for Van Duerzen seems to be an object cause more than an object to be attained; she says, (quoted above), 'this does not mean that we can ever state categorically what truth and meaning are, but rather that our existence is a journey of discovery for something a lot bigger than ourselves which we will gradually find out more about' (2008). This quote signifies 'meaning' as a cause to keep going and keep looking. 'Meaning' seems to be a reason to keep running away from trauma, chasing that which was already set to never be caught, i.e., 'meaning' is a signifier for the vicious cycle of trauma that Zizek mentioned above.

Van Deurzen's therapeutic approach exemplifies two important aspects of Zizek's comment (above). First, it exemplifies the symbolic topological illusion over trauma. Van Deurzen talks as if looking into the philosophy of trauma is the same as looking into the Real of trauma; a move that hides the Symbolic slip on top of the intrusion of the Real, which her therapy introduces. Frankl, as already discussed, exhibits a similar symbolic topological illusion, he too talks as if looking at the meaning of trauma is the same as encountering the Real kernel of a traumatic event; in his



narrative the Symbolic and the Real are conflated in a topological illusion. The second part of Zizek's quote that Van Deurzen approach exemplifies is the traumatic object cause of trauma, which he links it to the Lacanian 'a' (petit object cause of desire). Van Deurzen's approach exemplifies that the Symbolic order that is slipped over the traumatic encounter is not a static set of symbolic significations that obscure trauma, but rather a vicious symbolic cycle. 'Meaning' for Van Deurzen, exemplifies the way the traumatic object for trauma is in effect a vicious symbolic cycle over the traumatic encounter. Furthermore, Zizek seems to be associating the Lacanian object cause of desire 'a' and the vicious cycle of trauma. This link is essential to understanding the reproduction of agency in traumatic contexts. So, in the following I elaborate the Lacanian object cause of desire 'a' and how it associates to the vicious symbolic cycle of trauma.

The Lacanian object-cause of desire (abbreviated by Lacan as 'a') is a compound concept. To begin with, it seems to serve a dual function in Lacanian neurotic psyche dynamics. In the Lacanian literature 'a' appears to play two different roles with two different neurotic positions. The 'a' appears in the neurotic-obsessive structure, where the subject substitute the Other with 'a' and its desire becomes focused on possessing the objects that have the 'a': let us call this the obsessive 'a'. The 'a' also appears in the neurotic hysteric-structure, where the subject renders itself as an 'a' for the Other, i.e., the hysteric subject sees itself as a place holder for the Other's object-cause of desire; the hysteric desire then focuses on becoming that which holds the 'a' of the Other, i.e., the subject desires to become the Other's object-cause of desire (Fink, 1999, 1997; Zizek, 1989, 1999). Let us call this second type of 'a' the hysteric 'a'. Although Lacan's psyche structures were meant to describe troubling psychological dynamics in the context of therapy, rather than a non-troubling psyche dynamic in everyday contexts, nevertheless his proposed psyche structures underline a perception of subjectivity in general. And a lot of Lacanian inspired literatures take the Lacanian neurotic psyche structure particularly to be their basis for understand the underlying subjectivity in its usual (non-problematic) mode of being (Gessert, 2014). In the following I will do the same, I will use the two Lacanian neurotic structures, the hysteric and the obsessive, to infer an understanding of the link between the Lacanian subject, its object-cause of desire, and how it links to trauma.

To infer the underlying Lacanian general subjectivity within the neurotic subject, I start by asking what the problem is with the obsessive psyche structure and the hysteric psyche structure. Is it having an object-cause of desire? The Lacanian literature does not seem to support that 'a' is a problem in itself. Is it the specific type of 'a' associated with each? This seems to be a possibility. However, there is no third type of 'a' used in the Lacanian literature that we may detect as a non-problematic type of 'a'. Hence, I suggest that the problem is not in the specific type of 'a' (i.e., the hysteric 'a' or the obsessive 'a') but rather the problem is in being stuck with one specific type of 'a'. In other words, the non-problematic neurotic uses the 'a' (the object cause of desire) in its full duality. That is, the Lacanian non-problematic subject can offer itself to the Other as the holder of its object-cause of desire, and at the same time, the Lacanian non-problematic subject, can replace the Other with a symbolic object-cause for the subject to develop its own desire separate from the Other. We may think of this dual functionality of the 'a' within a vicious cycle of desire. Here is one possible depiction of how this dual 'a' might become a vicious cycle of desire:

The subject, confronted with its lack, offers itself as an object of desire for an Other(s). This Other is lacking yet it has an enough superior agency to empower the subject to confront its Real and complete its lack. Through this symbolic exchange – empowerment in exchange of fulfilling the Other's desire – the subject is empowered to possess the objects that the fulfils the subject's lack. Let us call this part of the cycle the hysteric's part, it empowers the subject against its own lack. Once sufficiently empowered the subject begins on the obsessive side of the cycle by substituting the lacking Other with a symbolic object-cause of its own desire. The symbolic object-cause then get manifested into objects and the subject starts an obsessive pursuit to possess these objects that have manifested its object-cause of its desire. This obsessive pursuit (charged with the hysteric pursuit) culminates in jouissance that brings the subject back to a confrontation with its own lack. Jouissance leaves the subject with a sense that it has just got its object-cause of desire at the same moment that it has just missed it. Hence jouissance brings the subject back to encounter its lack, but in a different way; jouissance fuels the subject's desire to go for another round of this hysteric-obsessive (neurotic) cycle of

desire. The subject then restarts another hysteric pursuit to offer itself to the Other again, to empower it again to pursue the objects that have its cause of desire again, and to taste the fleeting jouissance again. Jouissance both transforms the lack and brings the subject back to encounter it again, jouissance transforms the subject's encounter with the lack in a way that makes the subject desire restarting another neurotic cycle of desire, and so the vicious cycle of desire keeps going on.

This is an overly simplified depiction of the duality of the object 'a'. However, it illustrates how the duality of the Lacanian 'a' may, in effect, perform as a vicious cycle of desire. For Lacan 'a' cannot be captured in an object, its main function is to keep the subject desiring in a vicious cycle of desire (Zizek, 1992, 1999, 1994a). We may then understand how the obsessive psyche structure as a problematic dynamic, not because of its replacement of the Other with an obsessive 'a', but because it is stuck on one side of the duality of the Lacanian 'a' and is therefore unable to complete the vicious cycle of desire. Similarly, with the hysteric psyche structure, the problem is not in the subject offering itself as an object-cause of desire for the Other, qua a hysteric 'a', the problem is in being stuck with the hysteric side of the cycle and not being able to complete the vicious cycle of desire. This links quite well with Zizek's vicious cycle of trauma. The symbolic topological illusion Zizek is talking about does not just bringing a symbolic object to be conflated with the traumatic hole. The symbolic bending for Zizek performs a more complicated illusion. The symbolic produces a vicious cycle of desire that keeps the subject engaged in swirl, hovering above a traumatic hole. The vicious cycle reflection in the symbolic is a traumatic object, a Lacanian object cause of desire. The cycle then has to be vicious, as Zizek described it, because what is behind it is a traumatic hole. Losing the flow of desire becomes akin to losing the subject itself.

Let me bring the example of Van-Duerzen back to elaborate these abstract formations.

Van Duerzen (2008) says of 'meaning': 'I can find it and recognize it but not create what was there long before me' (p.162). 'Meaning' is the central symbolic object of Van Duerzen's existential therapy, for her it is the object that empowers the subject to bear its human condition. In this quote she describes 'meaning' as something the subject does not create but finds. The obvious question then is, who created it, who

left it there to be found by the subject? And why, at traumatic times, does 'meaning' become so very hard to find? This quote reveals the embedded role of the Other(s) in Van Deurzen's cycle; no matter what signifier gets attached to creating 'meaning', and leaving it for the subject to find, (such as: God, Humanity, Nature, Science, etc.), or even if the Other takes no fixed signifier, still her articulation of meaning shows the Other's role and the Other's desire as critical to finding meaning. That is, in her therapy the subject is looking for something left by the Other, and the subject is left to deal with the Other's desire to leave (or hide) meaning out in the universe to be found by the subject. Hence, in the existential approach, although the Other's name is omitted, the Other's desire to leave meaning out there to be found remains a part of the search for meaning to overcome traumatic encounters. We can already see the dual role 'a' plays in Van Duerzen's therapy. To highlight the vicious cycle that the duality of 'meaning' which the Lacanian 'a' brings consider again Van Deurzen explains the journey to meaning as not meaning: '... that we can ever state categorically what truth and meaning are, but rather that our existence is a journey for discovery for something a lot bigger than ourselves which we will gradually find out more about' (see also above). This again demonstrates how the dual role of 'a' is meant to enable a vicious cycle of desire – the pleasure of finding meaning and enjoying catching it to only lose it and find it again. Zizek, in the quote above, provides a rather different description of meaning as a traumatic object 'a'. He said (in the quote above): 'the moment we 'step out' in order to grasp the trauma as it is in itself and not through its distorted reflections within the symbolic space, the traumatic object evaporates into nothingness'. Meaning in Van Duerzen therapy seems to capture this traumatic object (or the Lacanian object-cause of desire), when we come close to it and examine it closely, Van Deurzen tell us we will not be able to categorically say what it is, i.e., the object will evaporate into nothingness. It was never positioned there to be found, 'a' is a symbolic topological illusion fuelled by our desire/need to bear our traumatic hole.

What emerges from this discussion is the subject as an effect of its two posited causes. In the previous section I have discussed two causes; the subject posits one to contextualize the other. In this section, I have discussed two effects that the subject appears to be. The first effect that the subject appears to be is a subject that desires objects which host its object-cause of desire, as in the obsessive side of the

neurotic cycle. This effect is contextualized by a bigger effect, that is the subject appears as an object of desire for the Other, as in the hysteric side of the neurotic cycle. The two causes from the previous section and the two effects of this section create between them a set of complicated dialectics that characterizes the Lacanian subject in relation to trauma. In the next section I bring these four causes and effects together to conceptualize the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

#### **4- Political Agency in Politically Traumatic Context**

In this section I will bring together the different ontological elements discussed so far to introduce a conceptualization of the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts. The discussion so far has been explored two ontological frames of the subject. The first was Lacan's sexuation formula of the subject with which ontological frame I discussed two the exclusive positions of the Lacanian subject: the Masculine and the Feminine. The masculine identifies with an excess within the subject and the feminine identifies with the lack of the subject. The second theoretical frame of the subject was Žižek's definition of the Lacanian subject as: an effect that entirely posits its cause. From this ontological frame I discussed two causes posited by the subject (i.e., the social Cause and the individual cause) and two effects (the hysteric subject for the Other, and the obsessive subject for 'a' petit object of desire). Now to bring these two ontological frames together let me quote Žižek's comments on the Lacanian sexuation formula, he says:

The notion of sexual difference that underlies the formulas of sexuation in Seminar XX is strictly synonymous with Lacan's proposition that "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship." Sexual difference is not a firm set of "static" symbolic oppositions and inclusions/exclusions ... but a name of a deadlock, a trauma, an open question – something

that resists every attempt at its symbolization. Every translation of sexual difference into a set of symbolic opposition(s) is doomed to fail, and it is this very “impossibility” that opens up the terrain of the hegemonic struggle for what “sexual difference” will mean. What is barred is not what is excluded under the present hegemonic regime. (Zizek, in Bernard and Fink, 2012, p.61)

Zizek seems to indicate that the Lacanian subject does not fall under one of the two positions described in the sexuation formula, i.e., the subject is neither the Masculine nor the Feminine categories described in the formula. Zizek reads the sexuation formula as an explanation of Lacan’s emphasis that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship, hence the formula is not describing the sexual difference between two sexual categories. However, the sexuation formula describes how the subject posits both the feminine and the masculine as two exclusive categories with an impossible relationship between them, so the subject may then appear as an effect of this impossible dichotomy, i.e., an effect that entirely posit its cause. Hence for Zizek, the Lacanian subject is ontologically understood to be neither the masculine nor the feminine, but rather the deadlock suggested between the Masculine and the Feminine; that is, the masculine subject or the feminine subject is an appearance (an effect) for an already posited sexuation (cause) by the subject itself. The Lacanian subject is thus the impossible dialectic between two exclusive categories that is not meant to be synthesized. As such Zizek reads the sexuation formula as a description of the development of an impossible dialectic rather than a description of difference between sexual categories.

Now let me re-read Zizek’s subject definition from the Lacanian sexuation formula perspective. But first let us recall the two causes and two effects that I have already identified based on Zizek’s definition of the subject, they were:

- A. individual cause (qua positing lack), in section 2.1
- B. social Cause (qua traumatic hole), in section 2.2
- C. the subject for the Other’s desire as an effect discussed, in section 3
- D. the subject of desire for a petit object as an effect discussed, also in section 3.

The sexuation formula suggests a particular relationship between any two of the above four causes and effects. That is, the subject does not posit any cause for any effect, it aims to posit an impossible sexual relationship between causes and effects. Hence any one of above four ontological elements is developed in such a way to form an impossible dialectic with each of the other three. Let me bring Frankl and Van Deurzen's conceptualization of meaning to capture this final organizing principle of the Lacanian ontology of the subject. In this chapter, I have repeatedly brought Frankl and Van Duerzen 'meaning' to exemplify each of the above four causes and effects, as shown in the following (diagram 1).

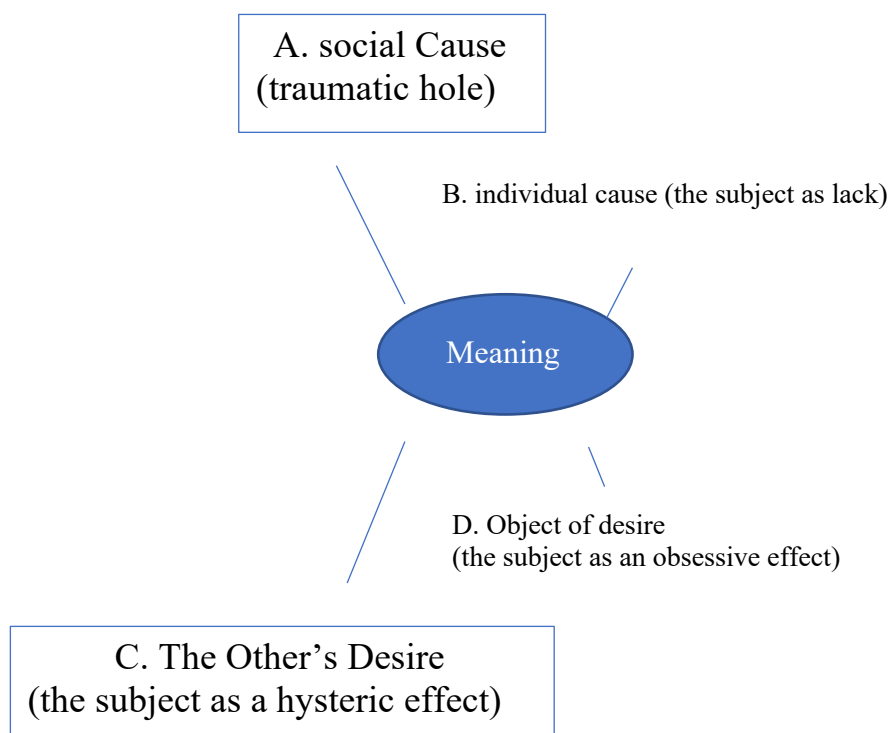


Diagram 1

In section one of discussing ignorance as subject ontology, I discussed how 'meaning' in Van Deurzen's literature is signified as an object that the subject needs in order to bear its human condition. In section 2.1, I discussed how meaning(less) in Van Deurzen literature also signifies the lack that the subject posits to make its own pursuit of meaning desirable and essential (as a signification of human destiny/condition). In section 2.2., I have discussed how the subject bars itself from creating its own individualized meaning in order to posit a social Cause; that is the subject posits an imperative on itself that 'meaning' has to be developed within a social discourse, i.e., meaning has to be developed within a discourse of big Other (s) (like: culture, religion, philosophy, etc.). Section 3 confirmed the subject positing of social Cause (qua absence of full individual symbolization) and I further discussed how the subject then appears to be an object of desire for the Other(s). In section 3, I also discussed how the subject in its obsessive mode replaces the Other with an object and becomes a subject of desire for that petit object of desire.

Now 'meaning' appears to be the quilting signifier for the above four causes and effects (Zizek, 1989). 'Meaning' in Van Deurzen's literature appears as the name of a vicious cycle of trauma; where one posited Cause leads to an effect, but the impossible relation translates to something missing in the dialectic, so the subject turns to another cause-and-effect dialectic, but again the impossible relation translates into something missing from this dialectic shifting the subject to another cause and effect dialectic and so the vicious cycle repeats, obscuring the traumatic hole behind it. In this way, the impossible dialectic developed (qua the sexuation formula) between the four causes and effects is critical in keeping the vicious cycle of trauma going. That is, if one dialectic is somehow resolved there will be no push to shift to another dialectic, then the vicious cycle will be halted. What is critical in this dynamic is the traumatic hole behind the vicious cycle, the cycle need to keep going, to obscure any re-appearance of the subject's traumatic hole. If the vicious cycle is halted (if the dialectics are resolved) the subject will re-encounter the impossibility of rendering its own agency possible. Hence, Zizek (1992, 1994a, 1999, 1989) indicated that when the subject's object cause of desire is thought to be acquired by the subject, i.e., when a dialectic is resolved, the subject will get into a state of trauma. The object cause of desire is meant to keep the vicious cycle going,



it is not meant to actually fulfil the subject's lack. Here the concept of *jouissance* is also critical to understand the persistence of the vicious cycle. While the vicious cycle does not offer any fulfilment, it offers *jouissance* instead. That is, it offers fleeting moments of *jouissance* in which the subject thinks it has attained its object cause of desire and lost it at the same moment, and that fleeting *jouissance* keeps the subject desire for more to be found and to be achieved in the next round of the vicious cycle of trauma.

Similarly, the significations of 'meaning' in the vicious cycle of trauma developed in Frankl's and Van Deurzen's literature always differed. 'Meaning' has to be pursued but never found, the reason for pursuing meaning already been suggested in such a way that it can never be fulfilled by any meaning. Van Duerzen clearly indicates this vicious cycle in her significations of 'meaning', she says (as already quoted above): 'this does not mean that we can ever state categorically what truth and meaning are, but rather that our existence is a journey of discovery for something a lot bigger than ourselves which we will gradually find out more about'. Hence the cycle for meaning is not meant to end, and that is what potentially makes Frankl and Van Deurzen's existential therapy quite enriching and helpful for their type of clients. In Zizek's terms we might say their therapy enables their clients to develop impossible dialectics between causes and effects which maintain a vicious cycle of 'meaning' hovering over their encounters with their own traumatic hole, obscuring their encounter with that traumatic hole.

The production of the vicious cycle of 'meaning' in this way exemplifies a successful reproduction of agency in a traumatic context as was clearly exemplified by Frankl's reproduction of his own agency in surviving Auschwitz.

Now let us finally link this vicious cycle of trauma to ignorance. The continuous deferral of fixing a signification for 'meaning' (qua the vicious cycle of trauma) offers the subject a dynamic of ignorance: of exterminating knowledge. This continuous deferral dynamic allows the vicious cycle to exclude certain significations out of the subject's symbolic order. Hence the vicious cycle provides the subject with a dynamic to exterminate particular significations that may render the subject agency impossible in a particular context. That is, the vicious cycle of trauma may be

understood as a dynamic for the production of ignorance, where the subject becomes capable of altering its encounter with the traumatic kernel in its traumatic context by excluding particular significations from its symbolic order. Now, let me update diagram 1 with the more general diagram 2 to capture the subject's production of a vicious cycle of trauma:

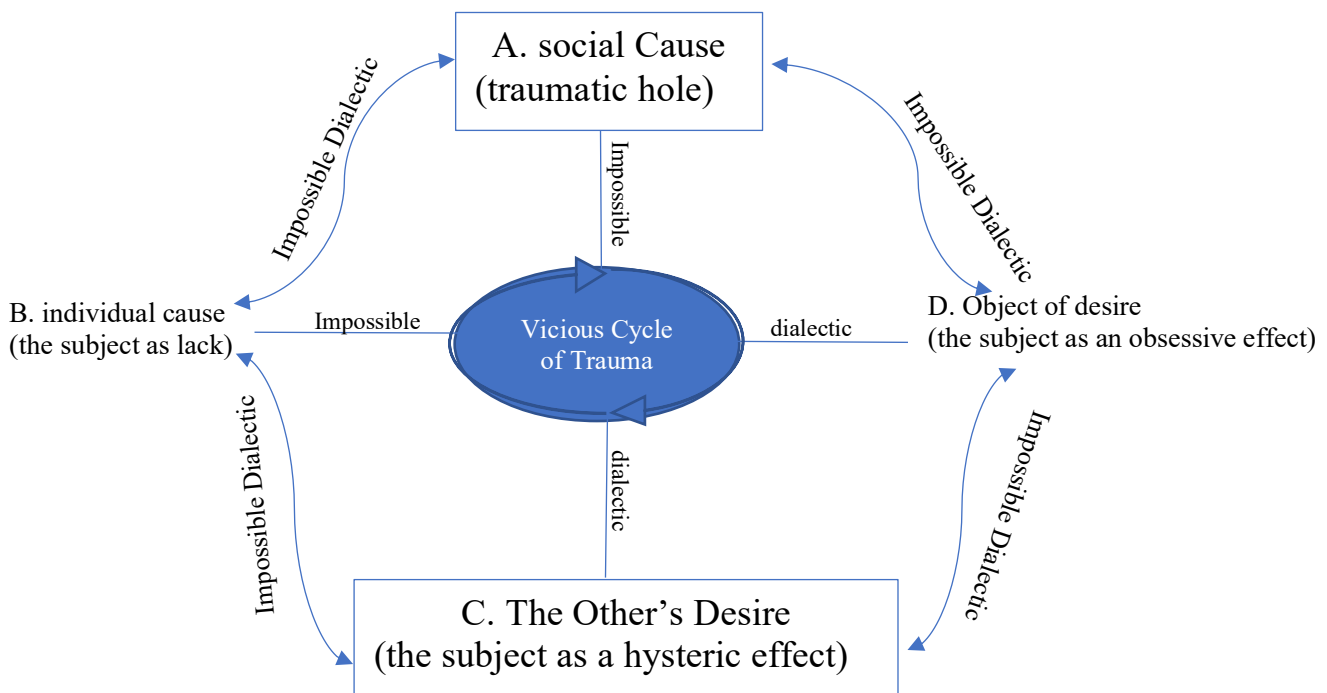


Diagram 2

The name (or the signifier) that signifies the vicious cycle of trauma can vary. In the case of existential psychoanalysis (as with Frankl and Van Deurzen) the vicious cycle was signified by the signifier 'meaning'. Hence, 'meaning', as Zizek would

suggest, becomes a master signifier that quilts the vicious cycle of trauma for the existentialists but not for everyone; it is not a human condition as Van Deurzen suggests, it is just a name. The master signifier itself is an empty signifier, i.e., it is void of any fixed signification and it needs to stay empty so it can be used to develop a vicious cycle of continual deferral of significations. Hence, in distinction to existential psychoanalysis, for Žižek the possibilities of choice of master signifiers are wide open and many empty signifiers may be used to synchronize the vicious cycle of trauma. The master signifier can be a name, a stone, a flag, etc., the possibilities are as wide as the imaginations of different human cultures/ social inventions that produces empty signifiers. Žižek here draws from Mouffe and Laclau's (2014) concept of master signifier, but with a critical difference that will be discussed in the next chapter.

This brings us close enough to conceptualizing the reproduction of agency in a traumatic context. The discussion so far suggests the following:

The reproduction of the subject's agency in a traumatic context can be understood as the re-development of impossible dialectics between causes and effects that are sufficient to produce a vicious cycle that is capable of obscuring the traumatic encounter. Such vicious cycles enable the subject to immerse in an indefinite cycle of symbolic deferrals in which debilitating significations of the subject's encounter with trauma can be obscured from the subject's symbolic order, hence the subject returns to its functioning ignorance.

This chapter's theoretical discussion suggests that there are four causes and effects that may be used as entry points to examine the subject's reproduction of the vicious cycle of trauma within its traumatic context. However, because my research focuses on the reproduction of political agency for Egyptian activists, I choose the Other to be my entry point to examine my participants' reproduction of their particular vicious cycle of trauma. There are three reasons for this choice as a point of entry to my participants' vicious cycle. The first is ethical and I discuss this in the methods chapter (chapter four). The second is methodological and I discuss this in the analytical methods chapter (chapter three). Finally, the third is contextual. The

Egyptian political context after the 2011 revolution has been divided along lines of different positions towards different Others. Positions such as the following: the position of God (and religion as a discourse of the Other) in politics, the position of the Egyptian people in politics, the position of the Army in the political game, the position of Humanity, the position of Arabs, etc. In Egyptian politics, discussion of these different Others in post revolution Egypt have been contested and visible in the media and on the streets among activists (Jung, Petersen, & Sparre, 2014; De Smet, 2015; Bassiouni, 2017; Abdelrahman, 2014). The subject became an object of desire for the Other quite visible in the speeches of political agents in Egypt which in turn made the Other a good entry point for examining the reproduction of political agency in the politically traumatic contexts of Egyptian activists.

In the next chapter I discuss the ways in which I use the subject's relation to the Other as a tool of analysis to examine the subject's reproduction of agency in a specific traumatic context. I call this tool 'ignorance analysis,' and I develop it by placing it in conversation with discourse theory analysis.

## Chapter Three

### Ignorance Analysis for Political Agency

In this chapter I will outline ignorance analysis as an analytical tool for the investigation of political agency in politically traumatic contexts. At the end of the last chapter, I pointed to the Lacanian Other as a possible entry point for examining the vicious symbolic cycle of trauma as an effect for the subject positing impossible dialectics between causes and effects. In this chapter I develop an ignorance analysis that identifies and examines the different flows of signification that relate the subject to the Other and which constitute an impossible dialectic centred on the subject relation to the Other(s). However, before discussing the details of this analytical tool, I begin by offering a methodological reason for choosing the Other as a focal point for analysing comments produced during research interviews.

From a Lacanian perspective the Other is already present in the interviews I conducted with my participants. Dolar (1999) explains the Other's role in facilitating every exchange between two subjects as:

the hypothetical authority that upholds the structure and the supposed address of any act of speech, beyond interlocution or intersubjectivity, the third in any dialogue. (p.87)

This applies to the interviews I conducted. The Other is already present in my interviews structuring the speech produced within interviews, for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Hook (2008) further emphasizes the structural role of the Other especially in traumatic contexts, he says:

The supposition of such a locus of authority and knowledge provides a crucial means of grasping how we are linked into the symbolic realm, perhaps precisely so at those points when it seems compromised, threatened with collapse. It is vital in this respect to emphasize the unavoidability of the Other, its structural inescapability. (p.60)

This structural necessity of the Other (Zizek, 1989, 1994; Leader, 1995; Salecl, 1988) made a necessity of my choosing the subject's relation to the Other (s) as an entry point for examining my participants' production of a vicious symbolic cycle of trauma in response to their politically traumatic context. Of course, I realize that the Other'(s) presence in speech is a structural necessity hence it may not necessarily be named, fixed to a particular signifier within a participant's speech. Therefore, ignorance analysis not only examines the role of the Other when it is signified by a fixed name, more importantly, it also, examines flows of signification potentially associated with Others, and driven by a position or a performance towards (or from) the Others.

In addition, looking for the flows of significations towards Others in my participants' speech echoes a Lacanian clinical technique, namely the L-schema (Fink, 1999; Leader, 2000). Lacan suggests that initially clients (or analysands in psychoanalytical terms) in a psychotherapy setting may identify with their therapist (or psychanalytically, the analyst) as another subject or ego similar to themselves, albeit being with more specialized knowledge related to their symptoms. That is, in Lacanian terms, the analysand initially identifies with the analyst as a small other. The L-schema encourages the analyst to look for incidents/opportunities during the analysand's free associations where the analysand leaves this small other (imaginary) relation and starts addressing the analyst in the place of the big Other (Fink, 1999).

This chapter identifies and outlines three discursive configurations that can be linked to (hence used to examine) the development of an impossible dialectic between the subject and the Other. In this way, this chapter examines the following discursive configurations in three different sections: the sexuating of the Other, the erotic flow of signification, and the hysteric flow of signification.

However, before discussing these discursive configuration, I first address the question of why I choose not use discourse theory analysis as an analytical frame for my investigation. The discourse analysis theory framework draws from the same Lacanian ontological perspective that I base my research within; and from this perspective it offers a detailed analytical framework for examining the development

of political identities. The discourse theory analytical framework has enabled the development of many productive analyses of political identities in a range of social conditions. For these reasons, it is potentially one of the most suitable analytical frameworks for this research. Therefore, I start this chapter by offering a critical review of this analytical framework and highlight the points of departure that lead me to look for a different analytical tool that better suited my investigation.

After offering such critical review, in subsequent sections I build on my review of the discourse theory analytical frame to develop ignorance analysis as an alternative analytical tool within the Lacanian ontology of the subject. In the last section I discuss how ignorance analysis can be particularly productive in investigating the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts.

### **The Discourse Theory analytical framework.**

The discourse theory analysis framework is also referred to as the Essex school approach to discourse analysis. The connection to Essex comes from the university in which the main theorists of this analytical framework all gathered. In this section I use the work of Laclau, Moufee, Glynos, Howarth, and Stavrakakis as the main theorists representing the Essex school approach. The empirical methods and the analytical framework of this school are based on Laclau's development of a post Marxist theory of hegemony (Zienkowski, 2017). I refer to this group of authors as the Essex school.

Glynos (2001) describes the ontological foundation of discourse theory based on Laclau's work:

In this view, society lacks an ultimate signifier with which to make it complete: '[W]e can maintain the concept of ideology and the category of misrecognition ... by inverting their traditional content. The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture' (Laclau, 1991). This re-formulation of

the critical ingredient of ideological functioning by Laclau, though simple, carries consequences. It involves nothing less than a fundamental shift in the theoretical status of ideology. He effectively moves questions of ideology from an epistemological plane to an ontological plane, making distinct his position from a classical Marxist approach to ideology on the one hand, and what we can call a liberal approach to ideology on the other. (p.196)

This highlights one of the core ideas of the discourse theory analysis framework, namely, that society is lacking and will always be lacking. In Lacanian-Zizek terms, society is structured around a hole that is impossible to suture. Ideology for Laclau then becomes that which is necessary to cover up this hole; ideology is what prevents the subjects recognizing society as an impossibility, i.e., ideology covers up the impossibility of suturing the lack of society. It does this in a way that makes society seem possible so subjects can identify with and develop social/political identities. Glynos appears to contrast Laclau's concept of ideology with classical Marxists and liberal concepts of ideology since both of these, unlike Laclau's, are underpinned by an understanding of society as a possible entity. Laclau's reframing of ideology in relation to society, as Glynos notes, alters the conceptualization of both society and ideology. This represents an ontological shift which draws from a Lacanian ontology of the subject. Glynos makes this link to Lacan explicit; he positions Laclau's ontological analysis of ideology within the Lacanian subject's ontology:

This somewhat paradoxical position is sustained by a postulate that governs their social ontology, namely, the 'impossibility of closure', a fundamental dislocation which is meant to characterize every social totality. This postulate—the Lacanian name of which is the 'lack in the symbolic Other'—is axiomatic in the sense that it is not susceptible to empirical proof—at least not in the positivist sense of the term. (2001, p.195)

Lacanian subject ontology does indeed postulate the necessity of constructing a lacking big Other, and for Lacan, 'society' as an Other is surely lacking. However, the lack of the Other can be understood in several ways within Lacanian ontology, i.e., the lack of the Other is a contingent signification and not a fixed signification. Discourse theory chooses not to question the contingency of the lack of society as a



big Other, and rather (as Glynos suggests) takes it as an axiom for their analytical framework. It is accepted as an ontology of society hence their framework does not address the development of the lack of society, but rather focuses the analytic framework on examining how this lack (as a given ontology) of the Other is concealed. As Glynos says:

Laclau thereby shifts the debate on ideology away from epistemological issues of how we can come to know the positively defined substantive 'truth' about society to the ontological issues concerning mechanisms of closure – mechanisms by which the substanceless 'lack in the symbolic Other' is concealed. (2001, p.198)

This quote shows how the discourse theory framework focuses on examining the concealment of the lack (as if lack is always there, a given), rather than examining the development of the lack of the big Other, and the possible success and failures in developing such lack. Hence their framework forecloses any questions related to the different types of lack that might be constructed for society (as an Other), and the possible failure in signifying society as lacking. Their framework takes the lack of the Other as its starting point and examines what comes thereafter. This foreclosure of the contingency of the developing of 'lack in the symbolic Other' becomes more problematic when they discuss the mechanisms of concealments and hegemony of a discursive field. Here is an example of how Laclau conceptualizes the mechanisms of concealment and hegemony:

Let us consider the extreme situation of radical disorganization of the social fabric. In such conditions which are not far away from Hobbes's state of nature – people need *an* order, and the actual content of it becomes a secondary consideration. 'Order' as such has no content, because it not only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder 'order' is present as that which is absent: it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the lack. To hegemonize something, i.e., exactly to carry out this filling function. (We have spoken about 'order', but obviously 'unity', 'liberation', 'revolution', etc belong to the same order of things. Any

term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role. Politics is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers.) (Laclau, 1996, p.44)

The above characterizes one key aspect of the discourse theory framework. The lacking symbolic Other needs an empty signifier to 'carry out this filling function' and become a master signifier that hegemonizes society. 'Order' in the above example plays the role of the master signifier. Laclau also emphasizes that hegemony works in a discursive field that is contingent in nature, i.e., the disorganization of society (in the example above) could have been hegemonized by any number of empty signifiers: 'God', 'Jesus', 'the Force', 'The Leader', etc. This very contingency makes discourse a ground of political struggle. In the example above the empty signifier 'Order' opens up a new contest in the contingent discursive field, namely a political struggle around what order means and how can it be signified. Hence politics, for Laclau, becomes possible as the struggle to fill this impossibility (lack) in society with an empty signifier that belongs to a discursive field that is, by its nature, contingent. Politics is therefore the contested process behind the temporary fixation of this rather precarious game of signification around a master signifier. Adding the word temporary to fixation is of critical importance in Laclau's ontology of society. As society (for Laclau) is impossible to suture, any and all fixation of its meaning is temporary, that is, all attempts to fill (as to conceal) its lack with a master signifier will ultimately fail. These ontological ideas draw on a concept of hegemony out of which Howarth and Glynos (2007) have developed a logics approach, that is a framework to analyse 'how a practice becomes possible, intelligible, and vulnerable' (Glynos, 2008, p.278).

The above quote from Laclau exemplifies the problem of foreclosing the loose, discursive, and contingent characteristics of the lack of the symbolic Other. That is Laclau, throughout his analysis of hegemony and society (1985, 1991, 1994a, 1994b, 1996), makes a presumption about a fixed type of lack in the big Other. Namely, a lack that can be filled (concealed) by an empty signifier. The type of lack in the big Other, is fixed, and its fixed signification is elevated to the level of ontology and taken as outside the Essex school scope of analysis. However, in a Lacanian

ontology of the subject, the symbolic big Other is a discursive construction that is both discursively contingent and does not actually exist. Similarly, the lack of the big Other is both discursively contingent and does not exist. Hence the question arises, why does the discursive contingency in Laclau's analysis (above) apply to the master signifier but not to the lack in the big Other which the master signifier aims to fill/conceal? By foreclosing the discussion about the discursivity and contingency of lack, the discourse theory analytical framework limits its analytical productivity. The theory becomes a very productive analytical tool but only for the one type of lack that it pre-assumes: a lack that can be filled/concealed by an empty master signifier. However, this framework does not offer a productive analysis of situations where the subject struggles to develop a lack of the Other, and in situations when the subject develops a lack in Other but a type of lack that cannot be filled/concealed by an empty signifier. Similarly, the framework produces a very productive analysis of situations where the master-signifier will ultimately fail to conceal the lack of the Other. In summary, the discourse theory framework analyses the struggle of hegemony over the discursive contingency of the master-signifier as a discursive symbolic object, yet it does treat the lack in Other as an equally discursive-contingent symbolic object, hence it does not examine the struggle of hegemony over the discursive contingency of different significations of lack associated to big Others.

The participants of my research (outlined in the methods chapter below) have actually lived an experience similar to the hypothetical situation Laclau gives in the above quote. In January 2011 the police force totally collapsed and there was no policing except for in few critical places, like the airport. Jails were opened, and people were left to their own devices to establish order and security in their neighbourhoods. My participants have also lived through several rounds of political trauma which I will discuss in detail in the chapters of empirical analysis. The interviews I conducted showed that some of my participants' struggles in reproducing their political agency could be characterized by their struggle to find a big Other with a lack that could be filled with a master signifier. That is to say, some of my participants' optimum objective was to reach the kind of lack that Laclau takes as the starting point of his analysis of hegemony. This is an interesting irony because, reading Laclau, I found him to give a good characterization of what my participants

sought to achieve but they talked about their end as if it was already there, as an ontologically given. Their struggle to develop a lacking big Other could not be addressed by Laclau's analysis of hegemony.

Zizek, in his critique of Laclau's work on hegemony, highlights this foreclosure of analysing the lack in the big Other. Zizek (2000) says:

The ultimate question is not which particular content hegemonizes the empty universality (and thus, in the struggle for hegemony, excludes other particular contents); the ultimate question is: which specific content has to be excluded so that the very empty form of universality emerges as the 'battlefield' for hegemony? (p.110)

Although Zizek and Laclau both draws from a Lacanian ontology of the subject, their respective analytical frameworks take different starting points from within the Lacanian ontology. Zizek's analytical framework takes the contingency of the big Other and its lack as a starting point of analysis. That is, from the Lacanian ontology Zizek starts from the point where the big Other does not exist (and of course the lack of the big Other does not exist either), hence it needs to be discursively brought into existence in a particular way, that is: the impossible society needs to be discursively developed in a way that makes it impossible to suture. Such a discursive formulation of society (big Other) is also developed in such a way that its impossibility (Lack) may be temporary concealed by a symbolic object, and it can also be revealed to be concealed again by another symbolic object and so on. Hence, Zizek examines the discursive production of the impossible dialectic between the lacking Other and the master signifier that contentiously conceals and reveals its lack. In the development of this impossible dialectic, the lacking big Other needs to be discursively developed; so, like all discursive objects, the big Other and its lack are contingent and the production of its lack is subject to hegemony (Zizek, 2000). Laclau, on the other hand, takes the production of lack in the Other as given and his analytical framework examines the hegemony over the production of a discursive master signifier that conceals the lack of society. Laclau seems to examine one side of the impossible dialectic that Zizek's analysis is concerned with. For Zizek, as in the quote above, the lack of the big Other as well as the signifier that conceals (hegemonizes) it both are discursive objects developed within a discursive field, hence both are contingent

and both contingencies are subject to hegemonical struggle. In Laclau's analytical framework the lack of the big Other is already assumed to be developed in a way that can be concealed by an empty master signifier. Hence his analysis pre-assumes a fixed type of lack in the big Other. Laclau's assumed lack of the Other has two specific qualities: One, the lack in Other can always be filled/concealed by an empty signifier; and two, the lack of Other can only be temporary concealed by the signifier. That is, the lack of the Other is made such that it can be unfilled/revealed and then refilled/concealed over and over within the hegemonic struggle. The second presumption of a specific type of lack forecloses the possibility of a subject stuck in producing a lack in the Other that, once filled/concealed, may not be unfilled/unconcealed again to be refilled again by another master signifier. Hence, Laclau's choice of starting point for analysis limits the scope of his analytical framework to a specific type of lack production. As a result, Laclau's framework does not examine the development of the impossible dialectic between the lacking Other and the symbolic object, but rather only examines the symbolic object side of the dialectic.

Zizek, in the quote above, seems to question Laclau's ontological starting point. He brings out a critical question that Laclau's analysis forecloses: how was the big Other's lack discursively developed in a way that could be hegemonized (and re-hegemonized) by an empty signifier? Zizek (2000) further points at two levels of analysis that are conflated at Laclau's analytical frame. He says:

So, ultimately, my key point apropos of Butler and Laclau is the same in both cases: the need to distinguish more explicitly between contingency/ substitutability within a certain historical horizon and the more fundamental exclusion/ foreclosure that grounds this very horizon. When Laclau claims that 'if the fullness of society is unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail, although they will be able, in the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems', does he not - potentially, at least - conflate two levels, the struggle for hegemony within a certain horizon and the more fundamental exclusion that sustains this very horizon? (Zizek, 2000, p.108)

Zizek's critique of Laclau can then be re-read in the light of the above discussion as follows: the analysis of hegemony is not only about the contingency within which one signifier may claim the lack of the big Other (i.e. hegemony analysis should not be restricted only to the contingency of symbolic objects); the analysis of hegemony should also include the discursive production of the lack of the big Other (i.e. the wider horizon that constitutes a symbolic object as cause for the subject's desire to conceal such lack). Hence, Zizek locates the analysis of hegemony within an impossible dialectic between lack and signification, rather than Laclau's analysis of hegemony that analyses the struggle between one empty signifier and other empty signifiers.

Zizek's critique seems to suggest two distinct trajectories in the analysis of hegemony. One trajectory of analysis aims to examine the hegemony over the production of a big Other with a lack (that can be filled by a discursive object i.e., an empty master signifier), and the other trajectory examines the hegemony over filling this lack with a discursive object i.e., over particular master signifiers. Both trajectories are entangled with each other to develop an impossible dialectic. On the other hand, Laclau's theory of hegemony seems to conflate both trajectories, hence concealing/conflating the impossible dialectic horizon that hegemony is operating within. That is, hegemony over an impossible dialectic is a quite different concept than a concept of hegemony over a master signifier, which is one end of a pre-existing dialectic.

The critique Zizek brings to Laclau's concept of hegemony does not totally negate Laclau's conceptualization, it rather expands it and warns against the possible conflation that such a restricted view of hegemony may lead to. The above discussion makes the discourse theory analytical framework a quite useful ground for the analysis of political agency, but only in a very particular sense. The Essex school discourse depicts a possible end point for an analysis of political agency. That is, the lack in the Other (Society) that the Essex school fixes is a good description of an end point of political agency. Hence, Essex school discourse analysis depicts a discursive configuration of an already-produced political agency. Therefore, I will use this particular attribute of the school to advance our discussion of ignorance analysis. In the rest of this chapter, I continue discussing the Essex discourse school but NOT

as an analytical frame; I will discuss it as an example of a discourse of an already produced political agency.

In the next three sections I will use examples from the Essex school discourse analysis to elaborate three different discursive configurations that exist in the Essex school as the discourse of an already produced political agency. In the final section of this chapter, I use these discursive configurations to identify ignorance analysis as an analytical tool for examining the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

### **Sexuating the big Other**

In the last chapter I based the ontology of the subject on a reading of two main ontological principles, first was the Lacanian sexuation formula and second was Žižek's definition of the subject. I have also combined the two principles to characterize a vicious symbolic cycle of trauma. There I described how the sexuation formula may be read as the subject positing an impossible dialectic as a cause for having a vicious cycle of trauma as an effect. In this section I will expand the reading of the sexuation formula to understand the development of lack in the big Other.

Lacan in the sexuation formula (Lacan, 1998; Žižek, 2002b; Bernard, 2002; Salecl, 2000) defines two sub-categories out of the subject as a general category for both sub-categories. Recalling an overly simplified version of the formula: the formula defines the masculine category as having an exceptional excess; although all of its members are castrated, there remains, within the category, an exceptional excess; in Freudian terms, this category has the phallus of the Father. The formula goes on to define the Feminine category as the set of subjects that do not have this excess, i.e., the Feminine does not identify with the phallus of the big Other (Father), it rather identifies with the lack of the big Other. In this way the feminine subject identifies itself as a subject lacking a big Other. Both categories are contextualized by an impossible sexual relationship. Now we can consider the two categories that the formula produces as two big Others, i.e., the Masculine and the Feminine. The formula does not seem to aim to define a particular subject as masculine or a feminine, but rather it seems to define the Masculine and the Feminine as two big Others: different subjects choose to understand the masculine Other as not the

feminine Other, or vice versa.

Lacan wrote the sexuation formula using logical formats, these are used to define (produce) sub-categories within a universal category. That is, the input of the formula is a universal category, and the output is two sub-categories. Such logical formulation raises a question about the universal category that both the Feminine and the Masculine are defined as a sub-category of. Regardless of the name we give to this universal category (humanity, society, people, etc.) the input of the formula constitutes a Lacanian bigger Other to the two sub-categories produced by the formula. The formula can be then read as sexuating the bigger Other into two big Others: a feminine (with lack) and a masculine (with excess). And the sexuation does not only produce these two categories, but it produces them in such a way that they have an impossible dialectic between them, i.e., the dialectic is not meant to be resolved. Hence subjects can associate with the feminine big Other as not the masculine big Other (or vice versa); hence the formula does not allow the subject to associate to both, however it allows the subject to identify with the universal bigger Other that both sexuated Others belong to.

Let me take a concrete example to show the sexuation of the big Other at work. The Essex school offers a rich example of a discourse that sexuates the big Other and then associates itself with the feminine Other rather than the masculine Other. The following quote combines the work of three key theorists of the Essex approach: Laclau (the master theorist), Howarth and Stavrakakis. The following is from Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) introduction to discourse theory:

In his more recent work, Laclau has further developed the logic of discursive structuration by introducing the category of the 'empty signifier'. As we have already noted, in discourse theory the social field can never be closed, and political practices attempt to 'fill' this lack of closure. As Laclau puts it, 'although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence'(Laclau, 1994b, p.53). In other words, even if the full closure of the social is not realizable in any actual society, the idea of closure and fullness still functions as such (impossible) ideals. What is necessary for the emergence and function of these ideals is the production of empty signifiers.



[...] Generalizing his argument, he argues that ‘any term which, in a certain political context becomes the signifier of the lack, plays the same role’ (the role of nodal point or ideals for political discourse, *my input*). ‘Politics’, he continues, ‘is possible because the constitutive impossibility of society can only represent itself through the production of empty signifiers’ (Laclau, *Emancipations*, p.44) [...] It is this central impossibility which, as we have already pointed out, makes necessary the production of empty signifiers, a production which in turn makes possible the articulation of political discourse, of partial fixation of meaning. (pp.8-10)

The above quote offers a specific discursive configuration where ‘Society’, as a bigger Other, is split into two opposite categories (i.e., two big Others). The quote talks about the function of the empty signifiers in Society, and it does not define the set of empty signifiers as an external category, on the contrary it treats the set of empty signifiers (or discourse in general) as part of Society, a sub-category of Society. The quote also defines another sub-category of Society that has the lack of empty signifiers, and the quote names it as society as well.

Hence to create an impossible sexuated dialectic within Society, the Essex school makes the following moves. It splits Society (the bigger Other) into two sexuated categories (Others). One category maintains the lack of the bigger Other and carries the same name as the bigger Other (we may call it society with a small s, to distinguish it from Society as the bigger Other) and another category, which also belongs to Society, is the category of empty signifiers (or discourse in a more general terms). Discourse is the category of Society that has the phallus, i.e., the masculine Other, it has a special type of excess within it. That is, there is an excess in discourse (a phallus) that is described in the above quote to be able to fill the lack, albeit temporarily, and fix meaning, albeit temporarily. The rest of Society, i.e., society that is not the set of empty signifiers, maintains the lack of the bigger Other, and the above quote calls this society, hence society as such is the feminine Other. There are two more important moves in the sexuation of the Society in the above quote. One is defining subjectivity with such a split and the other is defining jouissance.

The society (as the category of lack) in the above discursive configuration is the category that is ascribed with agency and will. Hence hegemony is presented between the members of the lacking society over the empty signifiers, or discourse in general. Moreover, the quote shows that the winner of the hegemonic struggle will enjoy the empty signifier of their choice to fill their own lack, and fix their meaning, albeit temporarily. In this way, the quote above may be read to represent a feminine subjectivity as it associates agency with the lacking Other (the feminine society) and characterizes hegemony as the struggle over getting the phallus (the excess) of the masculine category, while at same time presenting this excess (phallus) as an object that does not alter the ontological lack of the subject, i.e., society (where subjects belong) will always be lacking regardless of the phallus. So, agency in the above quote belongs to the category of lack (the feminine) which temporarily needs the phallus, as an empty signifier, to fix its lack. This links to the discussion in the previous section: the feminine subjectivity of the Essex school may explain its focus on examining discourse and empty master signifiers, i.e., its focus on the phallus of society, as produced by their own way of sexuating Society. I will have more examples in the following sections to elaborate the feminine subjectivity exhibited in the Essex school approach.

The sexuation of Society (as bigger Other) in the above quote shows a final important move, that is characterizing the jouissance of the Other. The discursive configuration in the quote emphasizes the need/necessity for the temporary filling of the lack by a master signifier, in other words the necessity of the intercourse between the feminine category and the excess in the masculine category. The Essex school attributes the emergence of new politics and the political agency of society to this intercourse dynamic. That is, the bigger Other's agency (Society) is conditioned by the intercourse between the masculine and the feminine Others. This may be read as the characterization of the jouissance of the Other. In the next sections I expand on the jouissance of the Other and the different dynamics associated with the intercourse that conditions the Other's agency and jouissance.

In this section I have suggested that Laclau offers an initial sexuation of Society that is needed to develop a full-blown discourse of political agency. I have discussed three discursive moves: (1) splitting Society into a masculine Other (i.e., discourse)

that is signified with excess (phallus), and a feminine Other (i.e., society) denoted with ontological lack. (2) associating agency and subjectivity with one of these two big Others. In Laclau's case, he associated subjectivity and agency with the feminine Other, i.e., with ontological lack. (3) conditioning the agency of the bigger Other on a type of intercourse between the feminine Other (society) and the phallus of the masculine Other (master signifier). In the next two sections I discuss two more discursive dynamics associated with the sexuation of the Other: the development of an erotic field and the development of a hysteric field. Then the ground will be ready to introduce ignorance analysis for political agency in the final section of this chapter. In the following, I continue using the Essex school as an example of a well-developed discourse of political agency.

### **The Erotic Field**

By sexuating Society into Feminine and Masculine Laclau gave the Essex school the tools to develop a powerful discourse of political agency. This school articulates politics as the various dynamics through which different groups in society succeed in bringing a master- empty signifier to fill/conceal the lack of society over all other possible empty signifiers. Politics is also the dynamics of how other competing groups contest the master signifier and attempt to re-conceal the lack with another empty signifier (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 2008; Stavrakakis, 1999). Glynos and Howarth (2007) have outlined three broad categories of the dynamics of discursive hegemony, namely: social logics, political logics, and fantasmatic logic. These logics were mainly developed to bring Laclau's analysis of hegemony (i.e., Laclau's sexuation of Society) to social research. The political logic of the Essex school describes many possible discursive moves, such as: the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, constructing antagonism, dislocation, counter logics, and hegemony (Laclau, 1994a, 1994b; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000; Howarth & Torfing, 2005; Howarth, 2000, 2004, 2005; Glynos and Howarth 2008). These discursive moves are not associated with Society as a bigger Other, but are rather associated with symbolic members of Society, such as: state, party, union, movements, institutions, etc. That is, political logic is concerned with analysing the actions of big Others and how they affect Society at large as the bigger Other that all these big Others belong to. However, political logic does not particularly address the

individual's choices/ desire/ agency within these local groups; this level of analysis is addressed by the idea of Fantasmatic logic.

The political logic explains some general dynamics by which some local big Others (like, multinational corporations, capitalist parties, banks, governments etc.) bring an empty signifier to hegemonize the discursive field over other contesting empty signifiers and become the master signifier filling society's lack. This logic also shows how an organization of society over some master signifier may lead to an exploitative / oppressive social order for Society at large (as the bigger Other), and how different local big Others (emerging movements, leftist group, parties, cooperative institutions) may use the same discursive dynamics to interrupt the exploitative/oppressive order by challenging the discursive hegemony of the master signifier filling the lack of society. Politics in this way may be read as setting the conditions for jouissance at the level of the bigger Other where change in Society at large may happen for better or for worse. In this way, the Essex political logic can be read as charting the routes that lead to an intercourse of a master-signifier (phallus of the Masculine) hegemonizing the lack of Society (Feminine), which, in turn, leads to jouissance at the bigger Other level (Society).

Hence, the Essex political logic may be read as charting routes to transform the jouissance at the level of the bigger Other to the level of local big Other level. That is, it transforms the agency of the intercourse one level down, from the bigger Other to local big Others. And local big Others (like parties, institutions, movements, etc.) are closer to the subject level, political agency is now brought closer to the subject's grasp. I will call this type of discursive configurations an erotic field. That is, the erotic field charts discursive routes that transform the jouissance of intercourse at the bigger Other level one step down to the level of the big Other.

The erotic field, like the Essex school political logic, may be used to produce many erotic narratives (aka political agendas) that may stimulate the desire of some subjects for political agency. For instance, an erotic narrative may use the antagonistic move in the Essex school to identify a local Other as an antagonistic Other (for example: a collaboration, a party, a bank, etc.), such anastigmatic Other is the local Other maintaining the hegemony of the exploitive master-signifier over the discursive field. The narrative may then use symbolic moves such as equivalence or

difference to develop a political agenda to combat the hegemony of the antagonistic master-signifier. Then the narrative can use the sexuation of society to convince people that if they follow their political agenda jouissance (change) at the level of the bigger Other (Society) will finally happen. These types of narratives, that bring jouissance at the bigger Other level closer to the subject's level, are erotic; they aim to solicit the subject's political agency by showing a way to get the jouissance of the bigger Other through working on the big Other. Such erotic narratives are facilitated by an erotic discursive field, like the Essex logic of politics, which chart discursive routes that transform the jouissance one level down from the bigger Other to the big Other. This is why I suggest that the political logic of the Essex school functions as an erotic field for Laclau's sexuated Society (as a bigger Other). Let me elaborate the erotic field with a concrete example from the Essex school.

Glynos' (2001, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2011, 2012, 2014) presentation of a fantasmatic logic takes the erotic field one step further. The fantasmatic logic described in Glynos' writing builds on the political level and further transfers the jouissance of the bigger Other (which has already been transferred by the political logic from the bigger Other to local big Others) and transfer it further to the individual subject's level. In the following I use examples from Glynos' writing to illustrate this development of erotic field around Laclau's sexuated bigger Other.

Glynos explains how the fantasmatic logic plays a critical role in the hegemony of a social practice, he says:

Insofar as fantasies prevent or make difficult the politicization of existing social relations, relations of subordination inclusive, one can say that fantasy helps reinforce the status quo. The logic of fantasy, then, can be construed as a narrative affirmed by workers, often unconsciously, preventing the contestation of normatively suspect social norms, and making less visible possible counter-logics. (2008a, p.284)

The counter-logics that Glynos refers to here are alternative ways to re-signify lack and re-organize a given social practice. The existence of an alternative is assumed to be available in any discursively formulated social practice. These available counter-logics have the potential to change social practice. Glynos explains that the

subject's engagement in the logic of fantasy renders these available (and liberating) counter-logics invisible. Hence, the issue that Glynos addresses in his development of fantasmatic logic is why individual subjects are gripped by a dominant social practice, even when the practice is exploitive and despite the availability of alternative discursive formations that could liberate subjects? The above quote sums up the answer. Glynos (2001, 2008a, 2011) proposes that the grip of an exploitive discourse on a subject is due to two factors related to fantasies. The first factor is that subjects construct fantasmatic narratives based on the exploitive social order and, within these fantasmatic narratives, subjects enjoy transgression, escape, and triumph over the status quo (i.e., the dominant social order). The second factor has to do with the subject's mode of enjoyment of those fantasies. Glynos describes two modes of subject enjoyment and attachment to fantasies. One he calls it the ethical mode of enjoyment of fantasies, and the second he calls it the ideological mode of enjoyment. He describes them in the following:

There is a mode of enjoyment associated with closure, and a mode of enjoyment associated with openness. While the former has a 'logic', more specifically a fantasmatic logic, which grips through transgression and guilt, the latter escapes attempt at capture – indeed, it appears to entail the dissolution of such a logic. Instead, it is characterized by an alternative ethos which signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters. If the former can be linked to an ideological mode of being, then we could say that the fidelity to contingency can be linked to an ethical mode of being. (2008a, p.291)

Here Glynos brings political agency down to the subject's level. The subject can choose to enjoy its fantasy ethically and stay open to the contingency within the discursive field, or the subject can choose the fixation of enjoyment of fantasy and ideologically fixate the discursive field (around the hegemonic master-signifier) and in return it sustains the fixation on transgression/escape/triumph fantasies that are produced based on the existing exploitive social order. Hence, for Glynos (ibid), ideological fantasies and their enjoyment actually sustain the status quo. Glynos asserts that the consequence of the subject's choice regarding the mode of enjoyment of its fantasies has far reaching implications: 'there is a general

consensus in the literature that the mode of enjoyment associated with an ethics of openness is to be preferred, especially when thinking critically about the political economy in general and about contemplating the transformation of the political economy of workplace in particular' (ibid, p.292).

In the same paper Glynos describes an attitude of openness towards ideological fantasies as an 'ethical attachment' to fantasies and he describes the attitude of fixation and closeness to fantasies as an 'ideological attachment' to fantasies. His choice of terms here is telling; the word 'ethical' suggests a higher preference, it also indicates a subject's choice and responsibility. Also in the same paper, Glynos maps different routes of possible change in the subject's modes of attachment to its fantasies, i.e., from an ideological attachment to an ethical attachment, and vice versa. Glynos positions the change in the mode of attachment to fantasy at the subject level, and subsequently (as quoted above), links this to a change in the political economy of a particular community. That is, he links changes in the subject level (mode of attachment to fantasy) to changes in the big Other level (change in the political economy of a community). He further associates an ethical mode of attachment with the subject's ability to see available counter-logics that have the potential to change the social order for the better: 'My exploration suggests that with detachment from (rather abandonment of) fantasy comes the possibility of realizing the potential for *political resignification*.' (ibid, p. 291). This can be read as a further link between changes in the subject level that condition changes in the discourse in society at large, i.e., change at the level of the bigger Other.

In summary, fantasmatic logic identifies two elements that belong to the subject level: fantasy content and mode of enjoyment/attachment to fantasies. The logic then links these two elements to political change at the big Other level (groups, practices in institutions, local community, etc. The political logic that was discussed earlier in this section, has already established the link between the actions of big Others to changes to the bigger Other level (Society at large). This exemplifies the development of an erotic discursive field, where the jouissance of the bigger Other (established by sexuating the Other) is transferred two levels down. That is, firstly jouissance is transferred once to the big Other level via the political logic that charts conditions of change of hegemony at Society on the actions of local Groups and

Parties. Then, in a second move, jouissance is transferred by the fantasmatic logic that says conditions change in practice (and hegemony within local groups) onto the individual subject's fantasy content and mode of attachment to its fantasies. In other words, the erotic field brings the agency of the intercourse at the big Other level to the agency of the subject level. Hence, within such erotic discursive field individual subjects may find/develop a role for themselves to influence the intercourse of a sexuated 'Society', i.e., the sexuated Other. The fantasmatic logic in addition with the political logic of the Essex school build an erotic discursive field for Laclau's sexuation of Society qua Other.

In this section I have discussed the Essex school as an example of developing an erotic discursive field for political agency. The erotic discursive field pushes the flow of signification in a specific direction, that is from the jouissance at the bigger Other level to performances at big Others level then to performances at subject level. I have discussed the Essex political logic as an example of a first level of erotica, where discursive routes are charted to push different flows of significations in one direction, that is: from the bigger Other's jouissance to the performances of big Others; and I have also discussed the Essex fantasmatic logic as an example of a second level of erotica, where it chart further routes to push flows of significations from the level of local big Others to the level of subjects. As such, the erotic discursive field facilitates the production of many different chains of signification mobilized by the field's push into the erotic direction, i.e., a direction that ends by setting the conditions of an intercourse at the level of Others within performances at the level of subjects.

In the next section I look at the reverse flow of significations and discuss the development of the hysteric discursive field which pulls flows of signification upwards: from the level of subjects to big Others and then bigger Others. I continue using the school of Essex as a model of a well-established discourse of political agency.

### **The Hysteric Field**

The Essex discourse theory analysis often presents the erotic field (discussed above) coupled with another discursive field, the hysteric discursive field. The



coupling of these fields is quite productive in developing a discourse of political agency. In this section I will bring examples from the Essex school to elaborate the hysteric discursive field and explore how it is being coupled with the erotic field.

Let me recall a previous quote from Glynos, he said:

Insofar as fantasies prevent or make difficult the politicization of existing social relations, relations of subordination inclusive, one can say that fantasy helps reinforce the status quo. The logic of fantasy, then, can be construed as a narrative affirmed by workers, often unconsciously, preventing the contestation of normatively suspect social norms, and making less visible possible counter-logics. (2008a, p.284)

In the previous section I discussed this quote and the logic of fantasy as an example of developing an erotic discursive field. In the same paper Glynos follows his outline of fantasmatic logic with a section that couples the hysteric field with the erotic field. The section is entitled 'Beyond the logic of fantasy?' (2008a, p.287). He starts it by pointing to a question: 'if one accepts the ideological aspect of a subject's fantasmatic engagement in the context of a public institution or a capitalist firm, it is natural to ask whether economic production organized differently also yields a difference in the type of relations subjects have toward their fantasies (for example, not relying on fantasies to eschew radical contingency).' (ibid, p.287). This question may be rephrased as follows: after we have established that performance at subject level, as per fantasmatic logic, is linked to intercourse and jouissance at the level of the bigger Other (Society), we then need to ask whether this matters; that is, if intercourse and jouissance happen at the level of the bigger Other (Society) could this be transferred back (would trickle down) to the subject/ individual level?

Glynos offers a way to find out whether the intercourse and jouissance of the Other matters to the subject. For this, he draws on examples from an organization that he thinks actually changed and re-organized their working practices based on a different master-signifier, i.e., there was an intercourse of the Other. Glynos discusses an ethnographic study conducted by Byrne and Healy (2006) exploring cooperative

firms (coops). Cooperative firms are firms that are organized differently from capitalist corporations; work practices in cooperative firms are organized on a discourse centered on a non-capitalist master-signifier. Glynos then reports what happened to the subjects in those workplaces (that had already changed the master-signifier within their institutions (Other)). He reports on what the study found from interviewing employees in these coops:

Interviewees tried to express what is involved in this head-on confrontation by saying that conflict and antagonism needed to be expressed rather than avoided, thus preventing their repression in the form of simmering feelings of resentment or their incorporation into heavily invested fantasies of exclusion and entitlement. Moreover cooperative workers in the case examined tended not to experience the legal, social, and other norms comprising the wider context within which the cooperative firm must operate 'as a Law to be obeyed or transgressed', nor did they invest their decision and chosen courses of action with secretly wished-for guarantees that could easily lead to disillusion. (ibid,p.288)

By this Glynos confirmed an answer to his earlier question, positive changes at the subject level can be confirmed as a result of the intercourse at the big Other level. In other words, the quote above may be reread to say: the subjects of the study quoted are not different because some quality in themselves as individuals, on the contrary these subjects are different because they are subjects of the coop and not subjects of a capitalist cooperation. This discursive formulation is flowing in the opposite direction to the erotic field. Here Glynos aims to associate positive changes already happening at the subject level (such as: workers no longer feel resentment, no entitlement, and they do not secretly wish for a guarantee) to the coop (local Other) that organized its work-practice discourse around a non-capitalist master-signifier. Or, to put it another way, unlike corporates that organizes their work-practice discourses on capitalist master-signifiers (like profit), the coops have dislocated this capitalist master-signifier and replaced it with a new one (like worker-owner). Glynos uses the above study to show that the new jouissance at the subject level is due to a new intercourse with a non-capitalist master signifier at the coop level (i.e., an intercourse at the local Other level). I call this direction of flow of significations a

hysteric flow because hysteria (in the Lacanian literature) denotes a dynamic in which the subject (jouissance) is signified by becoming the object of desire of Other, that is, the hysteric dynamic pushes the subject to become an effect of the Other's jouissance (Fink, 1999, 2004; Gessert, 2014). Similarly, the hysteric flow of significations, as the above quote indicates, links the subject jouissance to the jouissance of the big Other, i.e., the positive changes that happened for the subjects are a result/an effect of the jouissance of the Other. The underlying direction of signification in the above quote is the subjugation to the Other: a hysteric flow of significations.

Moreover, in the hysteric mode, the subject does not question the desire of the Other, does not bring out its lack. On the contrary, it guesses/anticipates the desire of the Other and works to become its object cause (Fink, 1999, 2004; Gessert, 2014). In the quote above, Glynos portrays the type of employees that are desired by Society or the bigger Other, the desired employees are those who do not resent or seek to transgress the law. The desire of the Other is guessed/assumed not questioned or scrutinized, and the flow of significations in the quote is focused on linking the subject to these desires of the Other. The lack of these desires of the Other (coop) is not offered for questioning in the above configuration. In hysteria the subject represses the lack of the big Other (Fink 1999, 2004; Gessert 2014), and the focus remains on knowing and becoming the desire of the Other.

This is an example of the discursive field of the hysteric: a discursive configuration that charts routes to associate positive changes (jouissance) at the subject level to an intercourse at the big Other and the bigger Other levels. Glynos found it 'natural' to couple the erotic flow of significations, the fantasmatic logic, with the hysteric flow of significations in a section titled "logic of fantasy?". A similar erotic-hysteric coupling can be observed throughout the logics approach (as developed by Howarth and Glynos (2007)).

The Essex school is a well-developed model of a discourse of political agency. They exhibit the production of a fully reproductive cycle of political agency, regenerated by the upwards pull of the hysteric field towards the big Others and the downwards push of the erotic field towards the subject.

Now I think the ground is prepared and I am able to offer a conceptualization of ignorance analysis for political agency.

### **Ignorance analysis of political agency**

So far in this chapter, I have outlined my critique of the Essex school as an analytical frame for the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts. However, I accepted the Essex school's discourse as a productive example of a well-developed discourse on a pre-existing political agency. I then identified within this discourse two types of flows of signification which relate the subject to the Other. In this section I will use the two flows of significations – erotic and hysteric – to define ignorance analysis as an analytical frame specific to examining the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts. The following diagram depicts ignorance analysis.

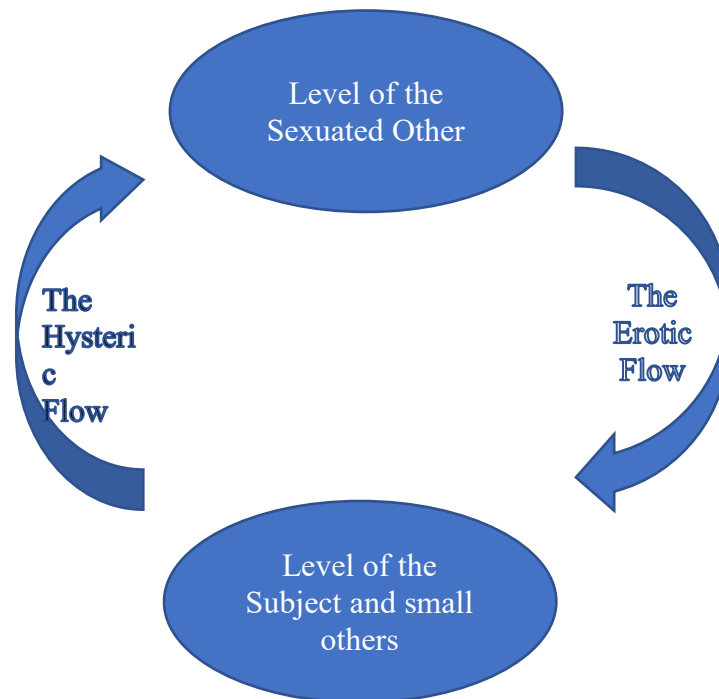


Diagram 3: Ignorance analysis

Now let me relate this diagram of ignorance analysis to political agency. The subject may appear to have political agency when it discursively conditions change at the big Other level (such as: local community, company, institution, etc.) or the bigger Other level (Society, Country, People, Humanity, etc.) with performance at the subjects' level (or, in Lacanian terms, the small others' level). For example, Glynos showed how changes in the subjects' attachment to their own ideological fantasies (a performance at the subject level) may lead to changes in the dominant discourse at level of local big Other, as in a company. The analysis so far has shown a particular discursive formulation that is associated with the production of a discourse of political agency. Such discursive formulation consists of two main moves. First the sexuating of the Other into two categories with an impossible dialectic between them. Sexuating the big Other conditions the change at the big Other's level into an

intercourse between two opposite categories of the big Other: the feminine category of lack and masculine category of phallus (excess). Such sexuation allows for a discursive configuration where any change at the big Other level is seen as a conditional incident. The second move is the coupling of two flows of significations, i.e., developing the hysteric flow coupled with the erotic flow of significations.

These two main moves constitute an analytical frame that can be used to examine the reproduction of political agency within the speech of my participants. I call this analytical tool 'ignorance analysis' and suggest that this enables the examination of the above discursive formulations relating the subject to the Other(s) within the speech of participants in an interview. To sum up, ignorance analysis examines the following:

I) the sexuation of the Other.

Ignorance analysis here is concerned with the development of an impossible sexuated relationship between two categories within the Other, one denoted with excess and the other denoted with lack. Ignorance analysis does not identify with either the feminine or masculine position. It is concerned with the development of the impossibility between the two and the transformation of this impossibility to a temporary intercourse that leads to change. Hence, Ignorance examines the subject's struggle to develop a lack in the big Other which is small enough to be filled by an empty signifier. The analysis also examines the subject's struggle to subjectify (identify with) one of the two categories and develop the need for an intercourse with the other category.

This is the foundational move for examining the reproduction of political agency within the speech of research participants.

II) The coupling of the erotic field with the hysteric field

Ignorance analysis here examines the subject's development of a vicious cycle of signification around the sexuated Other. The analysis at this level examines the subject's struggle to reach a balance between the push of the erotic flow and the pull

of the hysteric flow to produce a vicious cycle of significations which keeps the subject oscillating in the symbolic world of the Others.

Finally, these ignorance dynamics are not separate, nor do they constitute a linear progression. Ignorance analysis examines the recursive relations between these dynamics. The aim of ignorance analysis is to examine the degree to which these ignorance dynamics are entangled to enable (or hinder) each other to produce a vicious symbolic cycle around the Other, a symbolic cycle that is vicious enough to shift the impossibility of the subject encounter with its Real into a symbolic world of sexuated Others. The Essex school exhibits a brilliant balance between these discursive moves, one that is able to transform the impossibility of the subject into the impossibility of Society and in turn produce a discourse of political agency.

This chapter has further rendered political agency as a re-production of a cycle of symbolic ignorance that is vicious enough to swallow the intrusion of the Real into the subject's symbolic order. This chapter has also defined ignorance analysis as a tool to examine the production of this vicious cycle of symbolic ignorance. This covers enough theoretical ground to engage with the analysis in three empirical cases, each at a different stage of the reproduction of political agency. All are struggling with the politically traumatic Egyptian context. However, before delving into the analysis of the empirical cases, in the next chapter I outline the empirical research method and discuss the ethical dilemmas associated with using a psychosocial perspective in empirical research.

## Chapter Four

### The Research Method

In this chapter I discuss the research method used in this investigation. The chapter is divided into three parts: first I will discuss the researcher's position in the investigation process; second, I discuss the empirical method used to generate data, which includes the selection of participants, the interviewing process the interviewing method, and then how I transcribed Arabic interviews into English transcripts. Finally, I address the ethical considerations that were essential for this psychosocial research.

#### 1- Ignorance as Epistemology: The Researcher's Position

In this section I will look at the researcher's ignorance production and how it shapes the research process. In this context, I will examine the researcher's encounter with their own subject Lack within research. Based on the Lacanian subject's ontology (discussed in chapter two), the subject produces ignorance in response to the parts of its context in which the subject cannot generate a possible agency. Research, or the quest for knowledge in general, is one of the important areas where the subject encounters its own Lack, i.e., the impossibility to know All. At the inauguration of a piece of research, the researcher may encounter three categories of knowledge: things they already know about the subject (let me call this category 'the knowns'), things they do not know yet but it would be possible to come to know within the research context and resources (let me call this category 'the knowable'), and things that they do not know but know it will not be possible to know within the research context (Let me call this category 'the unknowable'). These categories are not necessarily distinct areas of knowledge; they are often entwined and inseparable within particular research topics. Researching the subject reproduction of agency, I encountered these three categories of knowledge: the known, the knowable, and the unknowable, and they were highly entangled in my area of investigation. Given such entanglements the unknowable is potentially crippling to the researcher's scientific



agency. Hence one way to neutralize this paralyzing layer (that is already entangled with the known and the knowable) is by the production of ignorance. Ignorance production here aims to neutralize the subject's Lack encountered in the field of knowledge to boost the subject's scientific agency to keep on engaging in learning and developing. Hence the production of ignorance (in research) has a complicated role: it has to neutralize the researcher's encounter with the unknowable without eradicating parts of the already known in the field while simultaneously empowering the researcher's scientific agency so they can explore the knowable in the field. Let me give an example to elaborate the epistemology of ignorance and its productivity in physics.

The electron in physics is an example of an ignorance production that facilitates scientific agency. School students are taught that the material we observe is made of tiny little particles called atoms. Atoms consist of smaller tiny particles organized as a positively charged nucleus at the centre and negatively charged electrons orbiting around the nucleus; and the number of electrons distributed over different orbits determines the electrical properties of different types of matter. This particle model was developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and pioneered by T.T. Thomson – it was an invention (although it was called discovery) of electrons to allow and understanding of the electrical properties of matter. At that time physicists had no technical ability to observe matter's behaviour at a sub-atomic level (Thomson, 1998), hence the model was theorized based on the matter's behaviour at mass level. Moreover, when the electron was first proposed as an explanation for the electromagnetic properties of matter, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was only one of several competing models explaining the same behaviour of matter (Tooper 1971; Dolby 1976). Nevertheless, the model dominated science education and empowered scientist in their work to discover more and develop new technologies. T.T. Thomson won the Nobel prize for physics and was knighted in the UK for his significant contributions to human knowledge (Thomson 1998).

Now with more advanced technical capabilities physicists are able to observe matter's behaviour at micro-levels in ways that were not possible in Thomson's time. As a result, many experiments have produced evidence that contradicts the main premises of the particle model. They observed behaviour the matter at the micro-

level that contradicts the particle model (Anastopoulos 2008; Morison 2011). As a result, new models of matter emerged to explain these newly observed behaviours, of these the dominant modern model is the quantum model of matter. Now in science textbooks there are two dominant models that explain matter at an atomic level: the particle model and the quantum model (also presented as 'modern physics' in some textbooks). The two models are not in total agreement, in fact they produce contradictory explanations for understanding key aspects of matter. The interesting point here is that despite the radical change of perception of our understanding of matter, to the degree that the scientific community no longer sees the particle model as the truth of matter, and despite all the recent scientific developments, this model is still widely taught in schools as a matter of fact and is still very productive in empowering the scientists' efforts to develop new technologies. Moreover, despite significant changes in theoretical models, all the technologies developed on the basis of the old model still functioning quite well (like the cable-based telecommunication industry for example). Similarly, if new advances in measurements and observation tools emerge in the future and physicists learn more about matter to the extent that they come to render the quantum model of matter obsolete, we will still expect that all technologies built on the assumptions of the quantum model of matter (like laser equipment for instance) to keep functioning regardless of the truth value of the theoretical models that empowered the scientists to develop them.

The above sequence of stating the obvious raises an important epistemological question: what roles do theoretical models (like the electron) play in research and the development of new technologies? They seem to boost scientists' agency, i.e., they support scientists' efforts in developing new technologies. Yet, after they have been used to produce planes, cars, mobiles, etc. it does not really matter if they are found to be right, wrong, or inadequate. We can replace them easily and nothing will happen to the products these models were instrumental in developing. These theoretical models seem to have more effect on the scientists' agency rather than on the technologies that the scientists discover or develop.

From a Lacanian point of view an epistemology of ignorance may help understand the epistemological role the models play in the development of scientific agency.

Ignorance structures (like the particle model of matter) empower researchers by isolating and neutralizing the paralyzing effect of the unknowable within their particular field without eliminating what is already known or obstructing the path to exploring the potentially knowable in that particular field of knowledge. However, if ignorance is overdone, it may eliminate useful knowledge and if it is underdone it risks the subject's encounter with its own Lack and damaging its agency. Hence, producing ignorance here does not mean that saying anything about the matter that we cannot know at the time. On the contrary, ignorance structures are carefully constructed discursive structures created by experts in a particular field to empower researchers in that field to transform their own encounter with their own Lack. I will call this particular way of dealing with subject's Lack in fields of knowledge 'epistemological ignorance', to distinguish the term from the common significations of ignorance as an unproductive or destructive form of speech. It is important to note here that I am not suggesting epistemological ignorance as the only way of dealing with the subject's Lack, however, I suggest it as one way of dealing with the subject's Lack in the field of knowledge and which I chose to position my research methodology within. It is equally important to note that I am not suggesting that the electron or theoretical models in general have only one role to play in science, i.e., they are not only epistemological ignorance. I acknowledge that they probably play other roles in science, however here I am highlighting a particular role they play in regard to the researchers' production of scientific agency as they encounter their own subject's Lack in the field of knowledge.

I therefore base my research on the psychoanalytical epistemological ignorance approach, more specifically, the Freudian invention of the unconscious. The unconscious in social science, like the electron in the physical sciences, is an example of a very productive ignorance structure. From an epistemological ignorance perspective, psychoanalysis is a very special type of ignorance structure, it is a doubly folded theory of ignorance. In fold one, it is like the particle model in physics, the Freudian model of mind is built around Freud's invention of the unconscious, and the model has the capacity to produce epistemological ignorance for many applications in social sciences. And like the electron in the particle model, the unconscious most likely does not exist, yet it does not matter, because its value is based on its symbolic existence; its value is in the degree of empowerment it

yields for the scientific agency of researchers. In the second fold, psychoanalysis is quite different to physics. Psychoanalysis' object of study is ignorance itself, that is the study of the production of ignorance in individual subjects. Lacanian Psychoanalysis (as a therapeutic approach) has been described by Fink (2013) and Leader (2011) as helping clients (analysands) to produce new symbolizations, new non-sense, new empty signification, which facilitate changes in the flow of desire that is otherwise stuck in a position confronting Lack.

As such psychoanalysis is a compound ignorance structure; it simultaneously addresses two entangled subjects' Lack within the therapy room: the Lack of the analyst (therapist) as she encounters her Lack in helping the analysand (client) deal with his own Lack. Hence psychoanalysis offers a two-dimensional (two-fold) ignorance structure, it offers the therapist a special epistemological ignorance (such as the unconscious dynamics) to help her neutralize her own subject's Lack in the context of offering therapy to a client, and at the same time psychoanalysis offers the client the ability to reproduce his own ignorance to neutralize his own subject's Lack within some context of his life. The key point here is that, as an epistemology of ignorance, psychoanalysis is not about facts on both sides (the therapists and the client). That is, it is not about the truth of the client or the therapists, it is not about understanding the human condition, and it does not aim to produce a coherent understanding within the analyst about the client or within the client about his unconscious (Žižek, 1989, 1992; Frosh, 1989, 2008; Fink 2013; Leader 2011). Hence, psychoanalysis is, in part at least, about a compound engagement with epistemological ignorance.

Now transferring this psychoanalytical epistemology to empirical research is a difficult task. One particular group of Lacanian psychosocial researchers have made significant contributions in transferring the psychoanalytical epistemology to empirical research. I will call this group the Birkbeck approach. I classify it as a group approach because this group of researchers cross collaborated on many publications, and they cross reference each other especially on issues regarding the transferability of psychoanalytic theory to social research. In addition, they share the same fundamental Lacanian premises in their approach to the issue of psychoanalytic transferability, and at some point or another the prominent names

within this approach worked in Birkbeck's Department of Psychosocial Studies. Prominent names and interlinked works of this group include: Stephen Frosh, Lisa Baraitser, Lisa Saville Young, Derek Hook, and Ian Parker. Saville Young (2009) characterizes the epistemology of the Birkbeck approach in the following quote:

In the same way, Frosh (2008b) argues that narrative interpretation leading to a fantasy of integration and wholeness is illusory, rather 'interruption' should replace 'interpretation' where 'what is offered is not a sense of holistic closure, but rather a set of provoking questions' (p.11). A Lacanian analysis of text does not convey hidden meaning because there is no final hidden meaning, but 'the fundamental openness of utterances' (Georgaca, 2001, p.226) so that the subject can never be fully known or fixed but remains resistive (Frosh, 2007). What is central to 'not knowing' in this psychosocial research is a Lacanian emphasis on the multiplicity and polyvocality of the text which is 'read' in ways that open out interpretation rather than close them down to fix on one or other final reading (Saville Young & Frosh, in press-b) (p.19)

Saville-Young here describes a common response within this group to the challenges of transferring ignorance as epistemology from psychoanalytical therapy settings to social research settings. The main essence of this response is to maintain a 'not knowing' position within social research by opposing the use of psychoanalysis to develop a complete coherent narrative about participants in social research. They also resist/reject claims of authoritative knowledge about the truth of the subject that may be claimed from applying a psychoanalytical framework to interview material produced within social research. Hence, they also resist closed interpretations that produce a final analysis and insist on highlighting the multiplicity and the indeterminacy of meaning within any discourse analysis (Frosh, 2010, 2016, 2017; Saville Young & Frosh, 2009, 2010; Pavón-Cuéllar & Parker, 2013; Parker & Hook 2008; Parker 1997, 2005, 2010).

The centrality of highlighting the 'not knowing' position within psychosocial research becomes clearer when the Birkbeck approach criticizes other psychosocial researchers that are more grounded in Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical framework. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) set the difference between the two schools of psychosocial researchers:

Loosely, Kleinian interpretive approaches, as they are used in psychosocial research, seek to make narrative sense of the material, telling a story of a subject's unconscious life, for example, or her or his investments in certain problematic positions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005). This connects with the way in which Kleinian theory retains a "redemptive" element in it (Stonebridge, 1998), both explicitly in the notion of reparation and implicitly through its therapeutic trajectory. It recognizes the split nature of the subject – hence is genuinely psychoanalytic – but pursues a sense-making agenda that makes everything come together in the end. (p.354-355).

The opposition of the 'sense-making agenda that makes everything come together in the end' is what differentiates the Birkbeck approach's epistemological position. And as discussed, the way they exercise this opposition to the 'sense-making agenda' is by disrupting it, by highlighting the non-sense junctures within a text, and by revealing the unknowable that is always entangled with the knowable in the analysis of any discourse. Hence, from the epistemology of ignorance perspective that is discussed so far in this section, I may summarize the Birkbeck approach to transferring the psychoanalytical epistemology to social research as follows: to maintain the 'not knowing' epistemological position of the researcher in social research, the Birkbeck approach suggests the researcher acknowledge and identify the unknowable that is entangled with the known and the knowable in her research; and to maintain the 'not knowing' position. Methodologically the Birkbeck approach suggests the researcher reveal the indeterminacy, the multiplicity, the incompleteness, and the non-closure that is always present in any given discourse. Hence revealing the unknowable within discourse becomes a central issue for the Birkbeck approach to discourse analysis (Saville Young & Frosh, 2009).

Although I agree with the centrality of an epistemology of ignorance in psychosocial research, I disagree with the centrality of this particular approach as a response to transferring an epistemology of ignorance from psychoanalysis to social research. That is, highlighting the unknowable is not the only way to bring an epistemology of ignorance to the centre of social research, and it is not always the best way to make such a transformation.

The Birkbeck approach may be useful for transferring an epistemology of ignorance to social research in some particular research topics and contexts. However, in other research topics/contexts the Birkbeck approach is easier said than done and relying solely on it may become problematic. The following are references of three examples of analyses produced by Birkbeck researchers that deviated from their own approach in particular cases; the following examples produce analyses that can be read as a holistic coherent interpretation that uses a psychoanalytical framework to claim the truth of the subject's unconscious life, i.e., contrary to their own approach. Here are references to the three examples that exemplify Birkbeck researchers' analysis that needed to deviate from their own approach: Saville Young and Frosh (2010), Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman (2005), and Parker (2010).

Having said that, I still strongly agree with the two underlying challenges that the Birkbeck group identified in doing Lacanian informed psychosocial research. The first challenge is epistemological: how to transfer an epistemology of ignorance (or as Young in the quote above calls it the not knowing position) from Lacanian psychoanalysis to social research; and the second challenge is ethical: how to ethically utilize Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts and methodologies into social research. As Hook (2018) has highlighted, these two challenges are related. I discuss the ethical challenge below. First, in the remainder of this section, I highlight the theoretical choices I made regarding transferring the epistemology of ignorance from Lacanian psychoanalysis to social research.

As already mentioned, I position my research within a psychoanalytical epistemology of ignorance, and do not follow the Birkbeck approach of transferring this epistemological ignorance by highlighting the unknowable within discourse. Instead, I chose to highlight the ignorance structures that I used to neutralize the unknowable. Hence, I identify my own analysis as a production of ignorance not of knowledge. The difference I make with Birkbeck here is that I allow myself to produce a coherent narrative about the reproduction of political agency in my participants, yet I acknowledge that this narrative is a piece of epistemological ignorance that aims to empower scientific agency. Hence, although this research makes claims about the subjects' unconscious dynamics, it acknowledges that the unconscious itself does not exist, and although this research makes claims about the subject's relation to

Others, it acknowledges that the Other itself does not exist, and so on. This is not research that invents an electron and then claim it discovered it. On the contrary, this research highlights its ignorance production objective from the beginning. As such this research is not meant to discover the truth of the reproduction of agency in my participants; this is research to produce an epistemological ignorance that enables a particular type of scientific agency to engage in a topic that is filled with crippling Lack of knowledge.

Finally, I want to note that there is a personal dimension to my epistemological choice. I am an Egyptian researcher, and I am researching the politically traumatic context of Egypt where I am a citizen. The political context in Egypt had affected my family, my close friends and myself. Hence, I share parts of the politically traumatic context that I examine with my participants. Following the Birkbeck approach, highlighting the unknowable within the traumatic context is not a mentally safe epistemological choice for me. This may be why Hook (2009, 2017, 2018) seems to link the research epistemological approach to the ethics of using psychoanalysis in social research. As I will further discuss in the ethics section of this chapter, The Birkbeck approach won't be the most ethical theoretical choice in my particular case. That is, it may not be ethical (mentally safe) to choose an epistemological approach to reveal the unknowable in a topic that is particularly close to the researcher's unconscious dynamics, I will have more to say about this in the ethics section.



## 2- The Empirical Method

In this section I outline the method I used to produce empirical data to investigate the reproduction of political agency in a politically traumatic context. My research focus was on the Egyptian activists' community. By activists here I mean those individuals who consistently worked or volunteered in community development projects that variously targeted political, social, and economic development. Many sectors of this activists' community have been highly engaged in the 2011 uprising that removed Hosni Mubarak from the presidency, and they were also instrumental in the 2013 uprising that removed Mohamed Morsi from the presidency. After the return of Military rule to Egypt in 2014 the activists' communities were targeted by the new military regime. Many lost their jobs in addition to losing the non-governmental organizations they had established over the years. The new regime severely restricted the public engagement of activists who were not fully supportive of the new military regime. Many members of the Egyptian activists' community lost their friends and colleagues to imprisonments, or self-enforced exile from the country, and they were frequently targeted by the government's media outlets who characterized them as un-patriotic and having financial affiliations to foreign organizations working against the good of Egypt (El-Mahdi & Marfleet 2021; El-Mahdi 2014). Hence, the return of the Military regime constituted a politically traumatic context to many individuals in the Egyptian activists' community. All participants of this research characterize their encounters with the new military regime as politically traumatic.

I begin the discussion of the empirical method of this research by giving an overall outline of the final research design and follow this with a discussion of the process behind the production of the research design:

1- I identified three participants who already had a history of political agency before the start of the politically traumatic contexts.

2- All three participants were subject to the same politically traumatic context. That is, all my participants encountered the return of the Military regime as a politically traumatic event.

3- My participants were at three different states of the reproduction process of their political agency after the ensuing of the politically traumatic context. That is, one participant was already successful in the reproduction of her political agency, another participant was still struggling to reproduce his political agency, and the third participant had forfeited the reproduction of her political agency.

4- Most of the interviews took place in the U.K., except the last interview of the last case which was done over skype after the participant had returned to Egypt. For this participant, I already had two other interviews which had been conducted in the U.K.

5- The interviews were long enough to produce repetitions, which I used to validate the types of flows of significations towards the Others in my participants life. I had four interviews with two participants and three interviews with the last participant. I planned for each interview to last for about one hour. However, I did not stop my participants if they wanted to keep talking longer. As a result, the first participant had about eight recorded hours over four interviews, the second had about five and half recorded hours over four interviews, and the third had about three and half recorded hours over three interviews.

In the following I address the details and the rationale behind the above design. I organize the discussion of the details into three sections. The first is the participants' discussion, which will include issues of selection and access. The second section is about the interview itself; I address how I conducted the interviews and the dynamics within the interviews. The final section is the transcription section, which addresses issues relating to transforming interviews done mainly in Arabic into an English transcript.

### ***The participants***

Accessing and selecting participants for this research went through few stages. To begin with I weighed the pros and cons of selecting participants based in Egypt and conducting the interview over the internet, versus interviewing Egyptian activists who were based in the UK. I chose the latter because of the contemporary political atmosphere in Egypt which might have made participants cautious about what they said (they could have put themselves and others at risk) and how much they revealed of their own biography on an internet-based voice application while based in Egypt. I wanted to avoid the effect of a politically cautious approach to the data produced within the interviews.

Egyptian activists in the UK are of two main types, one is those who are here on a temporary basis, perhaps joining a study programme, and plan to return to Egypt. The second type are those who cannot go back to Egypt, and they are in the UK as part of a self-exile journey, regardless of their UK immigration status. I chose participants for this research from the first category, i.e., Egyptian activists in the UK and who plan to return to Egypt. This kind of Egyptian activist would, in general, be expected to have a socio-political context that was more relevant to the socio-political context I am targeting in this research. That is, their struggle to reproduce their political agency would be more contextualized within the Egyptian political traumatic context. On the other hand, those in self-exile may have other socio-political contexts effecting their reproduction of political agency. Settling in the west would include socio-political factors that influence the process of reproducing political agency beyond the scope of this investigation.

My first attempt to select participants from this category was an Egyptian post graduate male student studying in the UK on a grant carrying the condition that he return to Egypt. I met him in the University café, where we had several discussions about the current political issues in Egypt. I will call him Michel. Michel's strong opposition to the current regime was quite clear. Moreover, Michel took a strong stand against key officials in the Egyptian embassy in the UK when they asked him to inform on his fellow Egyptian students. Such principled stand made me think that he would be a good potential interviewee for this research. Michel kindly agreed and

we had four interviews. However, after finishing the interviews, I found that Michel, despite having strong opinions about what was going on in the Egyptian political context, did not have any history of participation in social or political activities. He did not join any of the many popular demonstrations that took place in 2011, 2012, or 2013 although he strongly supported these demonstrations; he did not participate in students' or staff political activities in his university in Egypt, although his Egyptian university was known as having a vibrant political environment with various political affiliations among students and staff. Michel had a strong focus on his academic career, which he was quite successful at. One of the selection criteria for this research was that participants would have already developed political agency prior to the Military coup. Michel's lack of participation in social or political activities made me doubt that he fit the selection criteria and I finally decided not to include Michel's interviews in this research. His case also led me to improve my selection criteria. I decided to change the criterion 'participants must have already developed political agency' to 'participant must have a clear history of engagement in political activities, community development projects, or similar group activities that aim to have a socio-political impact'. Based on this improved selection criterion, I turned to two of my contacts in Egypt, both of whom were highly connected among activists. I asked them if they could connect me with Egyptian activists who were temporarily in the UK and who they knew had a history of activism before the Military coup. Over a period of a year, they suggested five excellent contacts who fit this selection criterion. I contacted all five and interviewed all of them. Being introduced through someone they knew helped to create a trusting and politically safe atmosphere to talk about their own biography of activism in Egypt.

Of the five interviews I decided to exclude two cases from this thesis. The first I excluded was of a female post-graduate student in the UK (pseudonym Amy). Her case was quite interesting; however, she had an ex-relation who held a prominent political position in Egypt and the Middle East region, and she also had a unique institutional position in Egypt. Her gender position in a sensitive governmental institute, her unique institutional position, and her former relationship with a prominent political figure were all very important parts of her biography and analysis; yet these factors also made her case very hard to anonymize. I found it difficult to produce a meaningful analysis while adequately anonymizing critical biographical

accounts. For this reason, in addition to other methodological reasons that will be discussed later, I decided not to include her case in this research, however, her case informed my thinking. The second case I excluded was that of an Egyptian male activist who was highly involved in all the political events until he was forced to flee Egypt to escape prison and torture. His pseudonym is James. I excluded James for methodological and ethical reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter.

As a result, the empirical analysis in this research is based on three cases. They were all recommended to me particularly because of their history of activism in Egypt prior to the Military coup, and all of them encountered the Military coup as a traumatic event. The three of them were in the UK when we started the interviews and all of them went back to Egypt. However, each of the three cases represents quite a different state of the reproducing of political agency in response to the politically traumatic context of Egypt.

The first case is an Egyptian male activist in his early thirties, his pseudonym is Yasser. His case represents a struggling state of the reproduction of political agency in response to the politically traumatic context in Egypt. That is, Yasser was still engaged in a process to reproduce his political agency; he was trying different paths for the reproduction of agency, but he had not yet found a path that completely satisfied him. When I interviewed Yasser, he was finishing his master's degree thesis in the UK. His thesis was about a community project that he had initiated in Egypt before the military coup, and which he was struggling to keep open after the coup. Yasser was in quite a reflexive mode during the interviews. He said that the interviews are helping him, and he often exceeded the one hour allocated for the interview session. I recorded more the eight hours over four interviewing sessions. I will discuss his case in chapters five and six. Yasser went back to Egypt after his master's degree. However, shortly after his return he moved to Jordan to join a community developments project based there.

The second case is a female Egyptian activist in her mid-twenties, her pseudonym is Maya. When I interviewed Maya, she was doing her masters in the UK. Before that she was working for a human's rights organization in Egypt. Maya returned to Egypt and, at the time of writing, was still engaged with a human's rights projects. Maya's

case represented the successful reproduction of political agency in the politically traumatic context of Egypt. When I explained this research project to her, she was keen to participate, and thought positively about the potential benefit of this research for the community of Egyptian activists. During the interviews she was open and reflexive. Maya was also an aspiring poet/writer and she volunteered to share pieces of her own old writings that were very helpful for the analysis of her case. I recorded about five and half hours across the four interviews. I discuss her case in chapter seven.

The third case was another female Egyptian activist in her late thirties, her pseudonym is Sawsan. When I interviewed Sawsan she was doing a pre-masters training course in the UK and was preparing applications to several masters programmes in different countries: UK, Canada, Holland, and USA. Sawsan was recommended to me (through my contact in Egypt) based on her history of activism before the military coup. Sawsan had initiated a very successful community development project in Egypt before the coup. However, during the interviews Sawsan clearly expressed no hope for any improvement in the Egyptian people or Egyptian politics. Furthermore, she stopped all her engagements with the community development work, and she was planning to emigrate from Egypt; Sawsan also advised her colleagues to emigrate from Egypt. Sawsan's case represents a case of a paralyzed reproduction of political agency in response to the politically traumatic context in Egypt. I had three interviews with Sawsan during which I recorded about three hours. The first two interviews were conducted in the UK and the last interview was done over the internet when she had returned to Egypt. I discuss her case in chapter eight.

Next, I discuss the interview process.

### ***The interviews***

The main method for producing empirical data for this investigation was interviewing participants. My aim was to use interviews as a tool to produce discursive configurations from my participants that revealed their associations to the Others in their lives, while talking about their autobiography, their political agency (past, present, and future), and the politically traumatic context of Egypt. But of course, conducting a research interview is not a single method, there are plenty of approaches for conducting and designing interviews that cater for different research epistemologies. Lapping (2008, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016), throughout her research, has outlined a psychosocial interviewing method that is compatible with the ontology and epistemology of this research.

Lapping brings the researcher's position (desire) within the interview as a research tool on itself. She highlights how the researcher's position of not-knowing within the interview produces a particular type of data that may not otherwise be accessible.

She says:

This account of the unknowability of the relations between two subjects, each in some way enigmatic to themselves, may be helpful in understanding speech in the context of our interviews. (Lapping & Glynos, 2019, p.441)

This enigmatic characteristic of the interview is both valuable and vulnerable at the same time. It is vulnerable because the enigma within the interview incites the two subjects involved to revert to familiar frames of knowledge. Lapping (2015, 2013a, 2019) shows that the researcher in particular may defend against encounters with the unknowable present in the enigma of the interview by holding onto established theoretical frameworks which lend authority and claims of knowledge that in turn obfuscate the enigma within the interviewing encounter. In addition, Lapping offers an interrogation of her own desire within a specific research interview showing how maintaining the enigma of the researcher within the interviews was not an easy or straightforward task, yet it was essential in the production of valuable psychosocial empirical data. Lapping (2013a) says:

My experience of the fixing and unfixing of interpretations in the process of writing this paper simply confirms how obvious this should be: that what is at

stake in research is the attempt to keep my own desire in flow, to avoid the sedimentation of desire into a claim to know. To do this it may sometimes be necessary to stop the continual undoing, to pause and let the words of the other be. (p.384)

As a researcher, Lapping shows that when she was able to offer the enigma of her own subjectivity within the interviewing process this offering elicited different types of associations from the participants. In other words, if the researcher labours to maintain an enigmatic offering long enough in the interview, the participant may start to address the researcher in the place of the Other (or, as she referred to, as the One). That is, the participant's associations may eventually shift to speak from the position of the subject to the Other rather than speaking from a position of one ego to another ego. This shift in speech is quite familiar in Lacanian therapy, Lacan described it in his L-graph for therapeutic technique (Fink 1999). In addition, Lapping draws from Laplanche's (1998, 2014) distinction between two types of transference that can take place within the clinic. The first type of transference is a 'filled-in' transference, a special type of repetition in the clinic of the client's relations and behaviour with other subjects in contexts outside the clinic. The second type of transference is a 'hollowed-out' transference, which is a repetition of the subject's encounter with the enigma of its own subjectivity. In the clinic, several 'filled-in' transferences may take place before a 'hollowed-in' transference can take place. Lapping transfers this clinical process into a research interviewing method suggesting that, if the researcher maintains their own encounter with the enigma of the interview long enough, the participants may start offering valuable associations to the Others (or the One).

I call this approach to interviewing the enigma-based interview approach. I found this approach much harder in practice than it sounds in theory. It requires a constant monitoring and interrogation of the researcher's own desire and associations in relation to each interview session. Later in this section I will discuss how I implemented it within my research interviews, but first I would like to draw attention to one particular advantage of this approach. It allowed me to utilize interview techniques developed from a different theoretical perspective while remaining grounded in an epistemology of ignorance. By centring my interviewing approach on



maintaining the researcher's enigma, I was able to utilize techniques from Holloway and Jefferson's (2000) free association narrative interviewing method, and techniques from the Biographic-Narrative-Interpretive-Method (BNIM) outlined by Wengraf (2001) and Breckner and Rup (2002). Drawing from these methods, I conducted the following interviewing design to produce data for this research:

**1- The introductory meeting.** For the three cases reported in this thesis, the introductory meeting happened over the phone after the exchange of few introductory texts following an introduction from my contacts in Egypt. In this phone call I explained what the research was about, and that I would like them to participate in four, one-hour interviews. I also explained that psychoanalytically based interviews may produce some complicated affects and I would absolutely understand if they decided to stop at any point during the interview or if they decided not to continue with the interviews.

**2- The first interview** started with an open biographical question. I asked each participant to start by telling me about their autobiography, starting from any point they would like. All three participants started from their time in primary school and went on to give accounts of different periods of their lives up to their current situation (at the time of the interview). The autobiographic narrative lasted for most of the interview, and I also asked them to elaborate on some parts that seemed important to me.

**3- In the three remaining interviews** I asked each participant to elaborate on the following:

- i) The parts of their biography that related particularly to their political agency.
  - o For Yasser, I asked him to elaborate on his work with an international NGO (non-governmental organization) at a very young age, his establishment of his own NGO and his struggle to keep it going after the Military coup.
  - o For Maya, I asked her to elaborate on her work in the human rights organization before and after the Military coup.

- For Sawsan I asked her to elaborate on her work establishing a successful youth development programme before the Military coup.
- ii) Special issues that appeared within their biography.
  - For Yasser this was an intense love story with another female activist that he worked with and who had quite different perspectives on politics and religion to those of Yasser.
  - For Maya this was her special relation to a Sufi Sheikh and the religious community around him.
  - For Sawsan this was her intense feelings and struggle about getting an acceptance on a masters' programme in a Western country.
- iii) Their relations to Others as they appeared in their autobiographical narrative. The following Others appeared to varying degrees in the participants' narratives: God, Egypt, People as Egyptians, People as humanity, the West. I asked them to elaborate on the accounts where relations to Others were apparent in their speech.
- iv) Their plans for the future and going back to Egypt, their views regarding the situation in Egypt and their hopes about the future.
- v) And, particularly in Maya's case, as an aspiring writer, I asked her to elaborate on a couple of pieces of her own writings.

The interviews took place mostly in public places; however, they were conducted in Arabic, which provided a higher sense of privacy. This was because, in the places where we met at the times we met, there were no obvious Arab speakers nearby. As already mentioned, Sawsan's last interview took place over the internet when she was already back in Egypt. However, because during the first two interviews in the UK, it became clear that Sawsan's associations were further away from political activism, and that she was more focused on career and personal issues, both of us felt that Sawsan could safely and openly conduct her final interview over the internet while in Egypt.

As discussed above, the dynamics within the interviews were grounded in Lapping's enigma-based interviewing approach. I used a two-step technique to help me implement this rather difficult interview technique. The first step was maintaining my focus on the emptiness of the signifier rather than trying to find fixed significations within my participants' speech; the second step was excluding the cases in which I could not maintain my attention on the emptiness of the master signifiers used by the participant. Hence, for the three cases included in this research, I was able to stay with the emptiness of the master signifiers used by the three participants during the interviews. My measure for that was checking that I did not need to fix /understand the significations of the master signifiers used by the participant within their own flow of associations, i.e., I checked whether, during the interviews, I was able to stay with the emptiness of the master signifiers that my participants used within the flow of associations they produced. The cases I excluded may demonstrate this better. In James' case, I had a clear affective response to his flows of associations that often triggered personal associations relating to political incidents that I had taken part in in Egypt. James belonged to a political group whose political and ideological stands I opposed. Hence, while reading and listening back to James' interviews, I found that his associations triggered different associations in my mind that did not belong to him. I could not stay within his own flow and observe the emptiness of the master signifiers he was using in the associations he was producing. My personal political memories were evoked by his associations, and I found a need to fix significations, i.e., to understand what he 'really' meant. Such a researcher position (my own position) within the interview did not allow for an encounter with the enigma of the interview; it was therefore very likely that I would be unable to conduct an enigma-based interview with him. For this reason, as well as another ethical reason discussed later, I excluded his case from this research.

The other case I excluded was Amy. In addition to the difficulty of anonymizing her case (already mentioned), her case also provided an example of the above excluding technique for the deployment of an enigma-based interviewing method. Amy's associations included talking about a prior relationship with a prominent political figure whom I had negative feelings against. Here again, my own political history incited my own flows of association in response to Amy's associations. My

flows of significations were attempts to fix significations of the empty signifiers that Amy was using to organize her speech. For instance, in one interview she was talking about this particular politician who had been a central figure in her life, my notes after listening to part of the interview read 'why is she surprised by his response?' This signalled a fixation in my head about this person that did not belong to the participant. This kind of reaction suggests that I could not see her master signifiers as empty signifiers, I needed to fix significations within her own flow of associations. In my mind there seemed to be a need for a kind of fixed signification that did not belong to Amy. Hence, this note strongly suggested that, in this particular interview, I did not maintain a proper enigma-based interviewing approach with her.

On the other hand, for the three cases I included, I was comfortable enough to encounter the emptiness of the master signifiers they used in the flows of association they produced. In addition, another factor I think also helped in conducting an enigma-based interview with the three of them, was the age difference between us. There was almost a twenty years age difference with the first two cases, and more than twelve years age difference with the third case. For them, I would seem to belong to another generation. I think this age gap helped to support my enigma as a researcher.

To sum up, the two-step technique I used to deploy an enigma-based interview may be described as follows: when I could not encounter the emptiness of the master signifiers that organized the participants' speech, or when I felt the need to fix significations for the master signifiers in the flow of associations that the participant was producing, I considered this particular interview/case not valid to be included in an enigma-based interviewing method.

### ***The Transcription***

The interviews were mostly conducted in Arabic; however, because all my participants were educated in English institutions, there were quite few English terms, phrases, and short sentences spoken in during the interview. I did the Arabic-English translation myself. In my translation I denoted the words that were spoken in English by using an italic font. I initially thought of using professional translators to transcribe the interviews, however, when I started my initial analysis (before translation) I found that, for this kind of research using a translator was not the best option. Translation often requires meaning to be fixed by the translator for signifiers that may have been left open for multiple significations in purpose by the participants. Noting this openness/ multiplicity of significations beyond a single signifier that is offered by the participant is important for this research. Hence, using professional translators would obfuscate this important data in the interviews, it felt like a contamination of the valuable data that this research depends on. For this reason, I decided to translate and transcribe interviews myself. Because, unlike a translator, my subjectivity and my own fixations were already present in this research and already factored in the epistemology and methodology of this research.

While translating and transcribing, I realized there were unavoidable losses in translating a flow of significations from Arabic to English. For instance, when a participant says: "I cannot find er.. .", then pauses and completes her sentence. Transcribing this sound as voiced in the English language does not mean much. But for an Arabic speaker, the flow suggests that the participant might be attempting to say the word 'erreda' meaning content, then she interrupted her flow in the middle of the announcement of the word and shifted her flow of associations mid-word. These dynamics between signifiers and flows of significations are usually lost in translation, but partially regained in the intersubjective analysis offered in this research.

In the transcripts of participants' speech, I used a format that reflected the focus of this research method, namely, to highlight the flow of significations in the participants' speech in response to my requests for them to speak. I therefore recorded my requests in brackets within the flow of the participants speech. I also

noted the pauses and the length of pauses by dots. To better elaborate this, the following is an example of my transcription from Maya's case (chapter six):

I do not believe in the concept of the modern state. . . . . (Me: can you elaborate?). . . (she laughs) . . . . . I . . . bs. . . *do not* . . . I . . . I mean . . . . . I think that the modern state is a problem in itself . . . . . *and there must be a localization of aaa* . . .honestly . . . I do not have a solution to the problems of the modern state . . . . . but the modern state is basically . . . in the third world. . . . it . . . it partners with the capital in a very clear way . . . and it employs a large degree of oppression . . . . . and it is fundamentally a *product of neoliberalism* . . . . ta . . .ah. . . *that being said*. . . ah. . .h . . . all the products of *neoliberalism* . . . such as development . . . and in regard to the concept of progress . . . and concept of civilizing the world. . . . . and all that . . .and what is not . . . . . which is a *colonial* concept . . . ah . . . amm . . . . . it is so manifested in the modern state . . . . . ah . . .w. . . and at the same time. . . . ahm . . . . .the issue is branching in many fields . . . . .like education for instance (Int 4 , 1:33:31)

In this example, the English is sporadically mingled with Arabic. The italic font denotes the words and sentences that were spoken in English by the participant, such as: '*there must be a localization of aaa*', '*a product of neoliberalism*', '*that being said*', '*colonial*' these terms and phrases were spoken in English within a long Arabic conversation. The example also shows my use of brackets. I used brackets to note my input within the flow of the speech. I also used brackets to provide necessary information so as to keep the focus on the participant's flow of significations. The example shows my use of dots to denote the length of a pauses, approximately three dots represent a pause equivalent to a normal pause for air.

### 3- Ethical Considerations

Among psychosocial theorists and researchers there are recurring issues regarding the transferability of Lacanian psychoanalysis from its origin in the clinic to use as a methodology in social science research. The list of researchers and theorists in psychosocial studies who raise this issue is long and includes: Lapping (2008, 2013a, 2015), Frosh (2008, 2010, 2016), Saville-Young (2009, 2016), and Hook (2018). The ethical implications of transferring psychoanalytic concepts outside the clinic is one of the essential recurring transability issues raised by the psychosocial researchers listed above. This is because, in the clinic, clients/analysands voluntarily seek and consent to psychoanalysis which is usually understood by the client to include psychological analysis of deep personal feelings and may involve psychological interventions to help. Also, in the clinic, the psychological content provided by the client is not meant for publication or sharing with colleagues, and it is not meant to inform social institutions beyond the client's case. On the other hand, psychosocial research, which uses similar psychoanalytical concepts and techniques, aims to use cases of individual participants to inform a larger social or political issue. Hence, using psychoanalytical concepts within social research demands a high level of ethical consideration. The ethical problem gets more complicated when one considers the breadth and depth of personal data used in social research compared to the data used to generate the same psychoanalytical inference in the clinic. In general, a researcher has limited accessibility to personal data within a research interview compared to a therapist in the clinic. The context of the clinic allows the client to provide more data and go into greater depth than that of a social research interview.

Many psychosocial researchers develop ethical frameworks to address the particular ethical issues raised by transferring psychoanalysis to social research. Holloway and Jefferson (2000), for example, outlined key research ethics for doing psychosocial research that draws from psychoanalytical concepts. They foregrounded honesty, respect, and sympathy as ethical principles for doing psychosocial research. Frosh and Baraitser (2008), as well as Frosh and Saville-Young (2009) highlighted the centrality of reflexivity in doing psychosocial research and they also added validity as a key research ethic for doing psychosocial research. Saville-Young (2009)

suggested that both validity and reflexivity are intertwined within psychosocial research. Here I focus on a brief description of both reflexivity and validity as key ethical positions in psychosocial research.

There are several suggestions for ways to increase validity in psychosocial research. One way, proposed by Stopford (2002), is including participants in the analytic process, by asking for their feedback, thoughts, and reflections on an initial analysis of their data and then developing the analysis further based on their feedback. I had initially thought of using this approach to validate my analysis, but I found it troubling. Young's (2009) review of Stopford's application of this approach has shown that it may create deeper ethical issues. The two participants that Stopford used this approach to validity with gave alarming responses: one agreed totally with Stopford's analysis and the other one did not respond to her request for feedback. There could be many reasons for this, but it raises the issue of the power dynamics within social research, which may shape the responses of participants (Alldred & Gillies, 2002; Willig, 2001). The validity provided by participants' feedback involves their response to a social researcher who may be perceived as an expert, give participants written or verbal analysis of their own contribution in a previous interview, and the researcher analysis may use psychoanalytical terms that the participants might not be aware of. This dynamic raises an important question: how might a participant perceive such an analysis? And consequently, what kind of validity can a participant provide for a researcher's analysis based on their perception of the researcher and the analysis the researcher produced? The analysis offered by the researcher may be read as an evaluation of the participant's mental/ psychological state. Hence it may create the kind of responses that emerged from Stopford's (2002) two participants, where one agreed totally and the other avoided totally.

This approach to validity raises another, deeper ethical concern, that is, the pathologizing tendency of employing psychoanalysis in social research. Wetherell (2005) is one of the voices that speaks up about the danger of pathologizing participants within psychosocial research. She is very critical of the ethics presented by Holloway and Jefferson's psychosocial research methods. She gave an example of this by showing an analysis of Vince, a participant in psychosocial research presented by Holloway and Jefferson (2000). She wrote, "for ethical reasons (as



Hollway and Jefferson intended) one hopes that Vince will never have to engage with this analysis of himself as a timid man choosing illness to avoid confrontation with a bullying boss” (p. 169). Saville-Young (2009) agrees with Wetherell and admits that she found herself anxious for similar ethical reasons, imagining the effect of her own analysis on her own participants. Similar ethical anxieties about sharing psychoanalytical research analysis with participants is also reported by Hoskins and Stoltz (2005).

There is another form of validation that Saville-Young (2009) present and that I find more useful. That is, the use of the ‘biography of the participant to deepen or undermine initial interpretations, therefore acting as a means of triangulation’ (p.14). This of course requires the researcher to ask participants to offer parts of their autobiography that are relevant to the research questions and the researcher’s initial interpretations. In the empirical data section of this chapter, I discussed how the interview design aimed to be long enough to produce enough repetition to be used as a sort of validation within the data. It is important to note here that such an approach on its own does not resolve the ethical issues related to using psychoanalysis in social research. However, reflexivity does more to address this problem.

Reflexivity is widely considered a central practice in doing psychosocial research (for example Frosh & Saville-Young, 2008; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Frosh, 2007, 2016, 2018; Stopford 2002). It is presented as particularly important for psychosocial research due to the ethical challenges related to employing psychoanalytical concepts and techniques. However, the way in which reflexivity is practiced within psychosocial research varies. Saville-Young (2009) presents a common way of implementing reflexivity in research by keeping a research journal where the researcher writes notes about (for example) their feelings, thoughts, images, fantasies, dreams etc that are aroused in relation to the interviewing process. Saville-Young suggested this journal material be used as the basis for a process of reflexivity which she characterized as:

... involves exploring unconscious processes that arise in the research encounter through the use of introspection, interpretation of fantasies and even dream analysis, so as to critically think about how the interaction and

narrative affected us, thereby providing information about the emotionality of the research interview. (p.16)

I imagine a psychoanalytic response to this ethical injunction would be that it is easier said than done. To adequately explore one's own unconscious dynamics as a researcher during an interview would need time, and personal, professional, and financial resources beyond the scope of most PhD researchers. Regular research supervision is not suitable, nor it is meant for such psychoanalytical explorations of the researcher's unconscious dynamics. And the researcher's own self-reflections in research notes cannot provide a sufficient exploration of the researcher's unconscious dynamics during the research. These reflections do count as a source of valuable insights, however, writing reflections and discussing them in a research supervision meeting should not be confused or conflated with exploring the unconscious dynamics that are defended in the formation of these written reflections. This is perhaps why Holloway (2008) suggests that psychosocial researchers may need to be supervised by psychotherapists to work out their unconscious relational dynamics within research. I think if such a resource were available it would be very useful, but I needed to find a way to ethically employ reflexivity without such resource. Hence, in the next sub-section I discuss compatibility, which explains how I employed reflexivity and validity as ethical principles during my investigation and within the available resources.

### **Ethical-Compatibility**

As I attempted to apply reflexivity and validity throughout my research, I found myself entering a recursive cycle with my supervisors in search of what I discuss here as 'ethical-compatibility'. In this subsection I present ethical-compatibility as a term to package my endeavour to ethically complete this psychosocial research. Ethical-compatibility is concerned with checking the ethical appropriateness of using particular psychoanalytic concepts on a particular set of data collected for particular research questions by a particular research working in a particular research context. Here I will discuss five check points for ethical compatibility that I used in my

research. I begin with the first two ethical-compatibility check points presented in the following questions:

- 1- Are the psychoanalytical concepts used in the analysis can be ethically utilized (or misused) for this particular psychosocial investigation? and
- 2- Are the collected data rich enough to allow for the ethical application of these psychoanalytical concepts on the speech/narratives of the participants in this research?

These two questions are tied together and bring to mind two articles by Hook (2017, 2018), which draw attention to the ethical concerns beyond these two ethical compatibility check points. In these papers Hook suggested that *jouissance* can be used as a research analytical frame to examine racism and racist political attitudes. Earlier in my research I explored following a similar track to investigate political agency; I thought to use the Lacanian concept of *petit object of desire* to explore the reproduction of political agency. However, through many discussions with Claudia Lapping (my supervisor), I came to the conclusion that using this particular psychoanalytical concept in my particular research context may become ethically problematic. To properly examine the *petit object of desire* for participants I would need much more in-depth data than was accessible to me in my research interviews. Although one participant was quite open and willing to share deep personal material regarding his desire, this level of willingness to share was not the same for other participants. Now, recalling that psychosocial research operates on the suture between what is psychological and what is social, there was a risk and a temptation to apply any psychoanalytical concept that may appear theoretically relevant to most psychosocial investigations. Hook's above suggestions for example is quite an alarming case in point. It may be theoretically relevant to explore the *jouissance* of participants in relation to their racist political attitudes, however, to implementing such an investigation in social research would be filled with ethically explosive issues. For instance, to ethically analyse the *jouissance* of a particular participant in relation to their racist attitudes would require the collection of the kind of personal data that is very close to the data collected in the psychoanalytic clinic. This of course raises a range of issues, not least the time and financial resources available for social research projects. There is the issue of getting the informed consent of the

participants to share personal material in the way a client shares personal material in a clinic. Moreover, to examine the jouissance of a participant in research participants would need to commit to attend as many interview sessions as needed to reach sufficient depth for the researcher to be able to explore the unconscious dynamics of jouissance. This could take a few or many sessions depending on the particular case. In addition, the use of jouissance as an analytical tool in social research raises the issue of the researcher's training/ ability/ awareness to deal with what might happen when a participant shares such deep personal material. Hence to use jouissance as analytical tool in social research ethically requires professional and financial resources that are beyond normally funded social research. Similarly, in my research it was clear that, given my research resources and context, it would not be ethically appropriate to use the Lacanian concept of petit object cause of desire as an analytical tool to explore my participants' reproduction of political agency.

The above two entangled questions guided my understanding of reflexivity and validity throughout my research. The ethical principle here is that, while it may be theoretically relevant to use a particular psychoanalytical concept in psychosocial research, it may still not be ethically feasible. Now to further develop this discussion of ethical compatibility, I will present two more tied questions.

3- Does the researcher's own history make them suitable to use a particular psychoanalytic concept to investigate a particular issue?

This question examines the researcher's subjective entanglement and investment in their own research. This question indicates the intersubjective nature of psychosocial research that Saville-Young (2009) also highlighted. However, instead of examining the researcher's unconscious dynamic within the research interview, as Saville-Young(2009) suggested (above), instead I reflected on my own history of investigating, discussing, and engaging with articulations of the Other in different subjects in different types of contexts. Having been an active participant in the socio-political Egyptian scene for years, I have already encountered most of the articulations of Other that appeared in my participants' interview contributions. I used my post interview reflections to check whether I was able to engage with each interviewee using the particular research method for this particular investigation. In the previous

section I discussed two examples of cases that I excluded because my personal history would not allow me to engage with the participant using the specific research method of this investigation. Moreover, I already discussed that, with the cases I have included, I did not find in my post interview reflections any alarming emotions, thoughts, images, or particular flows of significations relating to my personal history in response to the participants' own associations.

4- Would a particular participant be sufficiently safe and secure exploring this particular psychoanalytical topic during their participation in the social research?

This question was addressed both before and during the interviews. Before the interviews began, I explained to my participants the topic, the psychoanalytical approach I would be taking and that it may produce some uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. I informed them that it would be totally understandable if they decided not to engage with the interviews at all, or at any point later during any of the four interviews; I reiterated this at the beginning of each interview. In addition, my training in counselling made me vigilant during the interviews, watching the affective reactions of my participants. In the third case discussed in this thesis I noticed that, by the third interview, it was no longer emotionally safe for her to continue engaging with my investigation. The exploration of the issue of the Other was bringing her face to face with a psychological issue that needed more attention and care than I could provide in a social research setting. Hence, I decided to not continue with the fourth interview, and informed her of different counselling venues in Egypt.

To summarize, so far: I presented four interlinked ethical-compatibility points to examine the deployment of particular psychoanalytical concept(s) in social research:

- 1- The ethical-compatibility of the psychoanalytical concept being used in relation to the topic of the psychosocial investigation (i.e., can the particular concept be transformed from the clinic to this particular piece of social research?)
- 2- The ethical-compatibility of the psychoanalytical concept used in relation to the empirical data produced during the psychosocial research.
- 3- The ethical-compatibility of the psychoanalytical concepts being used in relation to the researcher and their subjective engagement with this particular topic of investigation.
- 4- The ethical-compatibility of the psychoanalytical concepts being used in relation with the particular participant's mental wellbeing.

I found these four ethical-compatibility check points to be quite useful in deploying reflexivity and validity as ethical principles within my research. However, there is a fifth critical ethical-compatibility point that underpins all of the above. Here I argue that it is extremely difficult for a researcher working alone to work with these four check points.

In my research these ethical check points produced a recursive cycle that I went through several times. Eventually this cycle led to an ethical ground for my research than I felt more satisfied with. However, I can also see the potential for these four points to lead to a worse ethical grounding for research. As a psychosocial researcher, I recognize myself as a defended subject. The intersubjective nature of psychosocial research may lead my defences to settle too soon or too early in the recursive cycle produced by the four checkpoints. For instance, as already mentioned, I spent a lot of effort and time investigating the petit object cause of desire for my participants as an analytical tool to understand their reproduction of political agency. However, during these times there was a persistent feeling of unease regarding the psychosocial approach, yet I could not name it or point to its source. As a defended subject it would have been very easy to let this subtle sense of unease pass and repress it. It was as a result of several supervision discussions with Claudia Lapping around psychosocial methodologies (including her own), that I came to realize that the source of my unease was ethical. That is, I was ethically uncomfortable with the kind of analytical claims I would have made about the desire

of my participants had I continued with the petit object of desire as the focus of my analysis. The type of data I produced does not ethically allow me to analyse my participants' object cause of desire, despite it being a theoretically relevant concept. I had to change focus and repeat the cycle. I focused instead on the associations to Others in my participants' narratives, and went through the above four check points again, I was then ethically more content with the deployment of psychoanalysis in my investigation and became more comfortable and ethically content with my psychosocial research. I believe that these supervision discussions led to my using the above four checkpoints to reach a research-ethical ground that was more appropriate and satisfying to me. Hence, I argue for a fifth ethical compatibility checkpoint to underpin the four above:

- 5- An ethical psychosocial research requires a psychosocial supervision. Or to put it in a question form –

Is there adequate psychosocial supervision for the deployment of the particular psychoanalytical concepts used in the particular research?

My experience, from doing this investigation, underlines that psychosocial supervision was crucial in reaching a theoretical ground where psychoanalytic tools could be deployed ethically. This point actually echoes Hollway's (2008) suggestion of having psychoanalysts supervise psychosocial researchers. However, the above fifth checking point adapts Hollway's suggestion for the resources already available to most psychosocial PhD researchers. The above five checkpoints form an ethical exclusion/inclusion technique, which I found to be a safer given the restricted resources of PhD psychosocial research. However, I could imagine other psychosocial research projects that might have the resources to include supervision from a psychoanalyst, they might then be able to exclude less and include a wider range of cases within their research.

This covers enough ground to move to the discussion of the empirical cases. The next four chapters present the analysis of the three cases examining three different stages in the reproduction of political agency in response to a politically traumatic context.

## Chapter Five

### Yasser's account of Ignorance

#### Introduction

I analyse Yasser's reproduction of political agency over two chapters; in this chapter I discuss important accounts from Yasser's interviews that relate to his reproduction of political agency. I divide this chapter in two parts, in the first part I give an account of the two bigger Others that appear in Yasser's discourse in relation to the reproduction of his political agency. In the second part, I give an account of Yasser's struggle to relate to these two bigger Others in a way that reproduces his political agency over the current socio-political conditions in Egypt. In the next chapter, I use these accounts holistically to analyse in depth Yasser's struggle to reproduce his political agency. The next chapter aims to use insights developed in Yasser's case to develop a more general understanding of the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic conditions.

Yasser is a very smart young activist in his early thirties. He has been engaged in different forms of activism since his last year of secondary education (aged 18). Over this time, his activism has taken many shapes, but it has always been within the domain of community development and youth empowerment; he expressed a clear dislike of engaging in political activities. In his fourth year of medical school, he decided to leave and start over studying sociology. The reason he gave was that he wanted to follow his true passion and gain a deeper understanding of how societies develop. During his years of university study, he became a professional trainer for development workers. His work made him financially independent and gave him opportunities to travel extensively and meet people all over the Middle East. After the initial success of the 2011 revolution, Yasser decided to start his own non-governmental organization (NGO), which he named it 'Mesaha', an Arabic word that translates to 'a space'. Mesaha's objective is to provide a space for activists to meet,



collaborate and share experiences and resources. Mesaha is one of the very few small NGOs still operating in Egypt.

When I interviewed Yasser, he was in the process of finalizing his thesis for his master's degree in the UK. He was engaged in his studies and enjoying the experience. I recorded about ten hours of interviews with Yasser spread over four sessions. He seemed to appreciate the interviews and used them as a way to reflect on his life as an activist. During the interviews I found him to be a very articulate, deep thinker; reflexive and open to sharing his reflexivity. Hence his interviews produced very rich data. Yasser said that he found the interviews very helpful for him and he wanted a copy of the audio recordings of our conversation (Int 2).

### **Part one: The bigger Others in Yasser's discourse.**

In this section I highlight the quotes in Yasser's discourse that signify an identification with bigger Others. There were two bigger Others that seemed to play a critical role in Yasser's reproduction of political agency, namely: 'People' and 'God'. In the following I provide an account of how Yasser signified both of these in his discourse.

#### **1.1 'People' as a Sexuated bigger Other**

During the second interview, while talking about his job as a trainer of community developers, Yasser said the following:

##### **quote Y.1**

going back to my work . . . . . and the way we deal with people . . . .  
 . . .I believe this is the way we should deal with people. . . . . ah . . .  
 . . .if a . . . if . . . . . I mean . . . . .I believe that all societies are in  
 a *learning process* . . . fa . . .a. . . . .since it is in a *learning process* . .  
 . . I do not have the right to override their decisions. . . . I don't have  
 the right to decide for them what is better for them. . . so . . . . . all  
 what.. all my job is about is to *design the process* that . . . makes it  
 able to decide . . . able to choose . . . choose what ? . . . . it is not

my business . . . . ah . . . . what is important for me is . . . . *its capacity* to make decisions. . . . . so when someone asks . . . . what is going on in Egypt?! . . . . I say . . . it is a *learning process* . . . . there are people experimenting . . . right . . left . . do something wrong . . . and what's not . . they get burned . . they will try something else . . . ..I mean . . . . it will see other worlds .. . . and . . . ah . . . . I always console myself . . . looking at *Europe* and other countries . . . how many *learning process* they have been through . . . . . and until now . . . . . they still get rotten leaders . . . . sons of bitches . . . . deceiving the people . . . . . fa . . . . the whole issue is a *learning to process* to the people. (int2,2:07:16)

This quote uses signifiers {'people', 'Egypt', 'society'} to signify a symbolic entity that needs to experiment and learn to be able to take good care of its constituency — citizens / members (i.e., small others). I will refer to this big Other as the 'People' with a capital P. Yasser's comment (above) started with 'going back to my work' then the flow of signification shifted to talking about People's agency; and within the agency of this symbolic entity Yasser developed a sense of his social context and his position in that social context. Throughout Yasser's interviews 'People' was signified as a well-intended caring bigger Other, one that desired the good for its constituting members. However, it is also signified a lacking big Other: some 'sons of bitches [who] can deceive it'. Moreover, there is a category within this lacking 'People' that had the phallus, implied in his signification of the People's 'learning process' above. He characterized the situation in Egypt as: People are going through a learning process, People are now trying different social orders to find out what suites them the best.

Yasser (int2 and int3) signified his work as someone who facilitates the learning of the 'People'; and when a sub-group of People learned the right lessons from the current situation and facilitate the learning for the rest of the People, then People as Other would be able to overcome the current socio-political conditions, like it did before. This flow of signification shows how Yasser sexuated 'People' as a bigger Other, where there was a category of lack and a category of exceptional excess that could 'intercourse' with this lack; an intercourse which became a condition for the

People's super agency. Yasser maintained this sexuation of 'People' throughout the 10 hours of interviews – as the rest of the quotes in this chapter will also show.

In chapter 3 I associated two different types of flows of significations with a sexuated bigger Other. Yasser (above quote) shows a flow of significations that indicate a well-established erotic field. That is, the intercourse at the level of the bigger Other is conditioned on the performance of small others. This erotic flow of significations was further developed when he talked about 'Mesaha' (the NGO he founded in Cairo) and what it meant to him. Below is part of his narrative responding to my question asking why he was fighting to keep Mesaha open in such a hostile political environment?

### quote Y.2

and to *sustain* the bunch of ideas that I believe in . . . to validate that it is still possible . .

(M. ideas like what?)

I told you . . . the *collective action* ..... and the things . . .

(me: you mean *collective action can make change or what you mean?*)

can you elaborate more on what you mean by collective action}

yes . . *collective action* . . . means . . that we together can find

something to work on together collaboratively and make a change . .

or offer alternatives . . . . (M. alternatives for what ) alternatives to the

problems we face . . . . or at our work .. or on development . . .or for

change . . . and so on. . . . . *collective action in different way* . . . . .

*collective action* that is people wants to do something . . .and that is

the initial level .. the least of belief .. .. people that are changing

something . . . .and that is another level of belief . . . people that are

developing something . . .da . . they see it will benefit them and the

community . . I have no problem with that . . .I . . . I mean I am . . . .

this is why I came to study participation . . . . .I mean . . . . I . . .i. . . . I .

.. .I . . . .My target is the process not the result . . . the process by

which we reach solutions in a collaborative and *collective*.. . .which

solutions?! I do not know it . . .but . . . I am keen for platforms where people can work together

(22:37 M. do you believe in the process?)

frankly I have to believe . . . this is my life *quest* at the moment . . . . I believe in it . . . . but I am approaching it in a learning way . . . . .

therefore. . . I experiment and learn . . . . I experiment and learn . . . . .

I experiment and learn . . . . (int3A, 21:25)

This quote has three layers of significations. The first layer again signifies his subject position in relation to 'People' as a desiring, lacking and sexuated bigger Other. In this quote he signifies his subject position as the facilitator for the process in which 'People' learn and discover what they need to do. This signifies a condition on the intercourse at the level of the bigger Other. That is, the bigger Other's agency needed to be facilitated/managed, i.e., conditioned by actions at the subject level. This layer of signification further emphasizes the erotic field where the jouissance at the bigger Other level is transferred through a series of conditions to sub-groups within the People then further transferred to Yasser's own subject level. Within this erotic discursive formulation Yasser's work and study gain an erotic charge. Seeing the social world in this way gave Yasser's studies and work in NGOs very significant; the work of small others like him brings the change at the People's level. Within such an erotic flow of significations political agency becomes the *modus operandi*, an effect flowing naturally from a cause which the subject had already posited.

The second layer of signification has to do with the hysteric flow of significations Yasser associated with Masaha. To appreciate this layer of signification in the above quote, I need to bring more data from other interviews. In interviews 2 and 3 he talked about the importance of Mesaha to himself: how it was the last achievement that was left after the January revolution, and if 'they' closed it then they would all be depressed. He gave the example of Nancy (one of the activists who started Mesaha with him) who withdrew from the activists' life and was now depressed, spending most her time at home. Yasser said that he had been questioned by the state security police about Mesaha's activities. Furthermore, a close friend of Yasser's told him that the state security police asked him for information about many activists who had been engaged with Mesaha and Yasser's activities. Yasser said that these

events made him think seriously about closing the NGO because, in his opinion, the state security police did not like the kind of gatherings that took place in Mesaha. However, he decided not to close it, instead, he decided to be very careful about the kind of activities and individuals he allowed into Mesaha. He mentioned that Mesaha was, for him, the place where he could maintain hope; a hope where there were still other people who thought like him and who were still trying to change the situation and had not given up. Yasser said that watching such individuals and such small groups in Mesaha maintained hope in him.

On the other hand, Yasser also mentioned in interviews that, in the current political atmosphere in Egypt, he did not see a way for activists like himself to be allowed to play a role in improving Egypt. He did not seem to have much hope that Mesaha could play a public role in the current situation; so, what kind of hope was associated with Mesaha? I suggest it signifies what Žižek (2003) refers to as believe through others, that is, a subject maintains its belief in the bigger Other by seeing others like him engaged in a ritual that addresses that bigger Other. In the next chapter I discuss in detail how engaging in a group ritual is a powerful way to induce a belief in the bigger Other that all subjects in the group address through the group's ritual performance. The activities within Mesaha became more like rituals for the continuation of belief; to maintain a belief in People as a big Other, albeit lacking. Through the rituals, the group offered itself as the object of desire for the bigger Other – People. Yasser and his friends engaged in activities in Mesaha while realizing that these actions at these times were not allowed to have any consequences outside Mesaha. They still engaged to see themselves within activities that functioned as a ritual through which they offered themselves as the object of desire of the People. Mesaha, for Yasser and his colleagues, became a symbol of resistance, a way to maintain belief in a bigger Other that was absent in a learning sabbatical. Hence his performance in Mesaha may be seen as a hysteric flow of signification towards People as a bigger Other. This signification was problematic when it came to using People as a bigger Other to reproduce his political agency. I think the third layer signified the feeling of this problem.

The third layer of signification is important. At the beginning of the quote above, Yasser says: “to validate that it is still possible” and at the end of the quote he says,

“frankly I have to believe”. Both statements signify a shadow of doubt, a struggle in maintaining his belief. The socio-political context in Egypt seemed to challenge Yasser’s subject position in relation to ‘People’ as a bigger Other. Nevertheless, the quote also indicates Yasser’s desire to reproduce his political agency while maintaining his relation to People as a bigger Other. Yasser signified People as a bigger Other with a substantial lack in the current situation. People needed to take time to learn so they could overcome the current oppressive regime. The contextualization poses serious challenges to Yasser’s ability to use People to reproduce his political agency. Questions such as: what happens while People are learning? i.e., what happens to him as an activist during this time? What should he do while People finish its learning process? How might he formulate his political agency during this learning time? In other words, his signification made People a bigger Other that he could use to reproduce his political agency in the current political conditions despite his clear desire to maintain People as a bigger Other for better times. Mesaha seemed to play this maintenance role, the power of People was not dead, People would return stronger than ever; until then, they had to keep believing through rituals – that the messiah would return.

In the last interview Yasser elaborated on the effects of the socio-political upheavals and his struggle to reproduce his agency between the ups and downs. He said:

### Quote Y.3

I mean .. .ahhhh . . . this is linked to the *cycle* that we have been through . . . . .  
 .(me: what do you mean?) . . . . I mean . . . *I think* . . . after the revolution we  
 all had this feeling that . . .the idea that . . . ah .... what can you call it . . . . .  
 ahhh.. . . . you called it ‘agency’ . . . but it is the idea that you are *powerful*  
 ... that you can draw a vision for the whole world . . . draw a vision for your  
 future . . . and what is not . . . .ah... .. and you had the feeling that you have  
 owned the . . . .. ah. . . . everything . . . and this feeling made us . . . . ah . . . .  
 I think in my own personal life . . . it made me *critically* . . .to get out the most  
 you can . . . and *to challenge* everything. . . . *to challenge the norm* ... *to*  
*challenge* the way your parents think . . . and so on . . . . . then you discover  
 that this *challenging* did not lead to anything but *exhausting* yourself. . . . .

*exhausting* all your capacities and all your energy . . . . and you got involved into things that you felt yourself *alienated* . . . I mean . . . hmm. . . .  
 .a.....she is not the first female I get close to . . . (int 4, 1:57:51)

In this quote Yasser attempts to contextualize his struggle to reproduce his political agency in the aftermath of the ups and downs of the socio-political upheavals in Egypt; the flow of associations provides a glimpse of Yasser's struggle. First he recalls the initial success of the revolution and associates it with a strong desire for political agency "you can draw a vision for the whole world [...] challenge everything". This quote seems to recall the existence of a strong hysteric state towards People after the initial success of the January/2011 revolution. The political successes of the revolution were all associated to the agency of the People (as Egyptians), i.e. People is the bigger Other – not family, not government, not experts, and not even Religion. This quote also shows that this strong hysteric flow of association towards the People as bigger Other was expressed in the past tense, Yasser's discourse throughout the interviews talked about the strong hysteric association towards People in the past tense. The present tense reference to the power of the People came, as in the previous quote (Y.2) with a shadow of doubt and a struggle to maintain the belief.

Following this memory of euphoric hysteria, the flow of significations told of his current feeling of exhaustion and alienation as a result of that initial euphoric state. Then Immediately after this an unexpected shift in association brought his love story to the surface without any introduction. In his flow of significations, the love story seemed to be the discursive space his desire ran to after being exhausted and alienated. After the last sentence "she is not the first female I get close to" in the above quote he went on talking about his love for Heba (we agreed to codify her name as Heba). He talked about his love for her as his destiny. Yasser had met Heba while he took his first steps into the development world about twelve years previously and they had been close friends and at times colleagues in development projects since then. Throughout those years Yasser had not realized that he loved Heba until two years ago, he realized that he was in love with her and that he had





(to God) . . . . . without much thinking . . . . .and I had not prayed at all before this since I came here (UK) (3C, 56:10)

In this quote Yasser did not refer directly to God, but in explaining religion he signified a symbolic agency with ‘a different power’ that he needed to get closer to in the moments of ‘crisis’ or ‘big conflicts’. In the second half of this quote, below, Yasser uses the signifier ‘God’ to further elaborate on the symbolic agency with ‘a different power than the powers I usually function by’. It is also worth noting here that his flow of associations suddenly returned to his love story after recalling a crisis or hard times. Below is a continuation of the above quote showing more significations of ‘God’ as a bigger Other.

#### quote Y.4 (B)

(me. interesting link)

I decided long time ago that I *practice* religion by my heart. . . I mean . . . ah . . . . .it was one of the things I have developed when I was young. . . . I *practice* religion because I like to do it. . . .not . . . I mean . . . I do not like the concept of religion obligations . . . because religion obligations do not make me feel the act . . . . . so I ...for a while I rejected the idea of religion obligation and I do it only because I like to do it. . . and I reached a state that I do it when I feel like doing it. . . .this is . . . this made me feel much more comfortable. . . made me comfortable to the extent . . . I mean I . . . . there was a risky path I took . . . some time ago I studied the ultimate aims of ‘sharea’ (‘sharea’ means Islamic rulings, and the ultimate aims is an established topic within the ‘sharea ‘ literature) . . . ahm . . . . . (me. in Egypt?) . . . yes in Egypt . . . fa . . . . ah . . . . I have an understanding . . . something I formulated at some past phase of my life . . I am not sure I still have it . . . but . . I . . it is . . . . ah . . . . god created us all and . . ah . . and . . ah . . . there is a way of life that god is pleased with . . . to help us reach this way of life . . . .there are revealed religion to guide you to this way of life . . . . . but there are also people are able to reach this way of life by feeling it in their hearts . . . .or by

*ethos* . . or *value system* . . that helps him develop and reach this. . . they too god is pleased with them . . . and when they are judged they will be judged like the religious people . . . because at the end they reached the same destination. . . one reached it by following and the other by trial and improvement. . . . (me. what destination?) . . the destination I mean that way of being . . .which are similar to the ultimate aims of 'sharea' . . .like preserving life . . .preserving sanity . . and so on . . those five . . . one could reach it through religion . . .another could reach it in other way. . . one could reach it through music. . and so on . . so I always believed there is one destination but it has different paths... (Int3C 56:30 to 58:50)

Yasser here signifies 'God' as a symbolic agency that desires a certain way of being in life. It is also an agency that will judge people based on whether or not they have reached its desired way of life. This symbolic agency holds the final judgment — the Arabic word he used for judgment, 'Hesab,' refers to the after-life judgment. Yasser contextualized his being with a universal goal: to reach God's desired destination, and he signified death as a path to a final judgment by God. God's judgement was not based on following any specific divine revelation (i.e., any discourse specific to the Other) but on reaching a more generalized form of life that God desires. God will reward humans after death whether they followed revelations (the Other discourse) or not as long as they reached God's desired way of life. Yasser also symbolized God's agency with a universal signification, it will judge everyone — it subjugates everyone: the religious and the non-religious, believers and nonbelievers, all are required and judged based on reaching God's desired destination. It is worth noting here that the Lack of God was not directly signified like that of People; the Lack of God, however, was repressed in Yasser's discourse; I will elaborate on this later. Hence, God was not sexuated in the same way that People were.

The above quote signifies two ways in which Yasser related to God. One way in a time of personal crisis and the other during general times when there was no personal crisis. In other words, there was one way of relating to God when the lack of the subject was revealed and another way of relating to God when the lack of the subject was not revealed. When Yasser's subject-lack was apparent he related to

God through the Muslims' religious rituals. Hence at times when the material and social conditions did not enable Yasser personally to pursue a path of political agency, he turned to God's discourse (rituals) to enable him. The religious practice Yasser is referring to is praying in the Muslim way: saying certain words, giving money to the poor, etc. By doing these acts (as Muslims believe these are the acts God loves), he offered himself as the object of desire for God. In return he expected God to help him overcome his revealed personal lack and empower him. At other times, when there was no clear crisis, Yasser's association to God was through working towards God's desired destination for all humans. It is worth mentioning here that those aims are very generic broad categories. The five aims are: preserving life, preserving belief, preserving sanity, preserving morality (or honour), and preserving security (or safety). These are very open categories, open enough to allow Yasser to signify any destination he desires. Hence, in a non-crisis situations Yasser rendered God's desired destination in a way that could encompass Yasser's own desired destination.

In the second interview Yasser referred to another aspect of his relation to God:

**quote Y.5**

My problem with spirituality is taking it to either the absolute truth or extremism . . . taking it to the extreme . . . and they lose control over the process totally. . . . I was in a wedding recently . . . and there was this new spiritual community in the wedding . . . so they were into singing and moves and what is not . . . and I was like . . . come on . . . please guys . . . these things are between you and God . . . in yourself. . . . I believe spirituality cannot be . . . ah . . . ah . . . be . . . be in group . . . spirituality . . . you know . . . it indicates part of the spirit . . . so it is your own . . . it is not a group practice. . . (Int 2, 2:18:00)

In the same interview he also mentioned how important it was to turn the light off in the Sufi's chanting circles; he said he found turning the light off important so that you do not see others and do not get distracted. Yasser did not like to associate God with collective action, or collective rituals. Signification of collective or communal action for God turned him off. God, for him, was about the subject's own lack. God

amends the subject individually. When it comes to groups or communities, God's desire was signified by the empty signifiers of the five aims of Shareaa outlined above. There seems to be a demarcation drawn here. When it comes to social events Yasser's flow of signification preferred to follow a Deism-like flow (i.e., God created humanity, put some general principles in place, and it is up to humans to act according to it or contradict it and suffer the consequences. Hence God is distant from direct interaction with communities). However, with personal events, Yasser was more willing to follow the discourse (rituals) of the Muslims' God. This dual mode of association to God was further signified in the third interview when I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by 'Qadar' (Arabic for divine destiny): \*\*\*\*\*

#### quote Y.6

when I look at Egypt for instance I do not interpret what is happening by the idea of divine destiny . . . . I explain it by *being constructed* . . . *learning* ...and the idea of *constructivism* . . . I interpret what is going on with this frame. . . I do not explain what is going on based on divine destiny . . . . but when it comes to my personal life . . . . because it will be for me . . . . ah . . . a. . . . . a. . . . more painful for example . . . . it can become a *trauma* for me . . . so I think the remedy for this is to associate it with the idea of divine destiny . . . . so . . . ah . . . . a . . . .in my relationship with her it is not learning . . . it is a relation that . . .it is . . . . my destiny . . . . right or left . . or . . .ah . .ah . . . in relation to getting a scholarship or not getting it . . . it is not learning . . . I have done what I have to . . . . so there are things that .. what you call it . . . . "tawakoul' ( Arabic: count on God) . . . . but when it comes to Egypt and what is going on . . . no . . . . this is learning .. .. fa . . . I think . . .I tend to relate the issues that is relating to my work to things I can change . . . and the issues relating to my personal life I tend to associate it with . . . . ah. .... a. . . someone else that I cannot challenge all the time . . . . so I can minimise the number of *Battles* I get into . . . . I cannot get into every battle for every issue. . . (3C, 50:42)

Yasser here clearly demarks the scope of each of the two empowering big Others: 'People' and 'God'. Such a demarcation also emphasizes the duality in his association to God. For social matters People is the bigger Other that has the agency to work out the details of the situation and therefore change it, whereas God only puts the general principles in place and is otherwise not directly involved. However, for personal / individual matters God can be directly involved. Both bigger Others empowered Yasser's agency albeit in different ways.

People is a bigger Other signified with lack, it needs to learn to be able to act in the right way, and it needs small subjects (like Yasser) to facilitate this learning. God, however, is a bigger Other not signified with a clear lack, despite having desires that repress (hide) its lack. God in general is distant but if Yasser's stimulates its desire with some prayers and good deeds, God might intervene to repair Yasser's subject's lack. Both big Others were signified as desiring the good for Yasser. But they differed in their domain of subjectivity. By relating to the sexuated bigger Other People, Yasser signified his actions with agency and found in himself an ability to change and to influence the course of events, hence: "when it comes to Egypt and what is going on . . . no . . . . this is learning .. .. fa . . . I think . . . I tend to relate the issues that is relating to my work to things I can change". By relating to Asexuated bigger Other God Yasser associated the aspects of his life, that he had no direct agency over, with a bigger Other that he had some indirect agency to stimulate the Other desire, so "the issues relating to my personal life I tend to associate it with . . . . ah. .... a.. .. someone else that I cannot challenge all the time". Yasser seems to have used both bigger Others in a complementary yet demarcated way to maintain the reproduction of his political agency.

However, beneath this ideal discursive configuration between the bigger Others which Yasser suggests (above), there is another important layer of signification. In the same interview I asked him whether he thought the 'Qadar' (divine destiny) worked for or against him. He said:

**quote 1.7**

I always try to understand it . . . or ah . . . make . . . . *my understanding* .... that it is for me.. . because if it is against me . . . .it is something I have no recourse to change (Int. 3C, 32:52)

This brings to the surface a subtle layer of signification that was frequently implied but not quite articulated in Yasser's discourse. The above quote signifies a struggle with relating to God as an empowering caring big Other. The hesitation in the tone of voice when he answered my question and the signifiers he used: 'try' , 'make' , and 'if' suggest a subtle struggle with parts of his belief. This quote is similar in tone and signification to the sentences he used to signify his struggle with his hysteric relation to People, when he said: 'frankly I have to believe' (as in quote Y.3). In the next section I further examine his struggle to formulate a hysteric flow of signification towards God as a bigger Other.

The significations of bigger Others that appear in Yasser's discourse seem to be accompanied by paradoxical significations which indicate a kind of struggle in relating to bigger Others. In the next chapter I will offer a more detailed analysis of these paradoxical significations of bigger Others in Yasser's discourse and explore how that linked to his reproduction of political agency in the traumatic political context of activists living in Egypt. Before this, in the next part of this chapter, I present accounts of the flows of significations that highlight Yasser's struggle to reproduce his agency in the context of his current socio-political conditions.

**Part two: Yasser's significations of his own struggle**

The traumatic socio-political conditions in Egypt had taken their toll on Yasser; he described a kind of struggle to reach 'peace' and 'truce' in his life. In this section I provide accounts of significations of struggle that appear in Yasser's discourse and link these to the reproduction of his political agency. I begin by discussing parts of his response to my question: what are the things that you do not want to take back with you to Egypt?

**quote Y.8(A)**

sometimes I worry about myself from my own mind. ... (me: how?) ..  
 I worry from my mind . . . . . because when keep thinking and  
 questioning a lot of things .. you start getting worried about your  
 questions. . . where it will take you and where are you going . . . . yes  
 you trust the process and all . . . . but . . I mean . . ahh..... also . . . ta  
 . . . ah. . . ah. . . the bad thing about questions is that . . .aha .... ah . .  
 . what you call it... . . .it is called open horizon. . . . .this open  
 horizon sometimes confuses . . . and the confusion does not stop ...  
 ... . answers are only like temporary sedative . . . . I mean . . . . I do  
 not like sedatives any more. . . . I do not want sedatives in my life. . . .  
 but . . . . .I feel ah .....  
 questions are the thing I learn from the most ... . but you have to bear  
 its cost . . . . . confusion and worry . . . . . and I always had a  
 question . . . . about my love . . . . her questions in life are different  
 than mine ... I wonder if I will be able to manage her questions. . . . . I  
 know she respects my questions in life and we can think together . . . .  
 but I am a bit worried would we clash in future. . . . . (Int 3c  
 1:04:01)

{He then talked about how he would be more willing to compromise than her  
 because he loved her more. Then he went on talking about how he did not  
 really worry much about the future, and how working as a freelancer taught  
 him to control his worry. He also talked about his job and the concepts he  
 came to believe in through his work}

**quote Y.8 (B)**

(I rephrased my understanding: So, you are worried to take with you  
 on the next leg of your journey are ah. . . .) (he completed)

More questions that give me more confusion. . . I need truce for a while. .... I mean I am in the truce period ... and this may explain why I decided to get into the relationship with the girl that I have always loved . . because this is part of the truce. . . . and I decided in this period to come closer to her way of life. ... because her lifestyle has a kind of truce... because she has determined few things . . . . so that is it . . . I will go to her side. . . (Int 3C, 1:06:50)

This quote can be read as a signification for Yasser's desire to reproduce a deeper level of ignorance than the ignorance level he was already grounded in. There seems to be a type of knowledge that his questions lead to, a troubling kind of knowledge that blocks the flow of reproduction of his agency over his conditions, a type of knowledge that may render political agency a difficult subject position (if not impossible) to resume in current socio-political conditions. Hence the above quote can be read as a desire to not know some kernel of his socio-political or material conditions. The quote reflects a desire for increased ignorance, and his associations follows his desire; the flow of associations in this quote reveals important dynamics.

At the first part of the above quote, he was talking about the confusion that his questions brought: "but you have to bear its cost . . . . confusion and worry . . . . . and I always had a question . . . about my love . . . .". Here again, as in quote Y.3, after recalling a sort of a crisis, his associations almost abruptly bring him to the love story. A similar flow of associations was repeated in the second part of this quote: he reiterated his concern about carrying more questions forward in his life and brought up his love story: 'I decided in this period to come closer to her way of life. ... because her lifestyle has a kind of truce... because she has determined few things'. The last two sentences reveal more; his lover's lifestyle signified a kind of 'truce' that his desire was looking for. Now it is time to bring some background information about his lover before furthering the analysis.

Yasser had known Heba since his final year in secondary school. She was few years older and wore a head scarf. He said that she had a very strict code for dealing with male colleagues, but she relaxed that code a little with him. He described her as



religious but open minded. He also mentioned that they had travelled together, given workshops together, and had received training together over the years. He mentioned that she had a way of convincing him with ideas as no one else could. They both started volunteering at the same time in a development project associated with UNICEF, and they had both had the same mentor, Kamal. Heba and his close friend (Amr) were the only two people Yasser asked to be on the board of Mesaha, the community organization Yasser initiated in Egypt after the revolution. Yasser respected Heba's professional opinions and agree with most of her positions in the field of community development; he said that over the years they had had a very good working relationship as well as a solid friendship. Although He respected her religious lifestyle, he admitted that his lifestyle choices were different from hers, but because he loved her so much, he was willing to change so that she would accept him as more than a close friend, a lover (int. 2, 3 and 4).

Yasser signified the 'truce' in her lifestyle saying: "because she has determined few things". This was said with a note of admiration indicating that he appreciated those 'things' that she had determined. The signifier 'things' seemed to refer to her more codified religious beliefs and practices. His flow of associations so far suggested almost the opposite of what he was saying, that is: he was saying that he was willing to change because he loved her, while his flow of associations signified that he loved her because he was willing (desiring) to change.

Three months after the third interview — which the above quote is from — we had our fourth interview in London. in between, he had returned to Egypt and got a job in Jourdan working with his long-time mentor Kamal, who was also Heba's mentor. My fourth and final interview with Yasser was conducted during a visit back to UK for his master's graduation ceremony. In that interview I shared parts of my analysis, raising it as a question. I asked: what would you say about a hypothesis that you do not want to get closer to God because you love her, on the contrary, you love her because you want to get closer to God? He asked what I meant, and I recalled part of what he had said and how it could be read as such. He thought silently for seconds (which seemed a long pause) before agreeing that this could be a possibility. He then went on talking about his surprise at how his mentor (now

colleague), Kamal took a religious turn. Then he talked about himself as being in one side and the people he loves the most on another side. He said the following:

**quote Y.9 (A)**

You see let me tell you. . . . my mind is critical . . .and I think about everything . . . . I am tired of *being critical* . . . so I want to give *being critical* a holiday . . . .the problem is that the answer on the other side is not satisfactory to me (m: you mean their side (Kamal, Heba, and his mother)) their side . . . it is not satisfactory because they have not reach to it critically . . . .they have reached it in a . . . . . Kamel for example when decided to become religious . . . I told him the difference between us is that you have felt something different . . . . . what he felt was for him. . . . and what is different is for him . . . *it cannot be transferred* . . . this is why I told him I need an experience to feel it . . . . it can take me to another world. . . .because I am tired. . . . my mind is tired . . . I am hoping with her ..being with her I will *redefine* . . . or ask different questions . . .or feel different things . . . do you ..the idea that . . . .an experience that shakes . . . a . .not to shake . . . that makes you feel differently . . .and come to see a different world beyond this point. . . (Int 4, S4, 1:22:59)

{ he went on talking about his love and how he liked the way she was . . . after that he talked about how he tried to rationalize his behaviour, then he said: }

**quote Y.9 (B)**

But there are times you are fed up . . . . .the idea that everything needs thinking . . . and you are fed up that you rationalize everything . . . . would this be of benefit or is it harmful . . . . so one need to get some rest in life. . . .fa . . . . *I think that* . . . ah . . . .a . . . and you do not want to

think too much . . . . so part of why I need to go to the other side is that I want a rest . . . . I want to stop thinking. . .and I want to stop thinking that . . . . .*I am making a gap between me and the people I love.* . . so yes I am tilting in this direction because those people I love . . . .and definitely I do not want to make something that they cannot share it with me. . . . therefore I *merge* towards their lifestyle . . and I *merge* more to the ideas that we both can discuss. . . . I do this *intentionally* and why I do it . . . . . to give my mind a break. . . .and so on . . . . . after a *stormy* phase in my life. . . would this last? . . . . after we get closer and so on. . . I do not know . . would the experience of going there will have enough feelings that put ones feet on a ground that he can continues? . . . . I do not know . . . . .so why do not I want to go there on my own? . . . . because . . . . . ah . . . . . because. . . . . I . . . .if to go alone . . . . then my mind is the one who has to take me there . . . . and this has not been enough till now. . . . .I mean . . . . my mind keeps buzzing all the time. . . . . and again . . . . .I also realised that the human is not only substance . . . . . there is soul and feelings and one has to follow their directions . . . . (Int 4,1:28:41)

This quote repeats the same flow of signification that appeared in the third interview. A flow of signification that take a sharp turn to the love story once a blockage, a recall of crisis appears his associations. This quote also shows what the crisis or the struggle may be about. Let us examine the flow of significations in this quote.

In the first half of this quote thinking critically was again signified as undesirable at this moment in his life; this signified Yasser's desire for a deeper ignorance (as in the previous quote). His associations then moved directly to talk about the ignorance structures in his context and his struggle to fully identify with them: "so I want to give *being critical* a holiday . . . . .the problem is that the answer on the other side is not satisfactory to me". Earlier in the interview Yasser explained that by the other side he meant the religious mode of his lover Heba, his mentor Kamal, his best friend Amr,

and his mother. Yasser saw how the people closest to him were healing their lack and finding peace within the Muslims' ignorance structure. However, to immerse into such a symbolic world one needs first to hysterically identify with the Muslims' God as a bigger Other; the above quote signified that it was a struggle for Yasser to hysterically identify with Muslims' God as a bigger Other in a way that would allow him to use the Muslims' ignorance structure to deal with the lack of his subjectivity and with the lack of People as a sexuated bigger Other. This seemed to be the crisis that his choices of significations of bigger Other, discussed in part one, had led to.

In a metaphorical way, he seemed to be noticing that his friends were able to use God to take care of their lack until the People (the sexuated bigger Other) finished the necessary learning it needed to undergo to be ready to take care of them again. As long as the sexuated bigger Other People was on its learning journey it could not take care of the lack of its constituents (subjects). Hence God seemed to provide a good alternative bigger Other to fill this temporary gap. He saw that his friends had reached a reasonable peace in their life and a kind of truce using the Egyptian Muslims' ignorance structure and were developing a hysteric relation to the Egyptian Muslims' God. Moreover, Yasser recalled (at quote Y.4) that he himself had used religion to overcome times of crisis in his life. However, once the flow of associations signified the need to be hysteric with God, the flow moved to signifying the difficulty of a struggle to lose himself to offer himself as an object of desire to a transcendental bigger Other, namely the Egyptian Muslims' God. This flow of associations signified a kind of obstacle or blockage in developing a hysteric relation to God. When the flow of association reached the point where he brought his struggle to believe to the surface, at that moment his associations took a sharp turn and he spoke about his love story as a way out of this blockage. This flow of significations repeated itself twice in the above quote and was already apparent three months earlier in quote Y.8. The same flow of associations was also repeated in quote Y.4. This repetition of associations suggested two areas for analysis:

- Yasser wanted to use the Egyptian Muslims' God, like his close circle, to reach a kind of peace and truce in the current socio-political conditions.
- He said he could not use the Egyptian Muslims' ignorance structure to develop a hysteric relation towards the Egyptian Muslims' God, and he realized this was an obstacle in his life.

- He flowed to his love (for a practicing Egyptian Muslim female) to overcome this obstacle, and he hoped that, with her, he would be able to have a different experience and see the world differently.

In chapter three I outlined the way the development of a hysteric flow of signification is critical in the reproduction of the subject's political agency. Yasser ended up in a position where he was struggling to produce a hysteric flow of signification to People (signified as an absent bigger Other) and with the Egyptian Muslims' God. Hence the signification of struggle. The question that emerged was: Why does Yasser find it difficult to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other, God, given that he seems to want to (he desired it)? what blocks his desire to flow in this hysteric direction? To answer these questions and provide a sufficient analysis of Yasser's case, I need to discuss the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental Other. I pick up this task in the next chapter. However, there are three side notes regarding Yasser's account of ignorance that I would like to draw attention to here before moving on to the ignorance analysis chapter. These notes are not essential to the next chapter's analysis, yet they may be helpful for comparing Yasser's account of ignorance with the other cases in this thesis.

### **Three side notes:**

#### **One: the erotic flow**

Yasser signified the obstacle and the source of his problems with the signifiers critical thinking / critical mind. These were signified to bring Yasser closer to a kind of knowledge that impeded his ability to reproduce his truce /peace, i.e., agency over his conditions. I can speculate that in the current socio-political conditions in Egypt, contemplations by a subject about any social or political action that bring a change in any community in Egypt, will bring the subject to an encounter with a new kernel of Egypt. That is, no one is allowed to have any social or political role in Egypt without the permission of the army or its proxies. Working without the permission of the army direct or indirectly can put activists in a grave danger (Higazi, 2018; Amnesty International, 2022). For someone like Yasser, this means abandoning any

aspiration for political agency outside of executing the military's direct commands. Hence if critical thinking for an activist takes him to what subjects such as himself can do to improve or impact the current situation, such thinking may render political agency impossible. In chapter three, I called this direction of associations 'the erotic flow' of significations, which flows from the big Other's jouissance down to the subject level performance. The erotic flow in the current socio-political condition will bring Yasser to the realization of the lack in the People as a bigger Other (it is taking a learning break for the moment) and what is there now is an oppressive regime, or an antagonistic big Other. The erotic flow needed to be supported by a hysteric flow of associations for the reproduction of agency to flow. That is, when Yasser thought about how the small others might affect the situation at ground level (i.e., critical thinking), such thinking would need to be met by a hysteric flow that made the performance of small others associated to the agency of some bigger Other competent to change the situation. Otherwise, the small acts of small others can never be enough to effect a change in a country or a community without the hysteric association to a bigger Other. This is one way to understand why Yasser's critical thinking would create a confrontation with his own struggle to develop a hysteric flow of signification.

### **Two: different Others also appear**

There were different bigger Others that appeared in Yasser's discourse. For instance, the signification of People as Humanity not People as Egyptians was suggested in a flow of signification relating to his scientific agency. However, I took the decision to focus only on the bigger Others that appeared in relation to reproducing his political agency. Hence my decision to focus my account of Yasser's ignorance on People as Egyptians, which was the bigger Other most relevant to reproducing his agency.

### **Three: Dealing with Antagonism**

The erotic flow of signification also brought Yasser face to face with the antagonism in his socio-political context. Yasser however dealt with the antagonistic forces in his context in a way that perhaps aggravated his hysteric struggle. Yasser seemed to disavow the antagonistic bigger Other, he did not directly associate the antagonistic conditions in his context to a symbolic higher agency (i.e., antagonistic Other),

instead he fetishized the antagonistic Other in El Sisi, the current president and the head of the army who led the military coup. The following quote signifies this disavowal flow of associations towards the antagonistic Other:

**Quote Y.10 (A)**

but when you look now every day is worse . . . every tomorrow has been worse . . . especially when the prices were hiked . . . ah . . . a . . . . when the prices were hiked people . . . I mean . . . . the matter has been materialised in front of them . . . . ah . . . . m . . . . m . . . . you cannot deny it . . . that is it . . . . if you had one pound . . it equals half a pound today. . . it does not buy as much as before. . . .fa . . . fa. . . . all of this . . . . *I think* it depletes our energy to have hope . . . and . . . it makes you want to escape. . . either you escape or to struggle more . . . .but how would you struggle more. . . if you struggle the eye (expression for the government attention) will come on you and you may be harmed. . . . the situation became so entangled in a dark way. . . I mean . . we cannot . . . . ah . . . .I mean . . . . one now sleeps and wants to wake up on a miracle . . . a miracle. . . .I remember . . . .aha . . . ah. . . Eihab my friend . . . . is one of the people that is waiting for another revolution . . . . so .. ah . . we want to sleep and wake up and find the people have felt the hurt of the economic. . . .they get upset....then they get angry . . . so this person vanishes . . . . or something happens to him . . . . or the people behind him or those supporting him sell him . . . and someone else comes who is more reformist . . . .or someone feels more for the people. . . or even just gives us the space to act. . . ah . . . the problem is that . . . . he is not . . . .ah . . . they are not letting us . . . . and they are not giving us a bit of hope . . . . and there is no improvement . . . . it is dark.... . . .I mean . . . . at the beginning one said . . ok . . . there is no political freedom and there is no freedom for us . . . so at least we get some improvement in the economy . . . No.. . it became darker with him.. . the idea is . . . . darkness is increasing . . . and there is nothing that helps you to endure. . . so we wait for a miracle. . . (m. miracle to do what?) . . . I think we are summarising the miracle in Sisi. . . that he vanishes. . . (Int 4, 24:29)

{I asked him what he wanted to see in Egypt ... He went on and talking about the simple demands he had then, that is to just let us work and live normally without fear. He elaborated a bit on normal activities like driving the car, going to work and so on. Then said the following:}

### Quote Y.10 (B)

There is a feeling of fear all the time. . . .I remember one time . . . . for example, . . . . . I was returning to Egypt and at the airport I erased everything on my mobile . . . . . because you are afraid . . . that he may stop you at the airport and asks for your mobile and keep searching in it . . . . .he made us reach a state that we are becoming obsessed with fear. . . and we are scaring ourselves more. . . . because we know that he is exceeding all limits. . . . nothing stops him . . . . . no standards. . . .no rights for any one. . .no law. . . he just enforces what he wants. . . . and I think this is the crisis in the country . . . that we cannot understand what we are supposed to do . . . to live. . . I mean to live with a sense of security . . what are we supposed to do... .. and that is it. . . . (Int 4, 26:55)

This quote refers to the economic hardship that dominated the country throughout different social classes (Middle East Monitor, 2021). When his flow of signification came to the level of daily living in Egypt two wishes were expressed: a wish for the People as a bigger Other to finish learning and return to the scene, and maybe get angry and do something. Anger rather than learning might bring People back from its learning break and take care of its constituents, including Yasser. The second wish was for this antagonism to vanish. Here the antagonism was not signified as a symbolic agency but rather as an individual/object: 'I think we are summarising the miracle in Sisi', 'that he vanishes', 'he stops you', 'he made us', 'he is exceeding all limits', 'he just enforces what he wants.' The critical thinking that was troubling Yasser seemed to lead (among other things) to a confrontation with socio-political conditions that were antagonistic. His signification of the current socio-political conditions seemed to be cantered on a phobic object, i.e., El Sisi, especially as the People (Egyptians) were temporarily absent from the socio-political scene, in a



learning process. Hence the erotic flow of associations brought Yasser to a troubling kind of signification, a signification confronted him with a phobic object and rendered his political agency almost unable to reproduce without major alteration of his flows of significations. This too may explain why he found critical thinking (which leads to such erotic flows of significations) quite un-settling. This also gives extra weight to the importance of developing a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental bigger Other. He needed the hysteric flow to take him from the subject level to associate to the powers of a bigger Other that would transcend his current socio-political conditions. This brings us back to the importance of examining his attempts to reproduce a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental Other. In the next chapter I discuss the question of why was he struggling to establish a hysteric flow of signification despite recognizing his need for it if he was to reproduce his agency? In the next chapter I examine the conditions of production for a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other.

## Chapter Six

### Yasser's Ignorance Analysis – Post-mortem

In this Chapter I use the accounts discussed in the previous chapter to more closely examine Yasser's struggle with developing the hysteric state he needed to reproduce his political agency. The guiding questions of this chapter are: what made the hysteric flow of signification so difficult for Yasser? What impeded his efforts to reproduce a hysteric state towards a transcendental Other despite his recognizing a need and expressing a desire for it? Could the process be made easier? Hence this chapter is about discussing some conditions of production of a hysteric flow of significations towards Others that enable the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

I start this chapter by recapping chapter 3's discussion of the relation between the development of a hysteric flow of signification and the reproduction of political agency. I then expand the discussion to distinguish between the development of a hysteric flow of significations towards transcendental and non-transcendental Others. I especially examine the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other. I link this discussion to Yasser's case and use it to further our understanding of the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic conditions.

#### **The Hysteric Flow of Signification & the Reproduction of Political Agency**

The hysteric psychological state in Lacanian psychoanalysis can be characterized by the subject offering itself as an object of desire for the bigger Other (Fink, 1999; Gessert, 2014; Evans, 2006). In chapter three I associated a specific flow of significations to the hysteric state, I called it the hysteric flow of signification, where the subject associates change at the subject level to the agency of Others. The hysteric flow of significations can be seen as a discursive-psyche-dynamic that induces the subject into a hysteric state towards a bigger Other. The hysteric flow

appears in the kind of speech that glorifies the bigger Other and represses its lack by associating positive changes at the subject level to the supreme agency of the bigger Other. In the hysteric flow of signification, the power and agency of the bigger Other becomes the focal point of discourse (or the nodal point of discourse to use Laclau's (1994b) terminology) pushing its lack to the shadows of discourse. Hence the hysteric flow of signification aims for the supreme agency of the bigger Other to *temporarily* dominate the subject's discourse (i.e., symbolic world). In chapter three I also discussed how this hysteric flow was one of the key discursive dynamics in the subject's reproduction of political agency. In the following I recall this link between the hysteric flow of signification and the reproduction of political agency.

In chapter three I defined political agency as the subject's ability to condition a change in a higher symbolic level, i.e., the level of big(ger) Others relative to the subject's social performance at the level of small others. This definition is grounded in Žižek's definition of the subject as 'an effect that entirely posits its own cause' (ibid). Hence, the subject posits a bigger Other with supreme agency, so the subject's own agency becomes an effect of the supreme agency of a bigger Other. In other words, the subject draws its agency from the agency of the bigger Other which the subject posits at the first place. This requires two complementary dynamics: one that gives supreme agency to the bigger Other and another transferring/linking this supreme agency to the agency of small others. The first dynamic is the hysteric which associates all changes at the subject level with the agency of a bigger Other and the second dynamic is the erotic which transfers (i.e., conditions) the supreme agency of the bigger other to small others social performance at the subject's level. The erotic flow of signification is usually the most direct association defining political agency in a discourse; let me illustrate this with a fictitious example.

One may think of a subject who has political agency because she believes she can improve the lives of Cairo's street children by providing them with basic education skills (i.e., basic maths and reading). Hence her agency first appears through her social performance with street children and through her interaction with different social institutions she deems helpful to her cause. Her discourse may foreground the impact of education on the lives of street children and the bigger social changes that may happen as a result of their education. That is, her discourse may present how

performances at the small others level can have an effect at the level of the bigger Others, i.e., her discourse foregrounds the erotic. However, the intelligibility of such an erotic flow depends on (implies) an already established hysteric flow that associates a higher type of agency to the bigger Others level. That is, investing herself in educating street children depends on and implies that society at large (as a bigger Other) provides better opportunities for educated citizens (members). In this way, the project of educating street children comes from the subject locating both itself and the street children within a discourse of supreme agency of society as a bigger Other. The project also implies that the supreme agency of Society is conditioned on the members skills and education – i.e., society provides better opportunities for the educated and the skilled. Furthermore, the project implies big Others (that are members of Society, the bigger Other) such as charities, education institutes, government departments, social care services, etc. who are capable of (have agency to) helping to provide education platforms for street children. Hence, talking about a project like educating street children appear on the face of it to be erotic (i.e., a small action that can change society), yet imply the existence of hysteric associations towards two levels of Others: the hysteric flow of associations towards institutions (as big Others) and the hysteric flow of associations towards Society (as a bigger Other).

There is another key signification that an erotic flow of signification implies, which is the existence of a lack in the higher levels of agencies, i.e., the Others. In terms of our fictitious example, our activist's work is signified as important because she had identified a gap which she is capable of filling; she can bring different higher agencies together (like charities, social services, and the Society attention at large) to address the gap her particular social project (educating street children) has identified. For instance, a signification of lack in the Others may suggest that street children are forgotten, marginalized, neglected by Society / Government / Education institutions / etc. so her work becomes significant because she brings this gap to the attention (interest) of symbolic Others - higher agencies - and to the attention and interest of society at large as a bigger Other. Hence the political agency of this fictitious subject is produced within a specific gap (lack) at the level of bigger Other and the big Others. Her social performance then becomes what fills this lack and allows those actors with higher agencies to do their jobs and ultimately care for the

street children of Cairo. Such an articulation of political agency produced to fill a lack (a gap) in higher agencies, again emphasizes the need to have already seen these symbolic entities (Others) as having higher/superior agency than the small others (subjects). Which brings us back to the importance to the hysteric flow of signification towards big(ger) Others – despite their lacking — in the reproduction of political agency.

Although the erotic flow of signification may be the foregrounded and the more visible flow of signification within a discourse of political agency, the (re)production of political agency depends on and implies an already established hysteric flow of signification towards Others who are, nevertheless, lacking. A struggle with the production of a hysteric flow of signification hinders the subject's ability to reproduce its political agency. Yasser's case is an example of this. This brings us to the next question, what makes Yasser (or any subject) struggle to develop a hysteric flow of signification towards a big or a bigger Other? What could be so difficult in associating changes in small others level to the agency of a lacking bigger Other? This question brings us to an examination of the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of signification towards bigger Others. To be more specifically I will examine the conditions of production of hysteric flow of significations towards People and God which are the two bigger Others that appear in Yasser's discourse. However, Yasser's case, like the subsequent cases in this thesis, suggests an important distinction needs to be made between the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental bigger Other and a non-transcendental bigger Other. In the next sections I begin by discussing the conditions for producing a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental bigger Other, I also distinguish this from the non-transcendental bigger Other.

### **The Transcendental Bigger Other**

'God' is the typical signifier for a transcendental bigger Other, its signification supersedes the temporal social-political-material conditions of the community of subjects. People/ Society/ State/ Nation are signifiers that can also be signified as a transcendental bigger Others. However, unlike God, they can also be signified as

non-transcendental bigger Others. A non-transcendental Other is signified with an agency that does not transcend the socio-political and material conditions of the subject and its community. A good example of a signification of a non-transcendental Other, is Yasser's signification of People (as Egyptians). People, for Yasser, is a big Other that is signified in a way that does not transcend his current socio-political conditions unlike his signification of God. For him, God is signified with an agency that transcends his current socio-political and material conditions. A distinction between these two types of significations is important for the analysis of Yasser and the subsequent cases. In this chapter I draw a distinction between the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental Other and a non-transcendental Other.

In this section I will start by examining the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental Other. To do this I bring in an important (rather long) quote from Dolar's (1993) famous critique of Althusser's concept of interpellation. Dolar makes an interesting contrast between Althusser's concept of interpellation as the basis of subjugation to Society and Pascal's advice on how to believe in God – as a subjugation to the transcendental. He says:

Althusser borrows a famous suggestion from Pascal, namely his scandalous piece of advice that the best way to become a believer is to follow the religious rituals (although they appear completely senseless to a nonbeliever), after which the creed will follow by itself with an inescapable necessity. So where does the creed come from? In the first stage, that of following the senseless ritual, there is no established authority of the Subject, no direct convocation or address, no specular relationship, but merely a string of nonsense. The subject has to make the Other exist first; he/she does this with a supposition ascribed to that senseless chain of ritual, a supposition that it means something even if one does not know what—a belief that there is something to believe in.

There is an invisible dividing line between "the first materiality" (following the ritual before the advent of creed) and "the second materiality" (the same ritual supported by inner belief): the two are separated by the "empty gesture" of

subjectivation. The crucial question concerns the status of the subject attached to "the first materiality." What made him/her follow the ritual at all? Why did he/she consent to repeat a series of senseless gestures? Clearly the creed did not motivate this consent since it was to be the product of the situation. Yet even before belief, there is already a belief involved-not belief in the Catholic faith, but a minimal supposition that there is something to believe in, that there is a "subject supposed to know" which can make sense of the string of nonsense. A subject is already present before subjectivation and recognition, a subject "independent of consciousness" (to use a Marxist turn); an unconscious belief is embodied in the ritual, a "belief before belief," as Zizek puts it (*Sublime Object*, 40). ..... Althusser leaves out the second step. (Dolar, 1993, p.90)

To believe in God, according to Pascal, the subject needs to follow the religious rituals first, after which a belief will develop as 'an inescapable necessity'. Dolar points out that if taken at its face value this advice seems strange because, for a non-believer, a religious ritual is a string of nonsensical acts. Interestingly Althusser seems to agree with the dynamic of belief that Pascal's advice suggests, and he draws on it in his development of the concept of interpellation as basis for subjugation to Society. What makes it more interesting is that Dolar and Zizek (as quoted above) don't fundamentally disagree with Pascal's prescription for a route to belief or Althusser's route to subjugate for a bigger Other (be it God or Society). However, they reveal an essential condition without which Pascal's prescription for belief and Althusser's route to subjugation will not work. That is, for the subject to produce a belief (or a subjugation) in a specific transcendental bigger Other (like God or Society) through following the rituals performed to/for that Other, the subject has to have already developed a need to believe that there is some bigger agency that is 'supposed to know', i.e. the subject had to have already developed a belief that there *is* a bigger Other that transcends its temporal conditions and which can make sense of the string of nonsensical events that have already appeared in the subject's life. They call this precondition for a ritual to produce a belief in a specific transcendental Other the first materiality of belief. The first materiality of belief is the belief in the need to believe, or as Zizek put it (above) 'a belief before belief'. Hence,

what Dolar and Žižek are distinguishing here is that if the first materiality of belief is well developed then following rituals will deliver the second materiality of belief – that is a belief with a creed in a specific transcendental bigger Other (God or Society), however if the first materiality of belief has not developed then following rituals will not necessarily lead to a belief in its second materiality.

This is of particular interest to the study of subjects in traumatic context. There are important parallels to be noted. In the throes of trauma, the subject's life may seem to be a string of non-sensical events. For Yasser, other participants reported in this thesis, and other activists, the political upheavals in Egypt may have looked like a string of nonsensical events. One popular narrative of such a string of events may look like this: a revolution where thousands died and thousands more were injured toppled a military dictatorship, then an Islamist group hijacked the revolution and gained power, then another wave of the revolution came with more sacrifices of life and it toppled the Islamist rule, then a few military generals used revolutionary rhetoric to justify establishing an oppressive regime that put the very revolutionists that brought them to power in jail, in the process many more died, or were jailed and injured to finally reach a police state in Egypt that is worse than what existed before all the sacrifices were made in the name of the revolution. In a changing context such as this, if the subject wants to hang on its political agency, i.e. reproduce its agency in the context of all these upheavals of socio-political conditions, it may need to develop a belief that there must be some super agency that knows what everything was all that about, a super agency that might make it all add up to a better end for the subject (as an activist or a political agent). Dolar points to this belief in belief itself as a condition for a precondition, or as he puts it, the first materiality of belief which needs to precede the engagement in the religious ritual for the ritual to produce a belief in the name of God (or transcendental Other) that those rituals are done in its name; or put another way, a belief with a creed or, in Dolar's words: the second materiality of belief. Dolar extends the same argument to address the process of interpolation that subjugates a subject to Society as a bigger Other. The development of such belief in belief (or the first materiality of belief) seems to be a crucial condition for the subject to offer itself in rituals as a subject of desire to a bigger Other that transcendent its temporal socio-political- material conditions. That



can be read as a first condition for producing a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental bigger Other.

Rereading Yasser's quotes (presented in the previous chapter) in the light of Dolar's argument (above), one can notice an underlying yearning for a belief in some super agency that transcends all temporal conditions, and which might eventually render all those (senseless) socio-political upheavals meaningful in some deeper way. Yasser seems to have crossed Dolar's first materiality of belief. However, his choice of the transcendental with which he needs to engage with to develop the second materiality of belief was quite interesting. Yasser did not signify People (Egyptians) with an agency that transcended his temporal socio-political and material conditions. Let us recall from the last chapter that he signified People with a lack of learning. That is, People, in response to the upheavals (contextualizing his activist's life), needed to take time to learn and develop a proper response to the same socio-political conditions Yasser was dealing with. Such signification made People as a bigger Other unavailable to hysterically relate to at that time. This signification made People a non-transcendental bigger Other in the current socio-political context, because it did not transcend the socio-political conditions that was Yasser enduring. This is different from some left-leaning activists or activists with a nationalist's ideology, for example, where People are signified with transcendental qualities that would qualify it to become a transcendental bigger Other. In the next chapter I discuss Merna's case, a leftist-leaning activist who signified People (Egyptians) as a transcendental bigger Other. Yasser's decision to signify People (Egyptians) as non-transcendental left him with God as an already socially established transcendental bigger Other for Egyptian-Muslims, a social group he had the right to join by birth.

So far, we have reached few important points in the analysis of Yasser's hysteric struggle. One: Yasser had already established a belief in the need to believe in a transcendental Other; the first materiality of belief. Two: Yasser signified People as non-transcendental so our analysis now moves on to examine his development of a second materiality of belief towards the Egyptian-Muslims God, which is his choice of a transcendental to develop a hysteric state with. Our analysis therefore moves to examine the conditions of production of a hysteric flow of significations towards a particular God – as a transcendental Other. I do this in the next section by further

examining the conditions to develop Dolar's second materiality of belief. However, before moving on, couple of points need to be noted from the discussion above to consolidate the distinction made between the transcendental Other and non-transcendental Other.

In Dolar's quote at the opening of this section, Pascal was taking about God while Althusser was taking about Society, yet both were treated with similar connotations of belief, because both God for Pascal and Society for Althusser were signified with agency that transcended any possible social-material-political conditions that the subject could encounter. Dolar and Zizek had bundled both God and Society into one analysis using the Lacanian notion of the big Other. Hence the first point to be noted here is that 'God' is not the only possible transcendental Other. The second point I want to note here is specific to the Lacanian big Other, which is: not every big Other is transcendental. For instance, the corporation or institution that a subject is employed by may be signified as a big Other – with agency bigger than any small other – however most likely the subject will not symbolize the employing institution as a transcendental big Other. That is, the subject will associate current socio-material conditions to the institution's symbolic agency but will not associate transcendental conditions in society at large throughout time (history) to the agency of the institution employing the subject.

A distinction between bigger Others that are signified as transcendental and big Others that are signified as non-transcendental may help in analysing the different conditions needed for developing a hysteric flow of significations towards these two different types of Lacanian big Others. Yasser is a case in point. To further delve into Yasser's struggle to develop a hysteric flow of signification to his choice of transcendental Other (i.e., the Egyptian-Muslims' God), I move to examine the second materiality of belief. In the next section I discuss how following a religious ritual leads to a belief in God (with creed) as an inescapable necessity – as Dolar put it in the quote above. Then following Dolar's theoretical move (above), the discussion about God can be generalized to Society (with law) or People (with ideology) or any transcendental Other (with its own discourse).

## Conditions of Production for a Hysterical Flow of Signification towards a Transcendental Other

Although, as Dolar pointed out, Pascal and Althusser skipped the first materiality of belief as a precondition to the second, their insight about developing belief *through* rituals is helpful in examining the conditions relating to the second materiality of belief. Following rituals reveals important dynamics in the development of a belief in the name of God (with creed), or a subjugation to Society (with law). There is a particular proximity between the development of the second materiality of belief in rituals and the reproduction of agency in traumatic contexts. One can imagine Pascal's advice to a subject like Yasser who had already developed the first materiality of belief and was now struggling to offer himself as a subject of desire to a God which would render the nonsensical socio-political upheavals sensible and empowering for him. During the engagement in a ritual something close to that happens for the non-believer. A non-believer (who already believes in his need to believe) may, during a communal ritual, discover that it is only the name of God that transforms those nonsensical rituals to something sensible and meaningful; it is the name of God that brings all those individuals together in an empowering communal act and transforms individuals into community, and that transformation is displayed right in front of his eyes as the ritual synchronizes individual acts into a communal ritual for the love of God. Letting oneself go into this group hysteria (i.e., joining a group that offers itself as a subject of desire to a God) provides a unique psychosocial space where the signification of God shifts.

The ritual then provides a psychosocial space where the signification of God may be displaced: from the God that makes the nonsensical rituals sensible, meaningful, and empowering to the community of believers – to the God that makes the nonsensical events of life sensible, meaningful and even empowering for the community of believers. Religious leaders usually push for such a displacement of significations to take place, that is, encouraging the subject to use the psychosocial experience offered by rituals to signify God for life events beyond rituals. A parent enduring the pain of his sick child may use the psychosocial experience offered by the ritual to re-signify his child's sickness as part of God's plan for its beloved servant and the believer will come out of this process with confidence and ease that, in the end, all

will be alright. I have witnessed such relieving experience through religion in close members of my family. When I was about 11 years old, we lost my youngest brother to illness. He was very young, and I remember my mother was devastated, as we all of were. My mom attended many Sufi Halaqas, local communal rituals, and she prayed on her own a lot. These prayers had a calming effect on her, she would come back to us in peace. Eventually she was convinced and convinced us that our brother had become an angel in heaven and that he was waiting for us to guide us to heaven when we die. He became our guiding angel, and in a sense his death was transformed by God, he was not no longer gone forever. Further, my brother's death had acquired an empowering meaning for us, his death made us less afraid of death because God made him our guiding angel. The communal rituals as well as the individual prayers allowed my mom to make a fundamental shift in her signification of God: from the God of nonsensical rituals to the God of nonsensical life events. Then the God who transformed the nonsensical ritual also transformed the nonsensical tragedy. Her belief gave a devastating life event a transcendental meaning.

When Pascal suggested religious rituals to the non-believer, he was probably referring to two types of religious rituals. The first type of religious ritual is practiced communally and usually takes place in a designated space such as a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or a temple. The second type of ritual that intended for the individual in a private space. Zizek (2003) brings an important dimension of belief that makes the communal rituals of special importance in developing a belief in a transcendental bigger Other. Zizek shows how individuals come to believe through seeing others actively performing a belief. He proposes that belief functions in a group through an endless cycle of delegation between small others. To explore this idea of belief through others, one can imagine that a subject in a communal ritual will be exposed to several different variations of hysteric flows of significations towards the transcendental Other, which the communal is gathered in the name of, and the communal performances represent the desire for the transcendental Other. Hence the agency and desire for the transcendental is embodied in the group performances. And, as discussed above, if the subject allows itself to delve into one of these hysteric flows of significations and if the subject finds that the nonsensical rituals start to make sense via a hysteric attachment to a transcendental Other, then the subject may feel empowered by the emergence of a new symbolic world of

meaning and may even enjoy being part of a collective. Hence a new prospect may appear to the subject to utilize the hysteric attachment to the transcendental Other (through a simple displacement) to reproduce its agency over its traumatic conditions beyond the ritual.

It is important to recall Dolar and Žižek's pre-condition that this second materiality of belief develop through ritual. That is, before engaging in the ritual the subject must already have developed a belief in its need for a belief in the agency of an Other that transcends its temporal socio-political-material conditions. It is also important here to notice that the hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other takes place within a creed or a discourse that is specific to that transcendental bigger Other (Fink, 2004, 2013). I call this creed or a discursive structure that supports a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other an ignorance structure. Hence the hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other needs an ignorance structure. For instance, one cannot imagine the establishment of the transcendental agency of a God without a reservoir of stories about its glory, decrees (about what it desires from its subjects), salvation (what happens if subjects obey and what happens for those who do not obey), and a range of mythologies which embody God's omni-love, omni-power, and omni-grace.

Now comes the importance of the second type of ritual: the individual rituals in the subject's private space. In this type of ritual, the subject may use the creed it captured during communal rituals to develop its own hysteric flow of signification towards the transcendental. Hence the individual ritual provides a sort of practice and trial for the subject to use the ignorance structure (creed) to develop a hysteric flow of significations that transcend its own socio-political-material conditions. The development of a personalized form of a hysteric flow of significations that transcend the subject's own conditions is the last step and it depends on all the steps that came before it. This last step however may take time and may need extra support from the more established members of the community who are more experienced in using the creed to hysterias. Hence a back and forth between the two types of ritual provides a better chance for the subject to gain more experience with the ignorance structure of the transcendental and to develop from it its own hysteric flow of significations particular to its own conditions and circumstances.

In this section and the one before I have discussed four conditions of possibility for the development of a hysteric flow of signification towards a transcendental bigger Other, to summarize:

- 1- a belief in the need to believe in a transcendental – a trauma could instigate such need, as discussed in the previous section;
- 2- a name for the transcendental Other with a creed – i.e., an ignorance structure or a discourse specific to the transcendental Other;
- 3- a community of believers engaging in communal rituals in the name of the Other and following its creed– i.e., a psychosocial experience where people use the creed and the rituals to fill a space of worship with hysteric flows of significations towards the transcendental (for example: the glorification of the transcendental in discursive and non-discursive communal performances); and
- 4- private individual rituals which guide the subject to contain its own specific circumstances and conditions into a hysteric flow of signification towards the transcendental Other.

Now it is time to go back to Yasser.

### **Yasser's Hysteric Struggle**

Let me first recall some of Yasser's signification choices that relate to the conditions of production of hysteric flow of significations:

- I) Yasser gave People (Egyptians) a signification of a big Other that did not transcend his current troubling socio-political conditions. This type of signification put People out of the hysteric equation for the present time.
- II) Yasser however realized that he needed to believe in a transcendental-Other. He appreciated that his mother, his lover, and his two close friends' way of life demonstrated a belief in an Egyptian Muslim's God and brought a kind of peace in troubled times, i.e., Yasser developed the first materiality of belief.

- III) In quote Y.5 Yasser expressed his dislike for communal rituals in relation to the Egyptian-Muslims' God. The Sufi group that he appreciated the most turned the light off during the communal ritual, and that specific feature was what made the group attractive to him. This dislike of engaging in communal rituals seemed to deprive Yasser of the space in which he could believe though the belief of others, which was discussed in the last section.

The combination of these three points contributed to his struggle to produce a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other, which in turn hindered his reproduction of political agency. Below I return to one of Yasser's quotes from the previous chapter that captures this struggle.

**quote Y.9 (A)**

You see let me tell you. . . . my mind is critical . . .and I think about everything . . . . I am tired of *being critical* . . . so I want to give *being critical* a holiday . . . .the problem is that the answers on the other side is not satisfactory to me (m: you mean their side (Kamal, Heba, and his mother)) their side . . . it is not satisfactory because they have not reach to it critically . . . .they have reached it in a . . . . . Kamel for example when decided to become religious . . . I told him the difference between us is that you have felt something different . . . . what he felt was for him. . . . and what is different is for him . . . *it cannot be transferred* . . . this is why I told him I need an experience to feel it . . . . it can take me to another world. . . .because I am tired. . . . my mind is tired . . . I am hoping with her ..being with her I will *redefine* . . . or ask different questions . . .or feel different things . . . do you ..the idea that . . . .an experience that shakes . . . a .not to shake . . . that makes you feel differently . . .and come to see a different world beyond this point. . . (Int 4, S4, 1:22:59)

{he went on talking about his love and how he likes the way she is . . . after that he talked about how he tries to rationalize his behaviour, then he said:}

**quote Y.9 (B)**

But there are times you are fed up . . . .the idea that everything needs thinking ... and you are fed up that you rationalize everything . . . would this be of benefit or is it harmful . . . so one need to get some rest in life. . .fa . . . *I think that* . . . ah . . .a . . . and you do not want to think too much . . . so part of why I need to go to the other side is that I want a rest . . . .I want to stop thinking. . .and I want to stop thinking that . . . .*I am making a gap between me and the people I love.* . . so yes I am tilting in this direction because those people I love . . . .and definitely I do not want to make something that they cannot share it with me. . . . therefore I *merge* towards their lifestyle . . and I *merge* more to the ideas that we both can discuss. . . . I do this *intentionally and* why I do it . . . . to give my mind a break. . . and so on . . . . after a *stormy* phase in my life. . . would this last? . . . after we get closer and so on. . . I do not know . . would the experience of going there will have enough feelings that put ones feet on a ground that he can continues? . . . .I do not know . . . .so why do not I want to go there on my own? . . . .because . . . . ah . . . . because . . . . I . . . .if to go alone . . . . then my mind is the one who has to take me there . . . . and this has not been enough till now. . . .I mean . . . . my mind keeps buzzing all the time.. . . . and again . . . .I also realised that the human is not only substance . . . . there is soul and feelings and one has to follow their directions . . . . (Int 4,1:28:41)



In this quote Yasser reflects on what formulates his struggle for a hysteric relation to the Egyptian-Muslim's God. He acknowledges that reaching the 'truce' and 'rest' (that he needs) in the current politically traumatizing conditions could not be achieved through critical thinking. Another way of putting this is that he realized he needed ignorance – not knowledge – to reproduce agency over his current conditions. He also acknowledges that, among the ignorance paths available in his context, he preferred to take the ignorance path of those closest to him (his mother, his lover, and his two close friends). But he also acknowledges that, to follow their ignorance paths (i.e., to develop a hysteric relation to the Egyptian Muslim's God) he needed a special type of experience: 'the idea that . . . an experience that shakes . . . a. .not to shake . . . that makes you feel differently . . .and come to see a different world beyond this point. . .'. We can characterize the experience that he is looking for here as a psychosocial experience that facilitates the development of a hysteric state towards the transcendental Other. The normal route to this kind of experience, for someone like Yasser with an already developed first materiality of belief, is Pascal's route: follow the rituals. Unfortunately, Yasser did not like communal rituals, which (as discussed in the previous section) is a key ingredient in Pascal's recipe for belief. So, Yasser turns to love to provide him with the psychosocial experience he needs to develop a hysteric relation to the transcendental. Later in this section I discuss this alternative route to belief which Yasser seemed to be drawing from, however before starting that discussion, there is another key issue raised by this quote that needs to be discussed.

In the quote above Yasser indicates that his position towards the transcendental Other seems to be alien among his closest circle of friends and family; and these are long standing friends that come from the same socio-economic background as himself; they have also been his colleagues in development work since he started his career. He says: '*I am making a gap between me and the people I love*'. In interview three he mentioned that he used to join in with the communal religious rituals despite being critical while engaging, like: Friday prayers and fasting during Ramadan. It seems that there was a point when he created a gap (or a detachment) with the religious mode most common in his immediate socioeconomic context. His current state towards the transcendental Other indicated a turn of events that was not directly expressed in the interviews, yet that he alluded to. I asked him (in

interview three) about his belief in God, and he said that he liked to have God in his life. It seems that at some point he had detached himself from the discourse of the Other while keeping His name. Hence losing the hysteric attachment towards the transcendental Other, because, as discussed in the previous section, the ignorance structure (or the discourse of the Other) is an essential condition for developing a hysteric flow of significations and hence a hysteric relation to a transcendental Other. This devaluation of the hysteric relation towards the Egyptian Muslim's God was not uncommon among activists after the revolution. Al-Jazeera network produced a documentary entitled 'In Seven Years' (Aljazeera, 2019) to document the inception of changes in modes of religiosity among Egyptian youth after seven years of socio-political upheavals. Other news reports also documented a change in the mode of religiosity among a wide sector of Egyptian youth during the political upheavals (BBC, 2018). In this context, Yasser's devaluation of his hysteric attachment to God is not individual but needs to be read in the socio-political context of the Egyptian revolution. It is important to situate his hysteric struggle within his own socio-political context. Yasser's hysteric struggle was not about establishing a new hysteric relation towards a transcendental Other, it was however a sort of struggle to return and adjust to an old and familiar hysteric experience. His struggle seemed to be in the remaking of a hysteric choice that had already been made during the years of revolution in response to a challenging socio-political context. This requires a bit more elaboration.

What I am suggesting here is that there was a detachment from the ignorance structure of the transcendental leading to a devaluation of his hysteric relation to the transcendental God during the years of the revolution before the military coup, and now, after the military coup, he seems to need to recalibrate his hysteric choices. In the following I investigate this assumption and explore what in his socio-political conditions, before the military coup, might have instigated a detachment from the ignorance structure of God? And what changes in his socio-political conditions, after the coup, might have made him want to hysterically reattach to the transcendental?

In quote Y.3 in the previous chapter Yasser contextualized his psychic struggle as the aftermath of the initial success of revolution; he said that these times were filled with a euphoric sense of agency. At that time, rapid and monumental socio-political

successes were all associated to People (Egyptians), and in such conditions the development of a strong hysteric flow of significations towards People (Egyptians) was relatively easy. At that time, People do not need to be transcendental, it did not need creed; it was easy to associate success to People, and most of the media outlets at that time, both local and international, talked about the Egyptian People as achieving something great. In quote 1.3 Yasser said:

but it is the idea that you are *powerful* ... that you can draw a vision for the whole world . . . draw a vision for your future . . . and what is not . . . .ah... .. and you had the feeling that you have owned the . . . . ah. . . . everything . . . and this feeling made us . . . . ah . . . . I think in my own personal life . . . it made me *critically* . . .to get out the most you can . . . and *to challenge* everything. . . . *to challenge the norm* ... *to challenge* the way your parents think . . . and so on . . . . .

During that time God seemed less important for reproducing agency; hanging onto its discourse may have seemed more costly than its psychosocial utility. This is one factor that may explain the lessening of Yasser's attachment to the discourse of the transcendental Other while keeping a sort of attachment to its name. The quote somehow indicates this: 'to challenge the norm ... to challenge the way your parents think..' may indicate a challenge to the way pre-revolutionary Egyptians used their hysteric relation towards a transcendental Other (God) to reproduce different types of agency (i.e., economic, social, and even political) using the discourse of the Other, i.e. its ignorance structure. So, one factor that might have instigated the detachment from the discourse of Egyptian Muslim's God was the emergence of People as a bigger Other and the euphoric sense of agency Yasser reported after the initial success of the revolution. However, there appears to be another socio-political condition which seems critical and may have increased the level of detachment from the transcendental Other.

For the three years after the initial success of the revolution, there developed an intense confrontation between the affiliation of Islamist groups lead by the Muslim Brotherhood and the rest of the revolutionary activists. Those with an Islamist affiliation tried to use the discourse of the Egyptian Muslim's God to gain political advantage with the majority of voters in the newly born democracy of Egypt. As a tactic, this was quite successful, and the groups with Islamist affiliations won the

popular vote in three consecutive votes: the referendum on the constitution, the parliamentary election, and finally the presidential election. The tactic was met with fierce resistance among most of the activists who had led the revolution. Different groups of activists met this new challenge with different responses. Some decided to lessen their own attachment to the discourse of the transcendental, that in its name the revolution was being Islamized. The documentary made by Al Jazeera, "In Seven Years' (Aljazeera,2019), showed four in-depth interviews with four activists who had made significant changes in their religious affiliations during those years. The four activists pointed to the political confrontation between the revolutionary groups and the Islamists (who had decided to use the Islamic discourse for political gain) as a turning point in the changes they made in their religious affiliations. I suspect a similar force could be at play for Yasser. I think a combination of these two socio-political conditions pushed Yasser to detach from the discourse of the transcendental Other, while keeping an attachment to its name.

The return of the Military regime and the return of the Islamists to prisons may have reminded some of the utility of traditional Egyptian hysteric relations to the transcendental Other as a remedy for the tragedy of being. However, as Yasser case demonstrates, the return to a hysteric state after a detachment from the community of believers and the ignorance structure of the transcendental is not an easy task. Yet Yasser seemed to be trying an alternative path to belief, namely, Love.

### **Love as a Hysteric Flow of Significations towards the Transcendental Other.**

In the quote (Y.9 A) above, Yasser reflected on the role love played in his struggle to create hysterias to a transcendental Other. He says:

this is why I told him I need an experience to feel it .... it can take me to another world. .. .because I am tired. ... my mind is tired . . . I am hoping with her ..being with her I will *redefine* ... or ask different questions . . .or feel different things . . . do you ..the idea that . . . .an experience that shakes . . . a .not to shake . . . that makes you feel differently . . .and come to see a different world beyond this point.'

Here he clearly says that there is a role for this experience of love to play in his struggle for 'rest' or 'truce/peace' away from his critical mind and over the tumultuous

conditions that characterised his life in Egypt. Let me here bring another quote that shows the intensity of his feelings for Heba:

Quote Y.11

so now I am at the state that the most real thing in my life is my love for her. ... and I love her because my love for her . . . .ta . . . . I mean . . . . I love love . . . . . I mean I became loving love in a way that . . . .ha . . . . I mean I do not want anything from her. . . . I just want to keep loving her. . . . even if she does not love me . . or she is not deciding to take this step. . . . . ah. . . . because at the end I was telling her. . . that ah . . . . . at the end it is a mutual decision . . . that you. . . . . for me my relationship to her *unquestionable*. . . I mean it cannot be questioned or . . ah . . . or *be compromised* in any way. . . therefore any . . ah . . . the form of the relationship . . . . is . . a mutual decision . . . .but I love her . . . and that is it . . . .and I do not want anything back from her. . . so my goal became just love. . . .and I am not . . . . and I even stopped questioning if she loves me or not . . . . I do not want anything (int 2, 2:34:11).

His love for Heba is quite intense and there are probably multiple factors involved in the development of such intense feelings, however, here I am only concerned with the role this story plays in the reproduction of his political agency via re-establishing a hysteric flow of significations. Focusing only on one facet of this complex experience of love is not intended to diminish it. It is however a way to limit this discussion and keep it manageable. For that purpose, let me bring in Dolar (1993) again. He makes another key point linking love to subjugation:

Perhaps it is in the experimentally produced pure form of love found in analysis that we can touch upon some fundamental implications of love as an ideological mechanism. Adorno speaks of "the blind spot of unquestioning acceptance of a given thing" merely because it is given, the obedience to the unavoidable which "love alone can psychically manage."<sup>23</sup> In this acceptance of the given as the most intimate, we find the blind spot of ideological construction—a point beyond the signifier where the subject silently submits and responds to the Other by offering his being. (p.87)

Love seems to be an alternative route via hysterias to a transcendental Other, an alternative to Pascal's route to belief through following rituals supported by a creed, i.e., an alternative to belief through the discourse of the Other. Dolar discusses further how the process of love involves a strong relation towards the Other. Below is another quote from Dolar that largely reflects Yasser's thoughts in Y.11, above:

the pattern could be described as follows: a young hero quite by coincidence and through no endeavour of his own meets a young girl in some more or less extraordinary circumstances. What happened unintentionally and by pure chance is in the second stage recognized as the realization of his innermost and immemorial wishes and desires. The contingent miraculously becomes the place of his deepest truth, the sign of Fate given by the Other. It is the Other that has chosen, not the young man himself, who was powerless (and who has to face heroically, in the third stage, the consequences of his non-choice: the opposition of the parents or society, intrigues, bad fortune, illness, etc.). It turns out that pure chance was actually no chance at all: the intrusion of the unforeseen is turned into Necessity, *tyche* is turned into automaton. The moment of subjectivation is precisely that moment of suspension of subjectivity to the Other (Fate, Providence, Eternal plan, Destiny, or whatever one might call it), manifesting itself as the pure contingency of the Real. (1993, p.83)

Yasser talked about Heba as 'the most real thing in my life at the moment'. When he talked about the first time they met (int 2), it sounded like Fate. He was going to his first ever workshop in the field that became his career, i.e., youth development/empowerment. The government building where the workshop took place was huge and he got lost. He was looked for guidance and he found Heba in the building going to the same workshop. He asked her if she knew where the workshop was, and she said 'yes, follow me'. They became close friends and colleagues, for almost twelve years, until one day (after the military coup) he suddenly realized that she was not his friend, she was the love of his life, and he discovered that the most real thing in his life had always been his love for her.

Heba seemed to be his Fate. But who declares such a Fate? Heba seemed to relate him to the Egyptian Muslims' God. She had quite a different hysteric relationship to

the Egyptian Muslim's transcendental Other than Yasser. Unlike him, she was a practicing Muslim; she wore the head scarf and followed the religious codes especially in social settings. Despite having a different lifestyle, Yasser described her lifestyle as having a kind of peace. He said that she had settled a few important matters. He respected her way of thinking, which was obviously influenced by the religion whose discourse he had detached from; he said that she had a special way of convincing him. He thought (see quote Y.9) that maybe, through her, he could see the world differently, find the experience that he needed to get to the other side, the side where all the people he loved were. Heba seemed to be the remedy that would enable Yasser's struggling hysteria to return to the transcendental Other.

Dolar (1993) talks about the idea of Fate in love as an injunction from the Other. So, if Heba is Yasser's Fate decreed by the Egyptian Muslims' God, one might understand his complete submission to Heba's love as an alternate route to develop a hysteric signification towards the transcendental Other. A route to hysteric significations that is not based on the discourse of the Other, i.e., that is outside the religious discourse, i.e., a kind of non-discursive route. Now recalling that Yasser, at the height of the revolution, had detached himself from the discourse of the Egyptian Muslims' Other, one might understand his submission to the Other's decreed Fate in Heba as an alternative to the submission to the Other's injunctions decreed by religion (i.e., the discourse of the Other). So, the discursive hysteric flow he could not develop via the discourse of the Other (which he had detached from) was perhaps substituted with the development of a non-discursive hysteric flow of significations through his love to Heba – as God's Fate. Love seems to have a dual function, on one hand it is offering oneself to the lover, and on the other hand it is also offering oneself to the Other, through which Fate the lover became a given, a destiny, an unescapable necessity. Through his love for Heba, Yasser may finally be able to subjugate himself to the transcendental Other, without attaching to its discourse. This may be one way to explain the intensity of his feeling towards her.

Dolar (1993, p.88) put it wonderfully: 'Love masks the external origins of subjectivity, concealing them not behind the illusion of an autonomous subject as a *causa sui*, but, quite the contrary, by offering one's being to the Other, offering one's own particularity in response to external contingency.' Through Heba, Yasser seems to

be offering himself to the God in her, or the God that constitutes her. Many religious traditions emphasize love as a way of finding God. Of course, Dolar does not limit the discussion of love to God, love can be used in a similar way to hysterias towards any Other signified with transcendental agency, for example, Nation/ Country/ Humanity/ etc. Love is a potent ideological mechanism (Dolar, 1993). 'Love thy neighbour,' as Žižek theorizes (1987, 2000), is not a simple moral injunction it is a dynamic of subjugation.

But this is not the only possible route available for developing a hysteric relation to a transcendental Other. The next case enables a discussion about developing hysteric relations to a different transcendental Other. In the next chapter I discuss Maya's case where she signifies People as a transcendental Other and develops a hysterical relation via a different route than Yasser's route to God. However, before moving on to the next case there is an important note due here.

Yasser's case shows that the need to develop a hysteric relation to a transcendental Other in traumatic situations is quite intense. Such intensity makes the subject vulnerable to manipulation. Hysteria is a condition of the development of agency (given that there are different hysteric relations to different types of agencies), and agency is at the core of what the subject is, hence a deprivation of hysteria may feel like a disabling of the subject (or a side of it) – like a symbolic paralysis. If such need is not carefully dealt with it may therefore lead the subject to desperate acts.

Yasser's choices put his reproduction of political agency in the hands of Heba. Heba did not totally accept his love, yet nor did she totally reject it. Her response was to give him room to develop a hysteric relation through her. But what if she had rejected him? how heavy could this have been? Would this also mean that God had rejected him? Yasser seemed to be symbolically resourceful enough to find different routes to the same transcendental Other, or to find a totally different transcendental Other to satisfy his needs towards hysteria. However, this process, by its very nature, exposes the subject's vulnerabilities to other subjects. It also exposes a subject's vulnerability to ignorance structures and those who speak the discourses of Others (such as Sheikhs, Muslims, and other clergies). Religious leaders are only one example of those who have at times in history used these human vulnerabilities to exploit weaker subjects. Ideological and Political leaders are also in position to



exploit the same vulnerabilities, and some have also misused their position to exploit. This discussion also reveals the powerful appeal for the State apparatus to monopolize the means of production of hysteric states, which is a subtle form of oppression that neo-liberal-capitalist states often deploy. Lovers too can inflict deep wounds. In the concluding chapter, I return to explore more of the human vulnerabilities that were revealed in this research, and discuss why, now more than ever, we need a theory of Ignorance to be included in our education regimes.

## Chapter Seven

### Maya's Ignorance Analysis

#### Introduction:

In this chapter I discuss the case of Maya; a lawyer and human rights activist in her late 20s. I interviewed her while she was doing her master's degree in a field related to human rights. She wore the female Muslim's head scarf. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, however there were some ideas she chose to express in English. In the first interview Maya gave an overview of her biography, below are some key points from this overview.

Maya was born in Cairo to a middle-class family. She went to a private school from grade three and stayed at the same school until she graduated with a high school diploma. She then went to study law at Cairo university. She described her school days as not the best time of her life; she was badly bullied at a young age. The bullies focused their verbal abuse on her body and weight. She stood up to them at times and at other times she gave in. Maya said this experience instilled in her a strong feeling against oppression and injustice. She reported getting extremely annoyed if she saw someone being bullied or oppressed. When she was at secondary school, there was a Palestinian uprising and she was affected by the scenes on the news. She linked this to her strong feelings against bullying and oppression. At that time, for the first time, she took part in a demonstration organized by her school to express support for the Palestinian people. She also related the start of her religious inclinations to the experience of bullying at school. She said she became more spiritual and religious at school and that this helped her to cope with the school bullying. She started wearing the headscarf in middle school.

She graduated from law school a few months before the 2011 revolution. She then worked for a stock market company for less than a year. She hated this job and after few months applied for another job with one of the established human rights

organizations in Cairo. She was employed by this organization and was very excited by her new job. This was at the height of the revolution's success, a few months after the toppling of Hosni Mubarak. Maya's first task was to work with a team of lawyers to support the detainees from a famous sit-in that turned into two weeks of clashes between demonstrators and the police at the headquarters of the interior ministry. The demonstrators were determined to occupy the police headquarters and the police were determined to defend it, this confrontation resulted in a high volume of arrests, severe injuries and even deaths. Maya later took a key part in writing a fact-finding report into this sit-in and the subsequent two weeks of clashes, documenting what she called 'the grave human rights violations by the state against the demonstrators.' Maya also co-founded a project as part of this group called 'the right for truth.' The project's main objective was to produce fact-finding reports for each major incident during the Egyptian revolution's upheavals after toppling Hosni Mubarak.

Maya immersed herself in the new human rights law job and advocacy. She described this community as true believers in the principles they stood for, mostly leftist, and as holding relatively progressive ideas about society and religion. She shared her passion to defend the oppressed and fight injustice with them, she also mostly agreed with most of their views on society and oppression. During the interviews it was noticeable that she used some terminology that belonged towards the socialist spectrum of the Egyptian political activists' scene. However, despite broadly sharing their views on politics and society, there was one key area of conflict with her work community, that was their views on religion. Her boss and some of the male colleagues openly critiqued Islamic teachings and key historical figures, including prophets. Maya found these remarks very disturbing and reacted to them emotionally. At one point she could not control her reaction and asked her boss in a clearly distressed way: 'why are you saying this, why are you saying this, why are you saying this?' Her boss and colleagues were taken aback by Maya's emotional reaction, and he apologized to her; after this incident he was quite careful not to open these kinds of topics in Maya's presence. Maya also noted that they became quite considerate of her religious inclinations and needs, however, she still felt uncomfortable. She linked this discomfort to herself starting to question aspects of religion. She called this 'a difficult period' in her life. This seemed to be one of the

key challenges Maya faced in reproducing her agency. At that time Maya frequently attended classes on Islamic theology and Sufism in a Sufi institute famous for catering for upper middle class religious circles. Eventually Maya was able to overcome this religious challenge; she said that she was eventually able to reach a place where she was comfortable working and being among this leftist human rights community, while maintaining her religious identity and her relationship to God.

I identify this challenge as her first challenge to religion, and later in this chapter, I will discuss how Maya was successfully able to resolve this first challenge and reproduce her political agency.

About two years after resolving this challenge and reaching a peaceful/balanced state in her life, there came a second challenge to religion that returned Maya to difficult times. The challenge started around two months after the military coup, and soon after the army and the police had violently dispersed the Rabaa sit-in resulting in the deaths of hundreds of protesters in a few hours (Human rights watch, 2014 ). Maya gave legal support to the families of the murdered protesters at the mortuary, where they were being pressured by the government to sign declarations of causes of death that they disagreed with. The disputes were about the status of the dead bodies that did not fit mortuary reports. In her support of the families at the mortuary, Maya witnessed numbers of murdered bodies and saw how the government manipulated the mortuary reports and pressured grieving families. Also at that time, another major incident happened in the religious community she frequently attended. One young lady in the community said that the head Sheikh (the religious head of the Sufi community) had sexually harassed her. Several other women came out to say that this had happened to them too. Maya was not harassed herself by the Sheikh, but the news disturbed her a great deal and she was angry. She said that this incident threw her back on her earlier questions difficulties with religion, she described this period as a return to the period of her first religion challenge at the beginning of her journey with human rights activism.

I call this phase the second religious challenge. In this chapter, in addition to analysing the first challenge to religion, I also discuss how Maya dealt with the second challenge to religion and was able to reproduce her political agency. The

second challenge to religion came about a year before our interviews so it was still quite fresh in her memory. The biggest part of the second interview focused on the details of her experiences following her hearing about the Sheikh's harassments of her female colleagues. The third interview consisted of open reflections on music she liked and some of the Facebook notes she had posted on her page. My assessment by that time was that Maya had been quite successful in reproducing her political agency after having faced two major challenges and experiencing the upheavals of the Egyptian context. In the fourth interview I wanted to make sure of my overall assessment of the current state of her political agency and I probed in this direction. In the next section I will discuss significations from the fourth interview that suggest a successful reproduction of political agency. However, the intricacies of her reproduction process are mostly apparent in the way she dealt with the first and the second challenges to religion. Hence, in this chapter, after discussing flows of significations that indicated the successful reproduction of political agency, I examine in more detail the symbolic moves Maya utilized to reproduce her political agency. I do this in three sections: (1) discussing how she drew from a socialist discourse to signify People as a transcendental and sexuated big Other, (2) a section discussing the first challenge to religion and how she resolved it, and, finally, (3) I discuss the intricacies of her second challenge to religion and her second reproduction of political agency, which will bring us back to her final state of political agency.

## Significations of Political Agency

Towards the end of the fourth interview with Maya I probed several times to make sure I had correctly read the status of her political agency at that time. The following quotes are from this section of the fourth interview. Below I present the flows of signification that indicated Maya's renewed political agency.

### Quote M.1

(me. why do you want to continue in the human rights advocacy path?)

Because this is the place that I was placed in. . . . (me. what do you mean?)  
 . . . . God destined everyone to be in a specific position. . . he puts you on a specific *path*. . . (Int 4, 1:28:19)

### Quote M.2

I thought whether I should continue or not. . . . . No I think I will continue being in this space . . . . . because there is oppression in the country . . . . .and someone has to do something about it . . . . . and it will be a kind of cowardice to leave. . . . . why leave . . . . . (me. but you said that Human rights advocacy is useless in Egypt) . . . . .that is right . . . . . but this is because the situation is miserable . . . . . but there is . . . . . there is . . . . . there is . . . . . there is . . . . . there is . . . . . *a lot of atrocities* happening . . .more than one can face. . . . .but . . .the . . .ah . . . a . . . . . this community . . . . .was there for how many years ? . . . . . and during these years . . . . . he stood by how many people. . . . . from those who really need support . . . . .ahm. . . . . wither . . . .ah . . . for the families of the politically detained . . . .or. . . . for. .ah. . . ahm. . . . I mean . . .*it is not black and white thing* . . . . . this community is not totally black . . . . . ah. . . . I mean . . . .not because there is some conflict in it . . . . I will leave it . . . . . this is how life is . . . . . and No. . . . it in fact . . it definitely has done a lot of good. . . (Int 4 1:29:58)

She went on talking about the human rights community, I then brought her back to talk about her political agency

## Quote M.3

(me. So when you will go back to Egypt... you ... she then completed my sentence with a strong tone) I will continue working for Human rights . . . .  
 .(me. Do you feel there might be some danger in working there?) . . not on me. . . (me. Why?). . . . because if there is someone that is going to get detained this will be the head of the organization. . . . . (me. Not you) . . . . .  
 ta. . . I do not think they will detain me. . . . . (she laughs) although they detained many people . . . . (me. Why not you?) . . . . it does not make sense . . . . but they also do a lot of things that does not make sense . . . . like Israel el Taweel for example. . . . . I do not know . . . . . I do not have a space of . . . . . I am not worried . . (Int 4 1:32:31)

## Quote M.4

My work is about consciousness and memory . . . . (me. do you mean making records) . . .yes . . . . (me. For whom do you keep the records?). . . . . for the coming generations for those who wants to read . . . . for myself . . (laughs) . . . . (me. Do you think this will make a difference?) of course. . . . the concept . . . . the . . . . .those who leave their past are lost (she was quoting an Egyptian proverb) . . . . . if the human did not know his history . . . . . and he is in a transitional state. . . . . how would he know. . . . . if we do not know . . . . . up until now we do not know. . . . there are a lot of secretes about. . . .regarding . . . ah . . . .h . . . the peace treaty and the war . . . . .fa . . . . .certainly we are . . . . certainly we do not completely understand the dynamics between Egypt and Israel for instance . . . we understand parts of it . . . . . because it appears in policies. . . . . but we do not understand everything. . . . subsequently . . . .again. . . . the concept ...of the freedom of information is import in this regard . . . . . even if the whole human rights community is corrupt . . . . . and . . . ah . . . an. . .and . . . . the issue has also to do with consciousness . . . . . writing history . . . .is related to ah . . .a . . . .in the *nation state* I mean . . . . .they take certain strands from history and they use it to influence the conscious of the society . . . . . so one tries to write alternative history for those who wants . . . . . (Int 4 1:38:57)

## Quote M.5

(Me. So you will go back to Egypt and work in the . . .ah.. ) . . . . *in the right for truth*. . . . (she said it in English, and I repeated in Arabic and she corrected my translation) . . . . the truth about the human rights violations (me. I see . . . . so you fight to take this right from the state which does not give it ) . . . . no . . . . I take it . . . .(with a strong tone) . . . . ( me. You take it) . . . . I collect the information . . . . I draft the report and I put it forward to the public. . . .I make a website and I make a documentary . . . (Int 4 1:40:20)

## Quote M.6

All we write is against the state. . . .the state in fact wants to shut us down . . . . . (me. And what is stopping it?). . . . . . that we are a local organization . . . . supported by many other local organizations . . . . .supported by . . . . and it is well known on an international level . . . . . (me. So what is preventing the state?) . . . . . *power dynamics* . . . . . (me. Internal or external power dynamics). . . . . to a degree *internal* but what is most important is *external* . . . . . for instance when Hosam Bahgat was detained . . . . . Ban Ki-moon issued a decision . . . . . issued a statement . . . . . Hosam Bahgat was . . . . . ah . . . .I . . . . . I mean . . . . . we are *privileged* . . . . . (me. Privileged by?) . . . . . *privileged by the status we are positioned in the power dynamics* (Int 4 1:44:53)

In the quote above I intervened three times to encourage Maya to talk about the status of her political agency. The six quotes above consistently signify a desire to continue working on defending the human rights of the oppressed, and to resist oppression and injustice. The quotes also signify that Maya had defined the scope of her political agency, and she had developed a belief in the impact of her work for the future of the Egyptian People. The quotes also indicate a few key elements in her reproduction process, for example:



### 1- Dealing with antagonism.

Although the field of human rights advocacy was one of the sectors of civil society that were targeted by state oppression, Maya seemed to have dealt with such antagonism in a way that did not hinder her ability to reproduce political agency (Amnesty International, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014, 2015, 2016). She worked in a field that had a high possibility of being subject to political oppression by the state, yet she managed not to be worried. Quotes M.3 and M.6 above show how she was able to re-signify the antagonism in her context in such a way that it did not stop her from being politically active. Dealing with antagonism was one of the keyways that Maya's case differed from Yasser's case. In the next section I discuss this further.

### 2- People as transcendental

In quote M.4 Maya associates People with consciousness and history. These elements give the Egyptian People a transcendental signification, that is Peoples' symbolic agency transcended their contemporary conditions. This signification of People related to Maya's ability to deal with antagonism. This will also be further discussed in the next section.

### 3- A strong erotic flow of significations

Maya, in the quotes above, signifies work in human rights with a high significance, although in the first interview she expressed strong doubt about the worth of the human rights path in Egypt. This was why I put that back to her in quote M.2. From quote M.2 to quote M.5 she developed an erotic flow of signification that tied her work to the level of a big Other, namely the People's consciousness and history.

### 4- The discourse of God is used to reproduce political agency

Quote M.1 above is important. It is another key area of contrast between Maya and Yasser. In quote M.1, Maya deploys concepts from the Sufi discourse: that God put people in particular positions to fulfil their divine destiny. Hence, Maya not only brought the name of God into the reproduction of her agency, but she also brought a discourse of the Other into her reproduction process. This will be discussed further later in this chapter. There are two sections in this chapter that will discuss how

Maya resolved the two religious challenges that she faced during the two cycles of the reproduction of her political agency that we discussed.

In the next section I discuss elements 1-3 outlined above further. The fourth element will be elaborated in the following sections where I discuss how Maya resolved the first and the second religious challenges to reproduce her political agency.

This section, however, is meant to present evidence for the main presumption of the analysis presented in this chapter. Namely, I am analysing Maya as a case with a successful reproduction of political agency. While acknowledging that such a success has its own challenges, failures, and successes, I also acknowledge that it will have elements that are incoherent and chaotic, areas of instability, and so on too. In other words, a successful reproduction is not a neatly organized process, it is multi-dimensional and brings complexities where areas of incoherence and chaos lie side by side with clusters of successful production of different types of agencies. And even these clusters of successfully produced agencies might be resolved when they are brought together with new challenges and different clusters are again produced. Like a living organism where death and rebirth are continuous processes, yet one overall direction may dominate from time to time; that is, the living origin could overall be healthy and lively, or ailing and dying. The discussion of Maya's case and subsequent cases will further elaborate the complicated nature of the reproduction process.

### **Antagonism and People as a Transcendental and Sexuated Other**

One key difference between Maya's flow of significations and Yasser's is the way Maya symbolized the antagonism in the Egyptian socio-political context. Recalling that Yasser used El Sisi as a fetish to disavow the signification of an antagonistic symbolic agency in his context, the next quote shows how (differently) Maya signified the antagonistic forces in her socio-political context.

## Quote M.7

I do not believe in the concept of the modern state. . . . . ( me. can you elaborate). . . . . (she laughs) . . . . . I . . . bs. . . *do not* . . . I . . . . I mean . . . . .  
. I think that the modern state is a problem in itself . . . . . *and there must be a localization of aaa* . . . .honestly . . . I do not have a solution to the problems of the modern state . . . . . but the modern state is basically . . . in the third world. . . . . it . . . it partners with the capital in a very clear way . . . . . and it employs a large degree of oppression . . . . . and it is fundamentally a *product of neoliberalism* . . . . ta . . .ah. . . *that being said.* . . ah. . . .h. . . . . all the products of *neoliberalism* . . such as development . . . . and in regard to the concept of progress . . . and concept of civilizing the world. . . . . and all that . . . .and what is not . . . . . which is a *colonial* concept . . . ah . . . amm . . . . . it is so manifested in the modern state . . . . . ah . .w. . . and at the same time. . . . . ahm . . . . .the issue is branching in many fields . . . . .like education for instance. . . . . (she diverged a bit talking about a documentary on Education then went back) . . . . so basically . . . .ah . . . .a . . . that . . . . a . . . the modern state is a product of colonialism . . . . and it does the same things that colonialization did . . . . . but it does it on its own people . . . through the . . .*the nation state.* . . (Int 4 1:33:31)

The quote above shows Maya signifying the antagonism in the Egyptian context by associating antagonism to the nation state or the modern state. That is, she associates antagonism to the agency of a symbolic entity, i.e., to a big Other. In Maya's flow of significations above, the state (as a big Other) has antagonistic agency, it can actually do bad things to the Egyptian people similar to that of colonialism. I will call this type of big Other 'The Antagonistic Other', which is a subject/ big Other and its agency associated with the antagonism in her context; like the flow of significations in the quote above where the nation state is signified as an antagonistic Other. Maya seemed to signify more than one antagonistic Other, the nation state is a product of colonialism, which seems to signify another antagonistic Other, and the Capital was also signified as an antagonistic Other. It is worth noting at this moment that all of these antagonistic Others are signified, as will be shown later, as related to People as a bigger Other. That is, these big Others are deriving their agency from the agency of People. The appearance of The Antagonistic Other

as a symbolic category in Maya's flows of signification is a clear difference with Yasser's flow of significations. Furthermore, the appearances of antagonistic Others as part of the People that was a bigger Other indicate that Maya was sexuating People as a bigger Other. I further elaborate on this later, but first let me briefly recall the process of sexuating the bigger Other.

In chapter three I discussed the sexuation of the bigger Other. Sexuating a bigger Other refers to the symbolic splitting of the bigger Other into two exclusive categories: the Feminine category which includes big Others signified with the lack of the bigger Other, and the Masculine category which includes big Others signified with the phallus of the bigger Other. In addition, sexuating the bigger Other conditions the agency of the bigger Other to an intercourse between a masculine big Other a feminine big Other.

Although Maya's speech did not reveal the full details of her process of sexuating People as a bigger Other, Maya's signification of People strongly indicated a sexuation process of People as bigger Other. One of these indications was Maya's signification (above) of big (antagonistic) Others that all belong to People as bigger Others: the nation state, capitalism, colonialism. These sub-categories of People were signified to act as big Others with their own agency. This categorization indicated a sexuation process. Another important indication was Maya's referring to some concepts/characteristics of People that echoed a Marxist discourse; Maya had mentioned that her boss and another influential figure in the organization she worked for as belong to the revolutionary socialist group, a famous Marxist group in Egypt. The Marxist discourse can be read as a sexuation of People. The following quote shows Maya drawing some of her significations of People from Marxist discourse:

#### Quote M.8

It is actually . . . it is actually the . . .the movement of history .. and the *consciousness* . . . *again* . . . that of societies . . . it does not have . . . but . . .ah . . .ah . . . . . or it may have . . . at some moments. . . I was. . . . / *actually had this conversation with somebody*. . . . . it moves with or without you . . . . .but . . . the movement of history is progressing with

or without you . . . . . so without you it will also continue . . . . . and with you it will also continue . . . . . you just choose for yourself. . . . . ta . .t. . . . where you want to be positioned in the movement of history . . . . . so let us stop being frustrated . . .and let us continue. . . . . (me. where do you put yourself ) . . . . . I try to continue on the path. . . . . but . . . now I become more like walking (laughs loudly). . . . like I am having a dance walking on the path . . . . . better than running . . . . and getting exhausted...( laughs). (Int4 2:10:11)

Maya's signification here of People as societies that had consciousness and history, and her use of history seem to follow a Marxist discourse. Similar significations were also mentioned in quote M.4. In quote M.4 Maya related the history of the People to the People's consciousness in a way that suggested that to have the right consciousness People need to have had the right history. In quote M.4 Maya described the state as trying to develop a narrative of events to create a history that would affect the People's consciousness. These significations indicate that People were divided into several big Others. She talked mostly about masculine big Others, i.e., those who had the phallus of the People and could therefore influence consciousnesses or history. Her flow in quote M.4 indicated that there was another sub-category of People that was lacking the right consciousness, that which needed to find/create the right consciousness; Maya saw herself as one of those trying to bring this to them. Her flow of significations did not name the feminine Others, yet she seemed to be assuming them in her speech. Finally, her flow of significations also indicated the need for an intercourse between a feminine Other and a masculine Other as a condition for People's agency. That is, she indicated that for People as an Other lacking critical consciousness to be able to combat the antagonistic State as an Other (with phallus, i.e., police force) to have a new intercourse with the critical consciousness brought up from organizations like hers (as Others with a phallus, i.e., critical ideas). These accumulated significations confirmed an embedded sexuation process of People as a bigger Other.

Furthermore, Maya's significations show how a sexuation of the People may be an effective way to contain the antagonism in a traumatic socio-political context. The sexuation allows for the signification of multiple big Others in a masculine category

where the possibility of rivalry between the big Others could be signified within the masculine category. Among these masculine big Others Maya identified the modern state and signified it as antagonistic Other (as shown in quote M.7). However, quote M.6 shows that the antagonism of the Egyptian state may be contained by a signification of masculine rivalry among masculine big Others. Maya signified multiple masculine big Others that may have counterbalanced the antagonism of the Egyptian state: the United Nations (indicated in quote M.6 by mentioning Ban Ki-moon), or other international human rights organizations that could influence more democratic states. Hence Maya was not worried because the state, although an antagonistic big Other, was not the only active masculine big Other. In quote M.6 Maya contained state antagonism within a power dynamic between masculine Others. The sexuation of People, which included the creation of a masculine category of competing big Others, diffused the full impact of the antagonism in Maya's socio-political and traumatic context. Quotes M.6 and M.7 show how such sexuated flows of significations towards Others enabled Maya to repress the antagonism in her context to a degree that allowed her to reproduce her political agency. Through sexuating People Maya was able to signify the position of her organization as privileged in the power game between big Others. In this way the organization was rendered safe, and she therefore gave herself a permission to repress any worries related to the highly antagonistic political context she worked in. It may be worth noting here the difference between Maya's flow of significations in comparison to Yasser's. Unlike Maya's flow of significations (that associated antagonism with a masculine Other in a rivalry with masculine Others) Yasser's flow of significations concentrated his significations of antagonism into a fetish object, i.e., El Sisi, which made it harder to defuse.

Quote M.8 has another key signification regarding People as a bigger Other. Maya seems to be drawing ideas from her colleagues' Marxist discourse. In this quote People as a bigger Other was signified with history, and history was signified with a transcendental quality. That is, People has a history that had a progressive movement which transcended the local conditions of specific communities at particular moments. This transcendental signification of People was another effective way of dealing with the antagonism rife in Maya's politically traumatized context. Quote M.8 indicates that People were transcendental, regardless of contemporary

socio-political conditions, People had history that kept moving and progressing by overrunning traumatic political contexts. Hence the current traumatic conditions were not signified as an obstacle to agency, but rather as an opportunity for agency; it was an opportunity for small subjects to choose where they positioned themselves in regard to the movement of history. History signified as a transcendental quality of People's agency may be used to render any opposing (antagonistic) force (agency) futile. Within such signifying flows Maya could allow herself to ignore/disregard the antagonism and focus instead on the reproduction of her political agency. As she indicated in quote M.6, her political agency was not concerned with antagonism because antagonism was first containable within the internal and external power dynamics, and second (as in quote M.8), it was temporal and futile. Her agency (as in quote 8) was focused on the People's history, that is, the transcendental supreme agency of the People.

Now Maya signified People as both transcendental and a sexuated bigger Other. These significations of People enabled Maya to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards People as a bigger Other despite the politically traumatized context which contradicted the agency of the People. These flows of significations (see quote M.8) allowed Maya to offer herself as an object of desire to the progressive movement of the People's history. The last position in quote M.8 showed a hysteric state that Maya have achieved in regard to People as a bigger Other; a state she produced utilizing the sexuation (including the antagonistic Other) and the transcendental qualities she associated to People.

Finally, the above discussion can be summarized by key distinctions between Maya's and Yasser's flows of significations in relation to their positions towards People as a bigger Other. As discussed above, Maya sexuated People in a way that created an antagonistic Other, in addition she signified People with a transcendental quality; these two symbolic moves enabled her to use antagonism to support the reproduction of a hysteric state towards People despite the politically traumatic context she worked in. However, in Yasser's case, placing antagonism in a fetish object, in addition to signifying People as a non-transcendental Other, hindered his ability to create hysterias towards People as a bigger Other. Recalling the previous chapter's discussion about how the development of a hysteric flow of signification is

an essential element in the reproduction of political agency, we can now start to appreciate why Yasser was struggling to reproduce his political agency while Maya was successfully reproducing hers.

Maya's case offers more important insights into the reproduction process. In her reproduction of political agency Maya did not only create a hysteric flow of signification towards People, but she also developed a hysteric flow of signification towards God. Let us recall quote M.1, the first transcendental Other she brought up when I asked her about her political agency was God. God and the discourse of God played an important role in Maya's reproduction of political agency. Examining Maya's attempts to balance between two transcendental Others reveals the intricacies of Maya's reproduction process. Hence in the next two sections I discuss the two phases of Maya's struggle to attain a balance between two transcendental Others and their corresponding discourses.

### **The First Religious Challenge**

In this section I discuss the first challenge Maya faced in relation to religion as she sought to reproduce her political agency. I also discuss how Maya successfully dealt with this challenge in a way that stabilized her political agency. Maya faced this challenge when she joined the famous human rights advocacy organization at the height of the success of the Egyptian People's revolution. It is important to remember that, at that time, socialist-led labour movements were considered to be one of the many groups who had successfully led the People's revolution (El-Mahdi, 2012). That is, the socio-political context (at the time when Maya faced her first challenge) was conducive to developing a political agency based on a socialist discourse. In the following quote Maya described her first and second challenges; I have divided the quote into two parts, part A which describes the first religious challenge and part B which describes the second. I begin with part A and discuss part B in the next section.



## Quote M.9 A

It is. . . the whole idea is the human rights structure . . . that ha . . . ha . . . that the community of human rights activists . . . what I saw from it . . . .h. . . that he is (she uses 'he' to refer to the community, which is a common Arabic use of the pronoun) . . . he is a very strong believer . . . . . but not in God . . . . . not necessary . . . . . but he is a very strong believer in the principles that he represents . . . ha . . . a . . . and he defends them to death . . . .and he may sacrifice his life for them . . . and he might . . . sacrifice his money for them . . . ah . . .ah . . .ah. . . because he tasted from the same glass. . . . . (I probed for clarification) . . . the glass of injustice . . . . . either by watching it happen or . . .hmm . . . h. . . *experientially* I mean . . . . . fa . . . . .ah. . . a . . . f he understands his space and his size . . . aa . . . a how . . . it is . . . *grave* I mean . . . . . ahmmm. . . . .fa . . . . fa. . . . there . . . . there was this space . . . and there was the other space of learning. . . . that I started to go to Al Azhar and I started to attend courses . . . . and what is not . . . . . there was a complete contradiction at this point . . . . . that most of the scholars of Al Azhar have nothing to do with rights and with fighting for the people . . . . . they are like stay at your home and hide yourself . . . . . and learn and that is it . . . . . *which is nice (with a different tone)* . . . ha . . . .hamm. . . . but *very uncool* as well I mean . . . . ha. . . .mm . . . .hm . . . . because I became *juggle(ing) between* two worlds I mean . . . one world I belong on the basis that . . . ha . . . that . . . ah. . . . . that I believe there must be some defending oppression . . . . I mean . . . defending the oppressed . . . . . and ha . . . . .hmm . . . . . and the other side which is the space of beautiful spirituality that I want it to be in my life and my relation to God which is the purpose of life . . . I mean . . . . . .so if there was a purpose for this life it is this and if there was a purpose for the hereafter it is this and both should be complementing each other . . . . so why the contradiction ?! . . . . .hmm ah . . . . . and . . . . . ha. . . . . . . . . .and then . . . . at some point of . . . .hmmm . . . . .ha. . . of . . . .combining this spaces . . . .the two spaces in my life . . . . . I have reached . . . . .ah. . . I have reached . . .to the opposite of the first space . . . where I was doubtful . . . . no . . . .ha . . . . I reached . . . . . become very certain and thank God . . . . I was so in peace with myself. . . . . I was doing chanting . . . . . and I would enter the office . . . . .and ah . . . .ah . . . they would come to ask me

about a dream . . . . . and I would laugh . . . . . I would tell them . . . . .  
 people I do not interpret dreams. . . . . but . . .ah . . . . . I became comfortable  
 with myself in this space of my life . . . . .and they became more comfortable  
 with me in this space . . . . .and *by the way* . . . . they never really had a  
 problem with this space of my life . . . . the problem was inside of me. . . . .  
 I stopped feeling that *otherness*. . . . . there became a wider space for  
 conversations and exchange . . . .wider than before . . . . when I was feeling  
 why they do these things . . . . hmmm . . . . . ha. . . .hm m . . . . . but I  
 had my space and they had theirs. . . hmm. . . .and we . . . we . . . . . I am  
 talking about the religion side not the rights side. . . . . and became  
 normal . . . . . when they ask me about something . . . . . I would say I do not  
 know . . . and I was comfortable saying I do not know. . . . . ham . . . . .  
 when they ask me about some religious issue . . . I would tell them . . . . not  
 because I am a practicing Muslim . . . and so on. (Int 1 26:55)

This quote sets out the constitution of the first challenge, in her words: she felt she belonged to two symbolic worlds with apparently clashing discourses. The first world was the human rights community which she felt she belonged to on the basis of defending the oppressed, in other words, this community helped her develop and strengthen a political agency which she was keen to develop. The second world was the Egyptian Islamic world. Earlier in the same interview she had described how becoming spiritual / religious had helped her to endure bullying and overcome its negative effects. Indeed, using God and religion to combat bullying seemed to be successful, after all, Maya came out of her school bullying experience with a desire to go on fighting injustice and defending the oppressed. She seemed to have strong self-esteem and a belief that she could do something about injustice in the world. In interview one she described how she used to be naïve, thinking it would be easy to change the world for the better. This sense of optimism is an indication of the good degree of success she had had in handling the school bullying experience, and God and religion played an integral part in her coping with and overcoming bullying at a very young age. Now Maya saw that the human rights organization she had joined was influenced by socialist revolutionary figures and discourses. These figures had rejected any role for religious discourse in politics, that is, they refused to allow the discourse of God to be used as basis for developing political agency. Let us recall

how her boss criticized key Islamic figures in a way that shocked Maya. It is also important to remember that this time was also the height of ideological competition in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood was using (or abusing) Islamic religious discourse to gain political advantages. So, a public rejection and critique of Islamic discourse as basis for political agency was quite a common practice.

Maya expressed a clear disliking for the Muslim Brotherhood (Int 1 and 4), yet she did not want to go as far as the revolutionary socialist discourse in disregarding or risking the hysteric relation she had established with the Egyptian Muslims' God. Maya's first challenge shows the multi-layered characteristic of the process of reproduction of political agency. Political agency is not developed in vacuum, it is built upon existing layers of already developed agencies. On one hand, Maya had already survived bullying at school, which was a socially challenging, and possibly traumatic, social context for a young child. Her story indicates that Maya had grounded her survival and development of psychological and social agencies in this traumatic context on a hysteric relation to the Egyptian Muslims' God. On the other hand, as discussed above, Maya was now reproducing her political agency using a socialist discourse to develop a hysteric flow of signification towards People as a bigger Other. Therefore, the first religious challenge arose because her political agency was not being reproduced in isolation from the reproduction of other types of agencies. The challenge therefore was to accommodate both discourses of two transcendental Others.

In confronting this challenge, Maya did not give in to the favourable socio-political conditions and ignore the discourse of God to focus on the discourse of People as a bigger Other; the path of signification that Yasser chose to follow at around the same time as Maya's first religious challenge. This challenge highlights the importance of looking at the history of subjectivity in the analysis of the reproduction of political agency. This challenge indicates that it was not only the contemporary socio-political conditions that determined the direction of agency reproduction processes, one needs also to take into account the other agencies that had already developed, the discourses used to support those agencies, and the importance of all of these agencies to the overall subject structure.

Now I discuss how Maya resolved this challenge. Maya became close to a female friend who was among the revolutionaries around Maya and at the same time also grounded in an Islamic discourse. I will call this friend Nesren. Nesren had finished a bachelor's degree in Islamic theology from Al Azhar University (the most famous Islamic University), she then travelled to the United States to get a master's degree in social science, and at the time of the interview she was studying for her PhD in Oxford, in England. Maya found Nesren to be aware of the socialist critique of the Islamic discourse. Maya also found many of Nesren's answers convincing (Int 1 and Int 4). Nesren suggested that Maya attend some of the Islamic theology classes in Al Azhar Mosque. Maya followed her advice, and she joined a newly founded institute of theology and Sufism that Nesren was among the first founders of. Nesren later left the institution after a big argument with the head Sheikh about managerial issues; this was the Sheikh who later turned out to have sexually harassed young women. The new institution became Maya's new base for her Islamic studies and Sufi practice. During the height of her confusion between the two worlds, she asked two Sheikhs, including the head Sheikh, whether she should continue working in her organization or quit; both replied that she should continue working with the organization. Below I discuss two quotes that reveal the symbolic moves Maya made and that brought the two worlds together allowing her to reach the peaceful state she described at the end of quote M.9A.

#### Quote M.10 A

I asked him about the freedom of belief . . . . h . . ta . . . he looked at me and said . . . by the way I talked in the lecture . . . .I mentioned it in the lecture specifically . . because . . ah . . . because I know you will ask me about it. . . fa . . . ah. . . . m. . . . I told him great. . . . . so what is it . . . he told me. . . . there is nothing called human rights in Islam. . . . direct like this. . . . fa . . of course I was shocked . . . . this was . . . . God's grace . . . . despite . . . he . . . . I mean . . . . regardless of who he is . . . . and who he became. . . . and what he did and what is not . . . but this was *one of*. . ah . . *the* . . . *slaps* that I received. . . . that is . . . *stop trying to fit things into each other* . . . . *because they are not the same thing* . . . . . God's grace . . . . . it came from this person but . . .ah . . . .but . . . .I mean . . . . . I am convinced until now

that these are two different things . . . and one should not . . . to fit . . . fit them together. . . .( Int 4 37:23)

Here Maya reported one of the main things she learned from this Sheikh, despite him turning out to be a bad Sheikh. She also revealed a key symbolic move that she made in the reproduction of her political agency. The Sheikh told her that there are no human rights in Islamic discourse, and the way she signified this was: 'these are two are separate worlds, they do not fit them together.' She displaced the signification of 'no human rights in Islam' from a contradictory signification (Islam rejects human rights) to a conciliatory notion (Islam has nothing to say about human rights, i.e., they do not fall within the scope of an Islamic discourse). This symbolic move allowed her to look for human rights in another discourse (the discourse of People) and to stop trying to see what Islam says about human rights, because there are no human rights in Islam. In other words, human-rights is a discourse of the People as a transcendental sexuated Other, and God is not concerned with this: God as a transcendental has left it to the People. This move resolved half of the conflict, but still left the problem of the socialists' critique of the discourse of Islam and its position regarding basic human rights, a critique which Maya was exposed to in her political community. In other words, even if the discourse of God provides space for the discourse of People, the discourse of People does not accept the infringements of the discourse of God on human rights. The next quote deals with this issue. In this quote Maya talked about one of her long conversations with Nesren about women's rights and Islamic discourse. It came about one minute after the above quote, M.10A

Quote M.10B

I told her ...*again* ...you know I am a believer. . . I am a Muslim. . . . and all . . . but I need to understand . . . .just to understand. . . hamm . . . . aaa. . . . (me. do you recall what was the topic that brought this) . . . . I do not remember exactly the topic. . . . oh. . . . almost . . . most likely . . . . polygamy . . . a.a. . . . it was this. . . .(laughs) . . . ah . . . .I am sure .. if it was this. . . . . it was women equality in general. . . . ah . . . .or not exactly equality .. not equality like equality . . . but . . . we talked about many topics. . . . I do not remember what the topics were. . . . the witness issue for example . . . . .and the

agency of women . . . is it recognized in Islam or not . . . ah. .. ah . . . . .  
 things like that . . . fa . . . . then she in a very peaceful state replied and said. . .  
 . . . . we talked about many details . . . . . and . . . . the topic was almost  
 closed . . . . . ah . . . and we were in my car . . . . and she was sitting at the  
 back . . . I was giving her a lift . . . and there was another friend next to me. .  
 . . . . then she said at the end . . . . after this long conversation was concluded  
 . . . and we were in silence . . . and so on. . . and she said . . . (Maya changed  
 her tone) . . . . by the way I don't have a problem even if . . . . . even if God  
 positioned women less than men. . . . . fa. . . I looked at her in the  
 mirror and recalled what she just said . . . . a. . . and I thought deeply about it .  
 . . . . and I concluded she is right . . . . . indeed. . . . . I mean . . . . if God  
 wants her less than man . . . he will make her less than man . . . . we are both  
 his creation . . . . . did we do anything to God. . . . how can we judge God. .  
 . . . so how come we judge God. . . . . this was also another changing moment  
 . . . and I became . . . with God grace . . . . . without noticing . . . . . this was  
 among the things that . . . . a. . . made me . . . that is . . I do not care anymore  
 after this to answer any questions . . . . even to myself . . . . I do not know if  
 this is a good or a bad thing . . . . . but it did not matter to me any more after  
 this. . . (Int 4 39:03)

In this quote Nesren seemed to have first answered Maya's questions about women's equality in Islam within the discourse of the Other. Then Maya made an important symbolic move. Nesren told Maya that God should not be questioned by subjects. Maya used this conversation to make a substantial symbolic move. In this discussion Maya shifted the role of the discourse of God as a whole. The discourse of God was not meant for use in developing an erotic flow of signification. Or, to put it another way, the role of the discourse of God is not to decide about the rights of women versus the rights of men, or how to manage our small others' world, these matters are not what it is meant for, nor can it be used in this way. The discourse of God exists here to develop a hysteric relation (to offer oneself) to a transcendental Other, that is: to tell us what we do to become an object of desire for God. When the discourse of God talks about women is not for justice, it is for hysteria. When the discourse of God says women should wear a headscarf, it is not to protect or not to

protect women, it is not about women at all, it is about how to become an object of desire for the transcendental.

This symbolic move further stabilized Maya's reconciliation between the discourse of her two transcendental Others. The human rights discourse – as the People's discourse— was about justice between small others, one may use this discourse to understand oppression and how to fight it, i.e., one may create an erotic flow of signification about justice using this discourse. However, if religion says women must wear a headscarf or men must wear a turban, this is done solely for the pleasure of God if (or when) you need His pleasure. These instructions should not be read for justice and equality. With this symbolic move Maya shifted the position of the discourse of God in a way that removed it from the critique of the socialist discourse of the People. This seems very similar to Dollar's discussion of love as a tool of ideological interpolation discussed in the last chapter. Maya used Nesren's answer to make a symbolic move that shifted the discourse of God away from being a discourse about rationality, fairness, and political change, to a discourse of love. In the discourse of love, the subject knows how to suspend rationality; for instance, in a romantic (hysteric) relation, the lover does not seek to understand why the loved one likes white flowers but not red ones or white lattice . In a mostly romantic discourse, such analysis is suspended, and objects are valued only on the basis of the loved one's desire. And in time romance often prepares the ground for erotica, romance often turns out to be the strongest inducement to the erotic. Maya's symbolic move also seems similar in this way. She kept God's discourse purely hysteric (romantic) and prevented the use of this discourse in developing an erotic flow of signification about political agency. In this way she stabilized and reproduced her political agency, until a point (revealed in quote M.1) where she realises her political agency is not despite or against God but is the very wish of her God.

This symbolic arrangement worked quite well for Maya until another major upheaval took place in her socio-political context, that is: until the military coup. This new change brought up the second challenge to religion and the second reproduction of her agency.

## The Second Religious Challenge

I begin the discussion of the second challenge to religion by bringing in the data extract in which Maya first mentioned the second challenge to religion in the first interview. The following extract came right after she talked about the first challenge to religion (in M.9A, above) – this data is a continuation.

### Quote M.9b

. . . a. . . ah. . . .and then this . . . . the religious space . . . .or the space which had the spiritual community . . . . collapsed . . . completely . . . . ah . . . it was a space with a degree of Sufism . . . or . . no . . . . ah . . . the place that I was attending. . . there was suf . . . .the sheikh there was Sufi . . . . and he was harasser . . . . ah . . . and I was not . . . a. . . I did not know that he was harasser . . . . then I came to know that he is a harasser . . . . . and I discovered that . . . . . (I interrupted was you harassed by him) . . . . .no . . . not me. . . (I asked how did you know) . . . . one of the women spoke up . . . then . . . all of them start talking . . . ah. . . (me. All confirmed the case) . . . . yes . . . . . this was a very very big shock . . . . . because there was a space of security in . . .in. . .in . . . . or I looked for security in this space. . . . . I then discovered that this was *false*. . . . and what I built on it as *facts and not facts* . . . all of this nonsense . . .all of it is nonsense . . . and it is . . . . no . . . . it was a very big shock. . . very very much . . . . . and then . . .hm. . . ah . . . .this harasser . . . . . who was supposed to be the sheikh and the guide . . .the Sufi ..ah . . . . a. . . .a . . . . destroyed all . . . . al. . . . not him who destroyed it . . . . . this situation revealed to me the extent of illusion that I was living in . . . . . so what the human rights activists say is right . . . .I mean . . . .so the religion is an illusion . . . . . so the issue is not in religion . . . . of course there is no problem in religion itself . . . . .but the problem is in the society . . . . . what are we but a society . . . . . fa . . . I mean . . . . . so if my understanding about religion is driven from my understanding of society. . . . . then . . . .that is it . . . there is nothing . . . ah h. . . . . or my relationship with a specific community . . . . and this community is corrupt . . . . .ah . . . so what guarantees that what I understand is not corrupt . . . . .so there was this



recurring conflict . . . that was much more difficult than the first time. . . . .  
and I won't deny that it is still there until now. . . (Int 1 30:17)

Maya talked about the 'harassing Sheikh' as the reason behind the second religious crisis she faced. In the first half of the first interview, she also characterized this second challenge as generating strong doubt in the truth of the discourse of God or the Sufi discourse because the head Sheikh had turned to be a very bad person. Subsequent interviews, however, revealed different significations of the nature of her struggle with the Sufi discourse and a different chronological starting point for these struggles. It is also worth mentioning here that the degree of safety and openness of Maya's flow of significations increased with each interview. In the first interview it seemed as if she was positioning me in the place of a big Other; I will have more to say on this positioning later in this section.

In the second interview she talked with admiration about how the other Sheikhs and the mature students in the Sufi Institute confronted the Sheikh about his harassments and forced him to resign and to commit to stopping all his public religious roles as a Sheikh. I also noticed during the second and third interviews that her speech did not reflect a big departure or intense doubt about the religious discourse. On the contrary she often relied on Sufi concepts to interpret events in her personal life. Overall, the flow of significations in interviews two and three did not support the same degree of intense departure from the Sufi discourse that Maya had signified in the first interview (in the data above) as a total collapse of her spirituality or total doubt in religion. By the fourth interview this indication was expressed clearly. The following quote shows this:

#### Quote M.11

I am until now . . . by the way . . . . I am very influenced by this school. . . I did not separate from it . . . . .I just do not practice it . . (laugh). . . . (me. But you believe in it) . . . Yes . . very much so . . . . .and even the spiritual-development techniques in it . . . . . or . . . . . or the books . . . . . I mean . . . . . .I mean . . . ihyaa' uloom eldeen (Arabic book title) until now . . . ihyaa' uloom . . . it is the imam (Arabic for head of scholars) Al Gazali . . I mean . . .it is not touched . . . or my master Ibn Ataa' Alsakanday and his wisdom . . . . or the

Tanweer fi Isqat al tadabeer (another Arabic title). . . . . I mean the literature itself..... and..... the concepts themselves exist. .. I mean . . . . . (me. You mean exists inside of you ). . . . ya . . . y . . . . but there is no practice . . . nothing at all . . . . (laughter) . . . .there is nothing . . . . (me. But you still think in these terms ). . . yes . . .y. . . .until now I Listen . . . in my podcast . . .there is Ibn Arabi the Maki Fotohat (another Arabic book title from the Sufi school) . . . . and what is not . . .hm . . . . (me. You listen to it) . . . yes . . . I listen about it . . . people talking about it and interpreting it and what is not . . . . (Int 4 41:32)

This quote shows that the Sheikh harassment of other women did not throw Maya into the kind of deep religious doubt that she described in the quote M.9B. She actually still had some degree of attachment to this discourse. Similarly quote M.10A also confirms that she was still utilizing concepts she had learned from the ‘harassing Sheikh’. Recalling in quote M.10A, she mentioned a concept from the discourse of religion that she learned from this Sheikh, then she mentioned that she still believed in this idea. Quote M.11 above however confirms a change in Maya’s relationship to the discourse of God, although not the same type of intense change indicated in quote M.9b. Maya said that, although she still believed in the discourse, she became less observant, or hardly practicing. Later in this section I will have more to say about these two different significations of her relation to the religious discourse in relation to the timing of each, i.e., when was each spoken about in the interviews.

There is another key indication in quote M.9B that we need to note here. Maya signified the moment of her knowledge about the harassments of the Sheikh as the moment when her second struggle with religion started, she indicated that this incident generated a new surge of doubts and struggle with the religious discourse. However, in the following quote Maya indicated that the trouble with her attachment to the Sheikh and the concepts of Sufism had begun even before her knowledge of the harassments of the Sheikh. The following quote is from the third interview, where she was elaborating on a note that she posted on her Facebook page weeks after the Military coup.

## Quote M.12A

{I asked if she could elaborate on what she means by a note she wrote in her Facebook page in Arabic, the note translates to:

‘She searches in the traces for someone who have entered her world and returned back so he can tell her what’s inside of her . . . but no one yet have come out’}

It means at the time of this issue . . . I was *again finding refugees in Sufism* . . . . *fa*

(me. at the time of this issue) . . . yes of course at the time of this issue . . . I was . . . this was (I interrupted at the time of what issue?) . . . what? (me. what issue are you referring to) . . . what issue? . . . (me. yes, do you mean the relationship with that man) . . . . no . . . that is everything . . . (I mean this was before the sheik?) this . . . this was . . . my journey to know myself. . and what happens inside of me. . even before the Sheikh’s issue. . . . . I knew the sheikh at that time. . . (but it was before the crisis) . . . y . . there was no crisis at all . . . but I then thought of him as a good human . . . but I was . . . *I never committed* to anything . . . including toroq (Arabic plural for Sufi regimes) . . . . . (me. hmm) . . . so even when the sheikh existed . . I was thinking in myself . . . that for sure *I am not committed* . . . to the idea of Sufism or to a specific tareeq (Arabic for a singular Sufi regime) . . . . I know . . . I have a problem. . . *fa* . . f . . even . . . I was . . always . . in my *conversations* with this person . . . I was trying to . . *to* . . . . . mmmm. . . . . *to explore* . . .ha . . mmm. . . . . but there was a blame . . .it was . . . an. . . because I was . . . . *I am not* . . . I was not. . . I am actually not committed to a Sufi regime . . .so it was . . knnn. . . . *that kind of conception I mean*. . .

(silence then I asked her again to go back on reflections of the piece she wrote) (Int 3b 11:30)

## Quote M.12B

(She read the piece again ‘She searches in the traces for someone who have entered her world and returned back so he can tell her what’s inside of her’)

..... what I meant by this at that time ..... although possible my  
 unconscious could be totally different .... but at that time ... this. ... an ...  
 a. . . I was searching for . . . .hamm .... .hh.. ... a scholar of the heart . . . that  
 is . . . . . a Sufi sheikh. . . . . like . . . aka . . . . . (she laughs) . . . . . ha . ha. . .  
 h . . . a . . . a . . . a . . . a . . . he has . . . . . he has . . . an insight and  
 knowledge . . . in . . . b . . . .b . . .in the inside . . . . .because this person will  
 know . . . . . *what* . . . . . *state of consciousness* . . . and . . . . . how . . .  
 . . . tarbeyah wise (Arabic for self-discipline) . . . . . what do I need to do  
 with myself. . . . . (she read ' but no one yet came out') . . . . . means . . .  
 . .that I did not find this kind of sheikh yet . . . ( me. even this sheikh) . . . . .y  
 even this sheikh . . . . . (me. so even from the beginning there was a kind of  
 knowledge that it is not him) . . . . .yes . . . . . yes even with this Sheikh . . . . .  
 . I though . . . I did not have . . . .aa . . . a . . . the relation . . . or . . . I . . . a . . . .  
 . this did not happen . . . . . because . . . . . I . . . . . am. . . . . not . . in . . .  
 amm. . . I mean . . . . . first God did not will it . . . . . of course . . .and also . .  
 . . . . may be . . . . . also . . I . . . *I am not* . . .equipped. . . yet to be . . . . . ah. h. . .  
 to be in that . . . . . kind of consciousness . . . . .(me. of what kind) . . . . . of the  
 existence of a sheikh . . . for me to realize that there is a sheikh in this life . . .  
 . .(me. ah) . . . that he knows what happens inside the heart. . (Int 3B 12:56 )

Part A of this quote indicates that the new surge of doubts in the religious discourse started before her knowledge of the Sheikh's harassment. This raises two questions: one, if it is not an issue with the harassment, what was the reason for Maya's return to a struggle with the religious discourse, after she had already reached a satisfying balance resolving the first religious challenge? i.e., what constituted this second religious challenge? Two, how can I then read / analyse the intensity signified in quote M.9B that is associated with the Sheikh's harassments?

At the time that Maya wrote the above note there were major political events in Egypt, events that directly challenged Maya's commitment to justice and defending the oppressed against the modern state. At that time a Military coup had just taken place and the bloody break up of a sit-in, which included children, old people, women, and mostly peaceful protesters, had also taken place. Human Rights Watch called this event 'the bloodiest dismissal of political protest in modern history'

(Human Rights Watch, 2014). Maya went to the public mortuary immediately after the break-up to offer legal and humanitarian support to the families of the deceased, and she witnessed the scale of the police brutality. Also, during this time, a key change took place: the religious discourse of the Sufi school, that Maya belonged to, changed its position within the public political discourse. Before the coup the Sufi religious discourse abstained from entering the political arena and opted to leave it to specialists in the area. As discussed in the last section, this abstinence was a key element which Maya utilized to resolve her first religious challenge and reproduce her political agency grounded on a discourse of People as a transcendental sexuated Other. However, after the coup, the Sufi discourse entered the political discourse with a position that was contradictory to that of Maya's political agency, i.e., it contradicted the discourse of People as transcendental and sexuation Other. Major figures representing the Sufi's discourse had supported the coup despite the violent treatment of political opposition, and further asked Egyptians to support the head of the army as their new ruler (Al-Anani, 2020; Warren, 2017). Hence, the timing of the above quote seems to suggest that it was Maya's discursive position in the new socio-political upheavals, more than the knowledge of the harassments of the Sheikh, that constituted the second challenge to her religion.

Maya's intense significations of the harassments of the Sheikh (in M.9B) may be read as a distraction that aimed to defend the source of the new conflict. The intensity can then be read as a screen (a red herring) to defend a protected issue which related to the origin of the conflict. This protected issue was repressed/hidden behind the Sheikh's harassments, displacing the affects related to the repressed. The timing of the comment in the interviews may also support this. It is understandable that, in the first half of the first interview, Maya may have been more guarded talking about the sensitive issues with a researcher she did not know well. Also, as I am an Egyptian male much older than her, my white hair might have positioned me as a father- or Other-figure, hence her comments in the first interview may have been addressing a big Other not a small other. Towards the fourth interview, however, she was laughing and joking much more, and I believe she opened up more. I think by the last interview she was addressing a small other in me.

Still there remains an important question: what was that issue that related to the origin the new conflict? and why did Maya need to defend it? Given that Maya did not talk at all about the major socio-political events that had accompanied the writing of this note, where Maya was at the centre of things at the mortuary, it seems that there was something being repressed. This will become clearer after discussing Part B of the above quote.

Part B of the above quote contains important symbolic moves. In part A she had already established that the origin of the conflict came before her knowledge of the Sheikh's harassment of the women, part B explains how, at that time, she was trying to establish some distance from the Sheikh and the religious discourse. She gave two reasons for the kind of distance she was developing: one, God did not will it; and two, her state of consciousness was not yet ready for such move. These two ideas were part of the Sufi discourse, and they were both interlinked. The Will of God will give one a state of consciousness which in turns allows them to see certain some things but not see other things. In this context, it might enable someone to accept certain positions towards the Sheikh and the discourse. That is, the Sufi discourse allows individuals to have different relations to it, it allows for different distances and different levels of commitment to the discourse while being attached to the discourse; in this way it caters for a wider range of needs. The Sufi discourse has been famous for its tolerance of a wide range of religious commitments and levels of practices. This tolerance was reflected in the discourse, the discourse offered different paths, different paces, and different intensities to the different individual needs in establishing a hysteric relation to God (Piraino & Sedgwick, 2019). Maya seems to have chosen to shift from one path within Sufism (with high level of commitment) to another path within Sufism (with a lesser level of commitment to the discourse). In the quote above the first reason Maya gave for the new distance was that: God did not will it, i.e., God did not choose to give her the kind of conscious that would allow her to commit to the Sheikh or the Sufi discourse to a high degree. Hence Maya was using the Sufi discourse of God to explain why she did not fully commit to the Sheikh or Sufism at that time, i.e., she used Sufism to distance herself from Sufism. The important move here was that Maya did not totally detach herself from the religious discourse, on the contrary, she kept a strong attachment to it by

using the discursive paths available within the discourse to develop the distance from the discourse that she needed at that time.

This reveals Maya's symbolic moves. First Maya did not want to completely detach from the religious discourse, in fact she was still using it and thinking in its terms; she seemed to still want to keep the part of this discourse that helped her to overcome her first religious challenge. Second, Maya wanted to have more distance from the discourse for herself, she wanted to be more elaborate in her interpretation of the discourse and the degree of commitment that she needed. Third, the way she did this was by using the discourse itself to develop the space she needed for herself within the discourse. She seemed to be looking for a proper distance from the religious discourse which both kept her hysteric relation to God and her hysteric relation to People complementing each other for a second reproduction of her political agency during the new socio-political upheavals.

This may provide some insight into the issue at the origin of the conflict that Maya was trying to repress by her intense significations to the Sheikh's harassments. Let us outline the challenge in the wider context that Maya found herself in. On one hand there was the new position that the religious discourse took in the socio-political context of Egypt during and after the military coup. This position had in turn brought up a new wave of criticism of the religious discourse from activists, especially the revolutionary socialists' group which Maya worked closely with. On the other hand, the Sufis' discourse did not accept much criticism within the discourse of God. In Sufism criticality of God's discourse is akin to apostasy because God simply knows everything, hence a critical position on God's discourse is not conceivable within such belief and may be signified as a non-belief (apostasy). In other words, in Sufism, God cannot be characterized with any Lack. That is, Lack is not allowed as signification within God's discourse, which means Lack has to be repressed or disavowed. This was how and why the socialist discourse of People as a transcendental and sexuuated Other clashed with the Egyptian Sufism's discourse of God. This context constituted a severe challenge to Maya's first production of agency which was grounded on the complementary discourses of both transcendental People and God. Yasser, in the previous two chapters, seemed to have encountered a similar predicament and he decided to signify the Lack of God

and lose his attachment to the discourse of God, which resulted in a struggle to reproduce his political agency. Maya, in the quote above, made a different choice.

Maya did not to yield to the pressure to signify Lack in God or in God's discourse; Maya was keen not to risk her ability to develop a hysteric relationship towards God. Instead, she used paths available in the Sufi discourse to repress the Lack in God's discourse. Although the Sufi discourse prohibits the signification of Lack, it offers several signification paths (flows) which allow the Lack to be repressed and others that allows the Lack to be disavowed. Maya seemed to have chosen to utilize one of these paths of repression, allowing her to avoid making a direct signification of Lack that would have positioned her outside the Sufi discourse of God. Hence, in quote M.9B, her first comment about the second religious challenge repressed any mention of the origin of the challenge and instead hid this behind the intensity she attached to her knowledge of the Sheikh's harassment of female colleagues; furthermore, the affect associated with the Sheikh's harassments could be understood as the return of repressed affects in relation to the new positioning of the discourse of God. That is to say, Maya was truly disgusted and truly affected, but not by the harassment of this Sheikh, but rather by the harassments of many other Sheikhs that brought the Lack of the Sufi discourse of God back to the surface. The harassments of the Sheikh were the weak point, the safe point, to which she could attach those affects that she was banned from attaching to the Lack of the Sufi discourse of God.

In the light of this discussion, let me offer a final recap of the symbolic moves Maya made in quote M.9B at the beginning of this section. The quote was from the first interview, where it seems likely that Maya positioned me as an Other. Talking to an Other, she foregrounded the Sheikh's harassments as the cause of her second conflict with the discourse of religion, repressing the origin of the conflict to defend other causes associated with the origin of the conflict. She then displaced the affects relating to the origin of the conflict; affects related to the Lack in the discourse of God (as it appeared in the new socio-political context), onto the harassments of the Sheikh. In this way she was able to express the affects related to the conflict to the Other. Although this displacement allowed her to express her affects in relation to the Lack of the discourse of God, she did not own the signification of the Lack in the



Sufi discourse of God, she referred to the Lack as 'what the human rights activists say'. She talked about the Lack using a third-party pronoun, she expressed it but stayed one step away from owning it. The whole quote can then be read as a performance for the eyes of the transcendental Other. Her performance seems to use a specific Sufi path to God. I mentioned earlier that the Sufi discourse offers the individual different paths to God to cater for the different distances that different individuals may need. Also, as I mentioned above, while the Sufi discourse bans any signification of the Lack of God, it offers different flows of significations that allows for such lack to be repressed and/or re-signified in a chain of significations. Here, Maya's performance in M.9B, seems to be following of these repressing flows. The following is a possibility for a flow repressing the Lack in God, which may explain Maya's performance to the Other in quote M.9B. In the Sufi discourse, God is all merciful, all loving and all powerful; so God, who put Maya in the difficult position of being exposed to all these critique of God, will surely excuse her if she is not now able to fully commit to the religious discourse. The Sufi discourse of God allows for such a flow of signification. Hence, the intense signification of the Sheikh's harassment in quote M.9B and her expression of Lack of God in the name of others, could then be read as a Sufi plea for God's merci to allow her to stay away from this community and this discourse in these difficult times. In other words, she is performing for God's sight, presenting her request to be given the permission to keep her distance from religious practice and the discourse. Maya's symbolic moves are an example of Sufi signification flows that repress the Lack instead of signifying it. That is, instead of engaging with a criticism of the discourse itself that would open up the possibility of signifying the Lack in God, the discourse instead offers different flows of significations in which each element in the flow glorifies God as all-knowing, all-merciful and non-Lacking. Yet the flow itself is structured on the possibility of deceiving God, that is: the flow itself signifies the Lack while prohibiting any element in the flow to signify the Lack. Quote M.9B is a good example of a Sufi survival path.

In summary, Maya used two complementary symbolic moves for the second reproduction of her political agency. First, she repressed God's Lack, and developed discursive flows that distracted from any direct expression of God's Lack. Then she restricted herself to create the distance she needed from the discourse of God within the discursive paths available from the discourse itself. Sticking to these two moves,

she developed flows of signification in which she used her exposure to expressions of Lack as an excuse to plead for God's mercy so she could maintain a distance from His discourse in these difficult times. These symbolic moves enabled Maya to hold onto the parts of the religious discourse that she needed to develop a hysteric relationship to God, and at the same time keep a distance from the discourse of God that allowed her to develop her political agency grounded in a hysteric relation to People as a sexuated and transcendental Other.

Throughout this second production of her political agency, Maya refrained from mentioning the new political position of the Sufi's discourse of God in the context of her work as a human rights lawyer and activist. This clash was not mentioned in any of her four interviews, which is a clear contrast with Yasser's case. Maya's symbolic strategy was quite different from Yasser's. Throughout her first and second religious challenges, Maya stayed within the religious discourse and defended her hysteric path to God as a transcendental Other, and she further developed her defences in response to the emerging socio-political challenges within her context. She laboured her different symbolic worlds to develop a space for her political agency and she was finally able to come out of her politically traumatic context with a reproduced/renewed political agency. In the next chapter I will discuss Sawsan's case, which further highlights the contrast between successful and unsuccessful reproductions of political agency. The analysis of Maya's analysis will therefore continue in the discussion of the next case.

## Chapter Eight

### An Account of a Paralyzed Political Agency

#### Introduction:

I was introduced to Sawsan by Yasser. I asked him if he could recommend an Egyptian female political activist who was currently in the UK. He introduced Sawsan as a gifted facilitator of workshops on human rights, youth participation, and community development. In our first interview Sawsan narrated her journey in activism. She started her political activism in her senior year at university. Sawsan told me how her involvement in a government youth centre led to her transforming the youth centre to an effective community centre for youth empowerment and community development. In this centre she initiated a youth programme where young people from privileged backgrounds acquired critical employability skills and volunteered to teach and train their peers from less privilege backgrounds who had no access to good education or skills training. She was able to raise funds for her project from the Egyptian government, overcoming many bureaucratic obstacles; she was also able to raise funding and training from European development organizations. She was able to offer the instructors who volunteered in her programme free travel to Europe to get free training in community development and active citizenship. Her programme also included an embedded human rights and active citizenship awareness programme. Sawsan herself, as Yasser introduced her, became an excellent human rights facilitator, after she had training on facilitation for human rights in Canada, the USA, and UK.

Sawsan relied on her father's privileged position to develop her political agency. Sawsan's father was a recently retired top-ranking military officer. Families of top Military officers in Egypt enjoy a secure upper middle-class lifestyle. After her university graduation, her father was able to secure her a government job in the national petroleum company where she was supposed to have a secure lifetime job with above average salary and light workload. These kind of government jobs are almost exclusively for the families of top officials in the political and military

establishment, she mentioned among her colleagues the daughters of ministers and daughters of the president's secretaries. This job gave her the time to pursue her passion to make a difference. Most of the work she did to transform the youth centre took place during her work at the national petroleum company. A few years later, as her youth centre project flourished and she started to get paid to facilitate human rights workshops in Egypt, Jourdan, Yemen, and north Africa, she decided to quit her job to pursue a career as a freelancer human rights and civic education facilitator/instructor. This career path was much less secure and paid less well than her privileged government job; yet following her passion to make a difference, and against her father's advice, she insisted on resigning and shifted her career.

In contrast to this rich history of passion to make a difference, improving people's life, and political agency, Sawsan's interviews, as will be detailed later, revealed her to be full of disappointment and loss of hope for any improvement in Egypt. In the third interview she talked about her work merely as a way to earn a living and a potential way for her to relocate from Egypt to a western country.

During the first interview she talked relatively openly and freely until her associations brought her to a topic related to her political agency, where she teared and was about to cry. After that she became more reserved and careful of where her narrative associations were taking her. The second interview was similarly reserved and careful. There were a few weeks between the second and the third interviews. During that time, she had left England and gone back to Egypt, and we did the interview over the internet. In the third interview she was much open and less reserved. Most of my analysis below is based on this third interview and the first half of the first interview.

In the third interview she talked about her hopes, anxieties, and disappointments in life. She spoke in general terms, avoiding talking about political agency; when I tried to bring her back to talk about political agency, there was resistance from her and a sense of worry within me. Later, in my review of her interviews, I suspected that political agency was possibly associated with a kind of psychic pain that her speech was avoiding coming close to. In the following discussion of Sawsan's case I will show how the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic context

can result into a deep psychic wound. The discussion in this chapter focusses on two intertwining trajectories in Sawan's interviews: the trajectory of forfeiting the reproduction of her political agency and the trajectory of a struggle with a psychic wound. I will start the discussion by highlighting two discursive layers in Sawsan's speech. The first layer shows her obsessive flows of significations towards getting a degree in a western country. The second layer shows troubled hysteric flows of significations. I then discuss what I mean by a psychic wound and the significations that indicate a psychic wound in Sawsan's speech.

### The obsessive flow of significations

One of the key differences between Sawsan's case and the previous two cases is that her associations show a dominating obsessive flow of significations towards an object. In this section I present quotes that represent these obsessive flows of significations and then use these quotes to discuss what I mean by an obsessive flow of significations and how Sawsan associated it with her traumatic context.

In our third interview I asked Sawsan about her vision for her future and the current challenges in her life as an activist. The following is her answer divided into three parts.

#### Quote S.1A

"So .... I am ....ah.....I was .... I mean . . . .I was very successful in my work . . . . ok .... And I then decided to get myself out of this environment . . . (me. hm) .... And I ... took *completely different direction* . . . .not ...*completely different* ...but... *it is a bit different* .... I mean ... *it is quite different* ....(me: hm) .... Fa ...a...a.. so I am .... I .... I am betting that if I take this step I will be more comfortable if I lived ten more years or if I died tomorrow. .. ( me. hmmm) .... Do you understand .... . . .ha ... ha ..... so that is it ... .. so I have this as an obstacle . . . . it a psychological obstacle .. *actually* ... more than it is an obstacle of any kind. . . (me: hm)..... ah... a ... I am .... a.... not .... .. I mean ..... I feel if I went back to the work that I

used to do that I was very happy in and was very successful at ...  
 and all of that ... ok .... Because I put a lot of energy in it .... And it  
 is *actually* the only thing I put energy in .... We can say ... in a aa ...  
 in the past fifteen years for example! . . . . . ah .... Ah ..... that I will  
 .... I will be ..... I will be a big loser (Int 3, 5:04)

This is the opening part of a longer quote, which I divided into three. These opening comments set the context for understanding subsequent significations. The context is that Sawsan had decided to change direction, which her speech laboured to capture, she signified the new direction as 'completely different', 'a bit different', then 'quite different'. She also associated the new direction with overcoming 'a psychological obstacle' that was preventing her from going back to her work which she saw herself as 'very happy and very successful at'.

It is important here to recall that, in the current political context in Egypt, working as a human rights educator with non-governmental organizations was very risky. Hence the politically traumatic context constituted a clear obstacle preventing Sawsan from practicing a profession that she said she loved passionately and which she had invested fifteen years of her life building up. In the first interview Sawsan mentioned that her father told her that ,if she left her job in the national petroleum company, she would regret it, and he would not be able to help her to get this unique job back. She took the risk and followed her passion and she seemed to succeed; the subsequent fifteen-years' journey confirmed youth empowerment and human rights facilitation as a valuable achievement in Sawsan's life. Hence, current political events exposed Sawsan to a deep subject vulnerability, namely: no matter how hard she worked, there was an overwhelming context that may strip her of her valuable achievements. It is useful to keep this background in mind as we read that opening quote, which indicates that Sawsan had decided to seek a new direction as a way to overcome a psychological obstacle. Now let us continue with the other two parts of this quote.

#### Quote S.1B

If I went back .... Without ....learning .... And without ..... ah ...  
 doing the ..... ma.....ma..... without ....studying .... Like I want and

without M.A. .. this . . . . so this is a problem that I believe that a big part of it .....a.....at least half of it ..... ah ... ah .... psychological ... or ..ah .or ... I do not know ..... I mean I am creating obstacles to myself. . . . . all people around me ... they tell me ... you are crazy ... you are already someone who has work. .. and you do not need to do something like this. . . . .( me.hmm) .... Working and successful at your work .... Meaning . . you do not need to do something like this.. . . . to do ... ah ...ah ..... But I .... .. the people themselves that I work with ... who are from other countries and older than me ..... they tell me this ... . but I feel .... That this is ... something that is like ....like .....( me: missing) ... no not only missing ... I feel I .... ..I .... I *will lose my self-worth* if I did not do it . . (me. what do you mean by 'it' ? can you please point at it for me ?)

(recalling a famous phrase from an Egyptian comedy show, we both Laughed) . . . point at it .....( light laugh ) . . . . . yes ... yes.... It is true . . . it is good to name things . . . . It is ... it is .... I want .... . ah ... ah... .. I want to study .... And that I .....ah.... to a great extent I want to achieve . . . I am afraid of doing things ... and I am walking inside my shoes . . . . and I do not finish anything at all ..... and this is .... Ah .... Ah ... different ... different than my norm . . different than the norm of at my work..... (Int 3, 5:49)

#### Quote S.1C

(me: you did not say what is it that you want to achieve ?)... what I want to achieve is to finish this thing . . . . ( me: what thing?) .... And I .... After that .... After I finish this thing . . . I will ( me: hm) .... I will . . . . being optimistic .... I will get more options to work a bit easier jobs than now .... Not Having to travel all the time like that . . . ah.hh..... or .... I ..... I go more towards something else. .... . something related to academia for example ... ( me: teaching ) ... ya ....ah ..... or do something that has a calmer *pace*. . . . *that is it*. . . . . or .... I continue with my studies . . . I mean . . . it is possible that ... for example . . I

study . . . say .... I study one year in Holland and after that I go to study in Canada . . . for example. . for another year . . . . . and I know people did that . . . (me. hmm).. ahh..... h.... so that is it . . . (int 3, 8:00 )

In this quote, Sawsan named the new direction that would overcome her obstacle: study. This confirms what she had mentioned in the first interview, that her objective at that time was to get a master's degree in a western country, then possibly a PhD, also in a western country. Sawsan seemed to be highly invested in getting a higher degree from a western country; when I first interviewed her she was in London attending a pre-master preparation course. She said this preparation course had cost her most of her savings. These indications establish a direction for Sawsan's signification in response to the Egyptian politically traumatic context, Sawsan seems to develop a flow of significations that associate her Lack with getting a degree (as an object). This type of flow of significations can be called an obsessive flow of significations.

In the Lacanian literature, the obsessive is one of two sides of the neurotic psychic structure where the subject replaces the big Other with an object, which Lacan named the object 'a'. Then the subject associates overcoming its Lack with getting this object, which leads to the development of an obsessive cycle, i.e., the subject's desire flows towards getting this object. Now object 'a' is a symbolic position in a psychic structure that does not really exist (just like the Other it replaces). Hence, whatever real object occupies this symbolic position, it will either be something unattainable, or if attained it will be replaced by another object, as the subject discovers that it was not really the thing that it was looking for. Or in Lacanian terminology, because the attained object does not full fill the subject's Lack, the subject (in its obsessive mode) concludes that the object was not the real object a. The obsessive cycle then repeats, looking for another object that may occupy object 'a' (Fink, 1999).

Here, I am linking these psychic dynamics with a type of flow of significations that appear in Sawsan's speech. I call the flow of significations, like Sawsan's, that associates the subject's lack with an object, an obsessive flow of significations to differentiate it from a hysteric flow of significations which associates the subject's



lack to big Others. It is important to note that the association is not to just any object, it is an object that the subject can consume/ own/ acquire, and it is an object that is a replacement, or metonymy for the big Other: it is an object with the power to compensate for the lack of the subject. Later in this chapter I will discuss how the degree in Sawsan's speech has become a metonymy for the western big Other. This will become clearer after I examine the hysteric flows of significations in her speech which show her relations to different big Others.

Going back to the above quotes, they reveal the following significations: Sawsan signified a new direction to overcome a psychological obstacle in order to return to the job she loves. This new direction focused on getting a degree from a western country, the degree was an object that Sawsan thought would enable her to return to the job she loved and to overcome the obstacles that were, at that time, preventing her from going back. The obstacles she was trying to overcome were left vague. Moreover, there was no mention of the elephant in the room, i.e., she did not talk about how her work as a human rights facilitator was affected by the political context, and no talk about the role of big Others like the Army who were ruling the state, the police, the government, etc. This is markedly different to the previous two cases.

The above quotes reveal part of Sawsan's response to the traumatic context she was living in. Sawsan aimed to relocate and leave the traumatic context. The degree as an object, or study, would provide her a path for leaving this traumatic context behind and returning to do what she always loved to do. Hence the obsessive flow of signification that appears when she talks about studying in the west.

However, the obsessive flow of significations is not the only type of flow of significations that appears in Sawsan's speech. There is also a hysteric flow of significations, albeit a seemingly troubled one. In the next section I discuss the hysteric flows of significations that appear in Sawsan's speech. I then discuss a psychic wound which both the hysteric and the obsessive flows of significations seem to indicate.

## Probing the Hysteric Flows in Sawsan's Speech

Sawsan's speech shows four strands of hysteric flow of significations towards different big(ger) Others. The first is towards the Egyptian Muslims' God, the second is towards the Egyptian People, the third is towards Western People, and finally, a fourth is towards her Family as a big Other. In this section I explore the status of each of these four hysteric flows of signification.

### ○ *The Cairo Muslims' God*

In interview one Sawsan talked about how, in her university years, she had started to question the socio-political norms in Egypt and how that critical thinking started to include a critique of religion. She then explained how, several years later, after exposure to people from different cultures and different ideas, she had begun to seriously question her religion.

Quote S.2A

I mean ..... *challenging to the status quo* . . . that was happening . . . . *whether* . . . it has to do with the country . . . or . . . ah . . . or our way of life . . . ah. . . or . . . about religion . . . all that we take as facts and as things *for granted* . . . ah . . . when someone is coming from a different society they do not take it as facts and *for granted* . . . at all . . . so this too . . . affected me . . . ah . . . I mean . . . that was the start of . . . among the things that moved the water. . . a little . . . I did not question Islam until later in my life . . . . . for example . . . *it took me ten years* . . . or ..... or *seven years* after university to question . . . . and say no . . . .this is not right . .

{her flow of associations brought Sawsan to talk about a bad experience she had in an Islamic class during her university days. She then used it as an example of how she had started very slowly

to move into questioning Islam, and how small her questions were at the beginning . . . then @ 42:38}

so . . . .no . . . . .I used to question a little . . . . . but I was not having the questions I have now . . . . . I now have big (with emphasis tone) questions . .

(Int S1,  
39:57)

This quote indicates that Sawsan had a serious problem with the discourse of the Cairo Muslims' God. This quote shows a signification of the lack of this transcendental Other, a lack that Sawsan seemed to be unable to repress. In the third interview Sawsan talked about how faith was more than rituals, fundamentally it implied having trust in God. Then her associations went on to the following:

#### Quote S.3A

This is the actual dilemma. . . . . because *shit happens* . . . . .(me: ha .. ) ..... *Shit happens*. . . . .the human ..ah. . .a . . still ... has . . . the feeling that ... a ...a .. faith that God will make it easy on him and ...a ..... and at the same time shit happens . . . . . this is precisely the dilemma that human . . . . . that I personally live in and other people I know are living it as well . . . . .that *shit happens* . . . . .and .... Ah ... these ... things. . . . . and we had to . . . . . I mean . . . . why what is happening to kids in Syria for example . . . . . and these kind of things . . . . . *shit happens* . . . . . so to keep faith in God ..... and at the same time you are seeing those kids that did not anything in their life . . . . all this is happening to them . . . . . this is what . . .a.....we have to adjust for . . . . . we have to . . . . . so . . . . God help us keep a....and. . . God help us to hold on it . . . . . because it is very hard . . . . . . . . . . to keep .....

.....

..... (Int S3,  
1:06:30)



In this quote Sawsan signifies the lack and simultaneously indicates that she would rather not speak it. It is an indication of an unwanted signification; that is: she signifies it, then she does not like that she hears it being signified. This is an important indication that the next quote also confirms.

Sawsan then went on to talk about how she could not explain what was happening to children in Syria; or the street children in Egypt and how the children had nothing to do with the terrible situations they found themselves in. She talked about how these examples indicated a universal injustice. Then her flow of associations brought the following,

### Quote 2.3C

I mean in school .. I do not know about your school days . . . but they always used to say . . . God is just . . . and there is justice and so forth . . . right? . . . . . we were like this . . . . . if you did this you will get that . . . . . If you did good you will be rewarded with good. . . . NO (with an emphasis tone). . . . . if you did good in this life . . . . . you may not be rewarded with good in this life . . . . totally . . . . totally . . . . and if one kept expecting when he does good to get good rewards in this life . . . . *he will be very disappointed .. extremely disappointed* . . . . . for that . . . . .this is . . . .the conclusion I reached . . . . so far . . . . may be in five years or ten years I think differently . . . . but so far . . . . *at the age of 39 I believe* . .there is no justice in this life .. . . and the justice in the heavens. . . .(me: what do you mean by justice in heavens) . . I mean justice is where God is . . . .when we go to the next life . . there will be justice . . . . .but there is no justice in this life . . . . .  
. . . . . this is what I feel at the moment . . . you may say that I am not a good person . . . but . . . .this is what I frankly feel . . . . . (me. hmm) . . . . . you got my secret now (laughter) . . . . . but this is actually my opinion and I say it to people normally . . . . I say it normally . . (Int S3, 1:13:28)

The first part of this quote confirms a signification of unrepressed lack in the transcendental Other, yet the last three sentences add an important signification. Sawsan said: ‘this is what I feel at the moment . . . you may say that I am not a good person . . . but . . . .this is what I frankly feel . . . . . (me. hmm) . . . . . . . you got my secret now (laughter)’, this comment indicates that Sawsan thinks that if the lack of the big Other is spoken aloud, people may think that she is a bad person. So, she treated her significations of Lack in the transcendental as if it was a guilty secret she had to keep. The quote also indicates that, although she occasionally spoke about this with people, she still treated her significations of Lack in the transcendental as something socially unacceptable.

We can read the three parts of the quote above as offering both significations of lack of the transcendental Other, as well as a meta-signification of her significations of lack of the transcendental Other in her context. That is, Sawsan signifies a Lack in the Cairo Muslims’ God, and she is signifying such signification as personally and socially troubling.

This meta-signification is also confirmed by an earlier comment in Sawsan’s first interview. In our interview her free(er) associations brought her to a signification that was tied to clear emotional distress and reduced Sawsan to tears. In our first interview Sawsan talked about her relation to the religious discourse (as quoted in quote S.2A), right after she said that ‘I now have big (with emphasis tone) questions’, her associations brought her to the following:

#### Quote S.2B

so . . . .no . . . . .I used to question a little . . . . . but I was not having the questions I have now . . . . . I now have big (with emphasis tone) questions . . .ahm . . . . . ah . . . . . that is it . . . . . . .  
 .I see the human is on a journey . . . . . we do not have a certainty about anything . . . . . I see we are in a journey and may god help us in it . . . . . because it is not an easy journey . . . .and I always pray that god get us out of this life in peace . . . . . in peace nothing more . . . . . . . . .

(me: how do you get out in peace) . . . . ammmm . . . . . (she teared and was suppressing a cry) . . . . . oh . . . ok I will get depressed now. . . . (in a joking tone and then long laughter) (Int S1, 42:38)

Sawsan was able to hold back her tears and brought herself back to the interview. However, she seemed to be more conscious about where her associations went after this encounter. It was not before the third interview that she became more open (freer association) again – this is where the earlier quotes in this section are from. I think this encounter confirms the meta-signification regarding her hysteric flow of significations I discussed above. I will explain below.

In this exchange, when Sawsan's associations floated until they brought her to her relation to God, she mentioned peace as a final target in life. When I asked about this she paused and teared up. Reading this in light of the earlier discussion, this may indicate that, although she signified the lack in God, she was not happy with this signification; she would rather have peace with God (even if only at the end of her life), and that does not seem possible with her significations of lack in the transcendental Other and her inability to repress this lack.

This is an important meta-signification because it brings up several critical questions such as: If Sawsan is not happy with signifying Lack in her God, why does she signify it at all? What is preventing her from repressing or disavowing the Lack in God? These questions are critical to understand the nature of ignorance and its fragility. Addressing these questions will need me to bring the three cases together, hence I will reserve this discussion for the concluding chapter.

Instead, I now move on to examine other key flows of significations towards big Others that appeared in Sawsan's speech, namely towards People. There are two different People as big Others that appear in her interviews: the Egyptian People and Western People; I examine her flows of significations towards each of them in what follows.

○ ***Lack in the Egyptian people.***

The Egyptian People were signified as sexuated lacking big Other. The following quote shows such significations associated with Egyptian People.

Quote S.4

(me: How about outside yourself . . . if you have a magic wand ... what will be the three things that you will change?) . . there are things . . . (do you mean) realistically or not realistically? . . . (me. no . . in your fantasy . . .). . total Fantasy? . . (me: ya) . . . ok. . . this is nice . . (me. fantasize) . . . ya . . no . . ya . . . of course . . I mean . . . I wish the society changes . . . and it will not change . . so this is a fantasy . . . (me: not change in what . . . can you elaborate the fantasy) . . . I mean . . I would love to see the people more educated . . . . (me. how would this effect you) .... it will help me *big time* (said in higher tone giving emphasis). . . I see all of our problems is rooted in education . . . . *it is based . . . because . . .* people are not aware . . at all. . . and not an education in the sense of pen and paper and school and this kind of things . . . no I mean awareness . . .because a lot of people have degrees but they have no awareness . . . .no political awareness . . . no social awareness . . . no moral awareness . . . and not any type of awareness at all. . . so this is the first thing . . . . but this will not happen I mean . . and will not even happen in your children's time. . . so we . . . . are . . . . .this is completely fantasy ( Int S3, 30:44)

Here Sawsan thinks society (Egyptian People) is responsible for social problems and if it could be changed it would help her 'big time'. This signifies Egyptian People as a big Other. Moreover, she signified the Egyptian People as a sexuated Other, that is: its agency is conditional on a group with excess awareness (phallus) to bring about awareness to a bigger lacking group (i.e., society that lacks awareness); such intercourse would deploy the Egyptian People's Other agency to transform the social context. However, a very important



signification here is her signification of impotence associated with the Egyptian People as a big Other. That is: the intercourse will not happen in the foreseeable future or even in the next generation's future; in other words, awareness will not enter Egyptian society. This signifies Egyptian People as an impotent sexuated big Other. This was confirmed in interview two when I asked Sawsan how she would advise someone starting their career in development in Egypt. She gave a very short and quick answer: to prepare to emigrate from Egypt. When I asked her to elaborate, she said: Egypt is not a good place to raise a family, it does not nurture good human nature.

○ ***Significations of Western People and Parent as big Other***

Behind her significations of the Egyptian People as a sexuated and impotent big Other, there seems to be another signification of the Western People as a sexuated but competent Other. Quote S.1C shows her desire or aim to go to a western country (Holland then Canada), that is, her obsessive flow of significations fixed an end in western countries. The obsessive flow, discussed earlier, also shows that Sawsan signified this Western Other as non-transcendental, that is: she had to go to it, she had to perform and acquire a degree to become accepted in its constituency. Hence, The Western big Other did not transcend her current conditions and context.

Another People that was signified with Otherness were Sawsan's parents. Here is a quote about her parents that shows such significations:

Quote S.5

And also because both my parents are here . . . this also is making me a bit more relaxed than what I should . . . . . I mean . . . . . *I need to grow up*..... because ahm..... .. I mean ..... I am a bit .... Ah ..... ah..... I am spoiled by their presence (in my life). . . . not a bit spoiled by their presence .... I am *definitely* spoiled by their presence. . . . but once one of them will .... Ah ..... ah..... ... will ..... will disappear from the view. . . . . *I will suffer a great deal*.....

because I do not have any other *support systems* that help me in anything. . . . (S3–12:50)

In this quote she indicates that she needs to ‘grow up’, which in turn indicates how she signifies her position to her parents: as a child counting on her parent. In the first interview Sawsan said that her mother was the most important person in her life, and in interview three she talked about how she would not survive in Egypt without her father, and how she did not understand the Egyptian bureaucratic system, or the police. She said she was totally dependent on her father for dealing with these because her father was a top-ranking military officer, and such military officers get VIP treatment within different governmental offices of the Egyptian state under military rule. On the other hand, Sawsan’s social circle was in development/human rights communities so she would be aware of the cruelty of the police and the military state. However, the police were not allowed by law to deal with military officers, and their daughters, who in the Egyptian culture were treated as an extension of the fathers’ honour. In the Egyptian Military state, a top-ranking officer (like her father) may be signified in the place of the state (i.e., Other). This Other for many people (including Sawsan’s friends) would be antagonistic, however for Sawsan this Other is her caring, loving father (quote S.8 in the following section highlights these significations as well). Sawsan in the above quote indicates that she is privileged by her family set up, without which she would ‘suffer a great deal’. In such a context, her parents (particularly her father) are signified as a potent Other, however, they are temporal. Her father had recently retired so would have less and less influence as time passed, in addition, of course, her parents were aging. In the same interview she talked about being late, and how she needed to work harder to get a degree. It could be read that her sense of being late and her parents aging were linked.

In this section I have discussed four different hysteric flows of significations towards four different Others. To sum up Sawsan’s current relations to Others in her context:

- The Cairo Muslims’ God was signified as transcendental but Lacking,
- The Egyptian People were signified as non-transcendental sexuated and Lacking,

- Parents (Father) was signified as a big Other, but temporal and vanishing, hence parents as Other were also lacking.
- the Western People (the only Other who was not signified as lacking) was however non-transcendental, she had to move to it.

These flows of hysteric significations indicate a suspended hysteric state. That is, the hysteric flow did not develop sufficiently to enable her to get into a hysteric state with an Other with an agency that was capable of transcending her politically traumatic context. For instance, when she developed a hysteric flow of significations towards her parents as Other, she followed it with a signification of their lack. Similarly, when she developed a hysteric flow towards the Cairo Muslims' God, she again followed that with a signification of lack in God. Similarly, with the Egyptian People, she signified them as capable but only if they were educated, and this would not happen. However, Western People were signified differently, it is a potent Other but non-transcendental, that is: she could not rely on its Other agency to re-signify her current traumatic context in Egypt, hence, she would have to relocate to it, to the west.

This state of the hysteric flows of significations has important consequences on the development of the obsessive flow of significations discussed in the previous section. The next section will examine the link between both.

### **The link between the Obsessive and the Hysteric Flows**

The following quote signifies the link Sawsan is making between the hysteric and the obsessive flows:

Quote S.6

I cannot tell you ..... I am worried that if I got older than this. ... my health will get worse and ..... no one will help me. . . . do you understand . . . .this is also another worrying thought that I have . . that I .... ah .....ah ..... I mean..... do you understand

..... I mean. .... I ha ..... I have to ..... *somehow I have to help myself* ..... do you understand. .... I mean ..... Of course God is with everyone .... And all of that ..... but he ..... I mean ..... One must ....ah..... I mean ..... Ah.....  
 y.....yii..... I do not know what is called in classical Arabic. .  
 .. ... I mean .....ah ..... one has to try to help himself..... I mean ..... seek (she used a classic Arabic word used in Islamic terminology she was looking for) ..... one should seek to help oneself ..... I do not do this as I should (Int S3, 10:52)

In this quote Sawsan signifies relying on herself as a must because the transcendental Other alone is not enough. The flow of significations in this quote indicates a link between the obsessive direction and the hysteric direction of significations: the development of the obsessive flow of significations deepens to offer a substitute for the suspended hysteric flow of significations.

That is, with the suspended flows of hysteric significations outlined in the previous section, Sawsan's response to the emerging traumatic events in her context relied more on developing the obsessive flow of significations.

This bring us to what was unique in Sawsan's flows of significations in comparison to Maya and Yasser. In the case of Maya and Yasser, there was an obsessive flow of significations apparent in their interviews too. For instance, both were studying for their master's degree, and they were both keen to get these degrees. Both had flows of obsessive significations towards an object 'a', however, the obsessive flows were not used in associations linking them to the emerging traumatic context although all three of them shared the same politically traumatic context. However, unlike Sawsan, Yasser's and Maya's associations that were linked to the traumatic context foregrounded hysteric flows of significations towards transcendental bigger Others. Below I explore this in more detail.

Yasser's case is the closest to Sawsan's. Yasser's speech showed the same disruption of the hysteric flow of significations towards the transcendental Other as Sawsan's. As discussed in his case, Yasser too signified the lack in the discourse of the transcendental Other, he did not seem to discursively repress the lack in the

transcendental Other. However, his associations showed that he did not allow the hysteric flow to be suspended by his significations of lack. Yasser was trying to replace the disrupted discursive hysteric flow based on the discourse of the Other (i.e., the Islamic religious discourse) with an alternative hysteric flow of significations that was not based on the disrupted discourse of the Other. Let us recall that Yasser immersed himself in a love story with Heba, his long-time religious friend. He signified this romantic relationship with the potential to let him see and feel different things; things which his mind would not allow him to see on his own. Through his deep romantic love for Heba, Yasser was developing a hysteric flow of significations to the Egyptian Muslim's transcendental Other, that was not based on the common discourses associated with this Other which helps him to reproduce his agency in the newly emerging traumatic context.

A question may then arise, how is Heba different to a degree? Why was Heba not an object 'a' for Yasser in the same way that the degree was an object 'a' for Sawsan? One key difference here was the way Yasser signified his relation to Heba: he was non possessive, his love to her was purely platonic. Remembering his case, he said that all he hoped for from his love for her was to keep on loving her, even if she never loved him back. That is, he did not signify her as an object that had to be possessed / owned / consumed; and that if he got her love, he would be empowered. Heba's main value to Yasser was that she allowed him to keep on loving her. In relation to his case, we discussed Dollar's (1993) analysis of love as a potent interpolation act to the Other. Hence Yasser's significations towards Heba did not indicate an obsessive flow towards Heba as an object 'a', however, he was using Heba to perform an act for the gaze of the transcendental Other; that is: through her love he was developing a hysteric flow of significations towards the transcendental Other. This was quite different from Sawsan's flow of significations toward the degree. The degree for Sawsan was an object she had to possess/own/consume, and when she got it, the degree would compensate a certain lack in her, it would empower her to overcome her traumatic context. Sawsan was not offering herself to the degree, she was rather getting the degree for herself. Yasser, however, was offering himself to Heba, he said his love for Heba was the one thing he was currently 100% sure about in his life; hence Heba did not directly empower him, she defined him as a subject. The difference between Heba for Yasser and the degree

for Sawsan highlights a key difference between the hysteric and the obsessive flows of significations. They flow in opposite directions; the obsessive flow offers the object for the subject to possess, whereas the hysteric flow offers the subject itself for the Other or for whoever takes the place of the Other.

Maya's case was quite different to both Yasser's and Sawsan's. Maya did not allow the lack in the transcendental to be discursively signified. Although she was in danger of signifying the transcendental as Lacking, she laboured the discursive field to find a way to discursively repress that Lack. As discussed in her case, Maya's relation to the transcendental Other faced two major challenges. In both challenges she worked the discourse of the Other to repress its Lack. She also worked the discourse of the People as transcendental Other to create a space for the discourse of Cairo Muslims' God to co-exist with People as two complementary transcendentals in her life. At the end of a long discursive journey Maya was able to retain both transcendentals within her symbolic order. This allowed her to switch comfortably between One and the Other, to avoid any significations of lack in either of them. Hence, she developed two complementary hysteric flows of significations which enabled her to reproduce her political agency in the same politically traumatic context that she shares with Sawsan and Yasser.

It is important to note here that Sawsan's development of the obsessive flow of significations towards a degree seemed to have a positive side; it played an important role in Sawsan's life. That is, the obsessive flow kept her desire flowing despite her traumatic context. Sawsan was highly motivated to get onto a degree programme; she kept applying despite a few rejections even travelling to the UK to attend a pre-masters preparation course to improve her chances. The obsessive flow enabled her to keep on trying to escape her traumatic context; the obsessive flow was at least maintaining her flow of desire against the political trauma she was encountering.

However, her reliance on developing her obsessive flow to compensate for the deficit in her hysteric flows seemed to come with a heavy psychic burden. Throughout the interviews there was an accumulated sense of untamed anxiety underlying Sawsan's significations. By the end of the third interview, I decided not to continue with an

already planned fourth interview. I explained to her that I had already gathered all the information I need; I then thanked her and guided her to different ways to access different types of counselling in Cairo in case she felt the need to continue talking about some of the issues raised during our interviews. For Sawsan, the obsessive flow seemed to leave a psychic wound open. In the next section I will discuss the psychic wound as it appeared in Sawsan's interviews. However, I first discuss what I mean by a psychic wound, and for this purpose I will utilize Deleuze's concepts of event and the cut and link them both to the Lacanian Real.

### **The Cut and The Wounded Psyche**

Before examining quotes that signify the psychic wound in Sawsan's speech, I first need to establish what I mean by a psychic wound. For this purpose, I find Deleuze's concept of the event together with the Lacanian concept of the Real offer good perspectives for conceptualizing what a wounded psyche may look like. Žižek (2012), in his critical reading of Deleuze, suggested that Deleuze's book 'Logic of Sense' represents a phase in Deleuze's thinking where he was closer to Lacan than he was in later work written in cooperation with Guattari such as *Anti Oedipus* or *Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 2009). The event is conceptualized in several works of Deleuze, however, to keep a coherent theoretical structure for this thesis, here I draw only from Deleuze's conceptualization of the event in the *Logic of Sense*. I begin with a brief description of the Deleuzian event and how it links to the Lacanian Real. I will use this to characterize what a psychic wound may look like. After this short theoretical detour, I return to Sawsan's comments to discuss how her speech signifies a psychic wound.

In the *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (2004) gives a two-sided description of every event. He asks: "why is every event a kind of plague, war, wound, or death? Is this simply to say that there are more unfortunate than fortunate events? No, this is not the case since the question here is about the double structure of every event" (p.172). Deleuze's first side of every event is characterized as an incorporeal indefinite floating event over the corporeal of the subject. Looking at the event from this perspective we may place the event within the Lacanian Real. The Real of the

subject, with capital R, is that sphere of the subject's context in which the subject is impossible; in other words, the Real is the sphere of the subject's context where the subject's symbolic order cannot render the subject possible within it. Hence to be a subject is to foreclose this Real; that is, the symbolic order is developed on the basis of a foreclosure of an already existing context in which the subject's agency cannot be rendered possible. In this sense the event as the Real is always there floating outside the symbolic order of the subject, albeit being foreclosed from the symbolic. Hence the Real is beyond the subject's language. What Deleuze seems to emphasize in the first side of the event is that the event, qua the Lacanian Real, is all around the subject's symbolic at all times. This side of the event is essential to understanding the second side of the event, that is the event as a cut and a psychic wound. The two sides however draw heavily from the Lacanian concept of the subject's symbolic order. Let me then briefly recap the elements of the symbolic order relevant to understanding the cut.

The Lacanian subject can be understood to exist as far as it has a symbolic order capable of differentiating the subject to a good extent from its Real, i.e., foreclosing the Real. Hence the symbolic order is like a skin separating the inside from the outside. But further, the real skin separates a body full of organs from an environment without organs; the symbolic order, on the other hand, is a contour that separates a body without organs from an environment without organs, as Deleuze's (Smith, 2018) brilliant metaphor suggests. Hence, what is inside the symbolic is not altogether different from what is outside the symbolic order, the difference is only a name, that is: the difference is in fixing a signifier for a particular sphere of context. By positing a name, the symbolic order differentiates the subject as a particular sphere of its Real (i.e., the name differentiates a particular sphere – where the subject can be rendered possible – from the wider context where the subject cannot be rendered possible), hence the Real has no name. The subject's capacity to posit a name for one sphere of its context and abstaining from naming another sphere is the subject's core agency, what Lacan calls 'the agency of the letter' (Lacan, Sheridan and Bowie, 1977). But how? How does the symbolic order do this brilliant separation by just positing a name? In other words, how does the agency of naming (i.e., the agency of the letter) bring about the subject's different types of agencies?



To answer this question, let us recall another Lacanian idea: the symbolic order is the discourse of the Other (Žižek, 1989; Fink, 2004, 2013). One way to envision an answer to the question above is through the big Other. The symbolic order separates the subject from its Real by positing a name for a big Other, and by associating this name with a supreme agency that can deal with the subject's Real; hence the Other is the one who deals with the subject's impossible context, it deals with what is beyond the subject's symbolic order i.e., what is beyond the subject's language. The imposition of the Other in this way forecloses the Real from the subject's symbolic order, but more; the Other, in addition to a name also has its own discourse, a discourse signifying its desire, and within this discourse of the desire of the Other, the subject has a place to be. This is the real agency of the subject, as Lacan implies: the agency of the letter, and from this agency emanates many other agencies: social, political, scientific, artistic, etc. By its capacity to name and to not name (abstain from naming), the subject can re-signify its own context to foreclose the traumatic kernel and create its own universe regardless of the impossibilities apparent in its own context.

This is why the relation to the Other is quite important, especially when facing the re-emergence of the traumatic context within the subject's symbolic. Which brings us to Deleuze and his second side of the event. Deleuze (2004, p.172) says:

With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person the moment we designate by saying 'here, the moment has come'.

The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present, and from the point of view of that which embodies it.

This is the moment when the event becomes a cut and creates a wound. The moment in which the event is actualized, here the event no longer hovers over the skin of the subject, here the event cuts through the subject's symbolic order. Hence the cut is the moment the event as Real penetrates the symbolic order. The cut, therefore, is when an event from the subject's Real is embodied in a state of affairs that brings the symbolic order to a halt at a particular moment. That is, the cut is where the symbolic order becomes unable to re-produce a radical difference between the inside and the outside of the subject. If left untreated the cut becomes a wound which may become a threat to the subject's very existence.



In the above quote, I was trying to probe whether the anxiety she expressed regarding her parents was specific or a floating anxiety that captured multiple signifiers in a chain of associations. The above quote indicates that it was not specific to her parents, Sawsan's worry seemed to be signified by a chain of signifiers; her health was given as another example in the chain of worries. Now, mentioning her health after her parents' possible disappearance or death, suggested the chain of worries were related to existential anxieties (Van Deurzen.2008,2009). That is, her anxiety was associated with her worry about continuing to be the subject she had already become. The following quote confirms the existential anxiety and adds more significations to the above quote.

#### Quote S.8

I do pray to God. . . . . I do pray to God..... first of all . . . . to give us strength in tough times. . . . because . . . I a . . . I am afr... I have fears about the future. . . .(me. really) . . . yes *definitely* .... I have fears about the future . . . .  
 .. (me: what are you afraid of in the future ?) . . . I am afraid of everything . . . .  
 I am afraid that I won't be able to live in Egypt on my own. . . because everything is working here with bribes and these sort of things ..... and I do not even understand if they are asking for a bribe .... And .... Ah ....ah.... they shout at people ..... and I am not used to be talked to like this . . . . . so I feel I will be mistreated ..... and I have no one to help me with this . . . . . and my father was helping me hundred percent . . . ah .... A..... in all these kind of things . . . . and I am afraid that he will disappear from my view completely ( Egyptian phrase for death) . . . . . so I pray to God to give me strength in tough times. . . . .this is the most important thing . . . and ah...ah....ah.....and with health and ah ah . . 'satr' ( Egyptian term: for an act of god to cover the person weaknesses) . . . . . and that is it .. thank you very much and see you later (Egyptian phrase from a funny joke) (light laugh) (Int S3, 55:34)

This quote further associates her floating anxiety with the socio-political context in Egypt. If her parents disappear, Sawsan feels she will not be able to survive as a subject in the current Egyptian context. Let us recall that before the military coup Sawsan was a remarkable community leader; on her own she mobilized government

officials (the same type that she is referring to in the above quote with desperation); she networked privileged youth and international development organizations to transform a useless public youth centre into a very effective centre for community development. The above quote, however, shows a different state of agency, Sawsan was worried about her survival in Cairo, i.e., worried about whether she could continue to exist as a subject of this socio-political context. This big contrast between her two states of agency suggests an event that cut through the symbolic and created a wound. Now let me elaborate how the cut may have been manifested in Sawsan's case.

As outlined in the introduction, the military regime in Egypt made it very risky for people like Sawsan to continue working as human rights instructors/facilitators/activists, subject positions that were important and beloved in Sawsan's life. Hence, the military coup had a direct impact on Sawsan's life. Recall that early in her career, Sawsan forfeited the comfortable/ rare job her father had provided her to pursue her passion for human rights and community empowerment. The military coup rendered fifteen-years of Sawsan's hard work pursuing her passion redundant. This intrusion of a political event cut the fragile skin that separated Sawsan's symbolic world (of flourishing social, political, and economic agencies) from the impossible wider context (as a subject with no agency). Hence, unlike in her past, Sawsan was now worried about her survival as a subject in the ensuing traumatic context. Sawsan now clearly signified that she could 'not guarantee that anything will last'. But what about before the coup? Had she been able to guarantee that anything would last then? Sawsan's history before the coup indicated that this lack of guarantee, even if raised, was not a disabling issue for her belief in her own political agency. To further understand the cut, let us take Sawsan's expression: 'I cannot guarantee that anything will last' and see how it can carry different significations before and after the cut.

As discussed, Deleuze mentioned that, before the event becomes a cut, it is there hovering around the subject. Hence the subject before the cut still cannot guarantee that anything will last, exactly like after the cut. However, before the cut this expression may be associated with a chain such as: let me enjoy what I have while it lasts because 'I cannot guarantee that anything will last', Or a chain such as: let

me make a difference with what I have because ‘I cannot guarantee that anything will last’. While after the cut Sawsan’s expression: ‘I cannot guarantee that anything will last’ seems to be part of a chain signifying an existential threat, the chain seems to be: there is a serious problem in life and of being a subject because ‘I cannot guarantee that anything will last’. After the cut the subject used this lack of guarantee to signify a problem, a psychic wound. After the cut there is a wound, an area where the symbolic order cannot generate a radical separation between what’s inside and what’s outside. Hence the lack of guarantee that inside is not radically differentiated from the lack of guarantee of the Real. Before the cut in the symbolic order, the lack of guarantee was transformable to enable the subject’s agency, however after the cut, the lack of guarantee was very similar to that of the wider context: totally beyond the subject’s agency. This difference captures Deleuze’s two-sided characterization of the event and how it pertains to the Lacanian subject.

There were plenty of moments throughout the interviews where Sawsan signified an underlying psychic wound. Below is a list of expressions from quotes throughout this chapter, which indicate a chain of significations that indicate a psychic wound.

- “I will be a big loser” S1A
- “I will lose myself worth” S1B
- “it is not an easy journey . . . .and I always pray that god get us out of this life in peace . . . . . in peace nothing more . . . . . (me: how do you get out in peace) . . . . ammmm ... .. (she teared and was suppressing a cry)” S1B
- “God help us hold on to it(faith) . . . because it is very hard . . . . to keep” S.3A
- “*disappointed* in life” S.3B
- “there is no justice in this life” S.3B
- “*I will suffer a great deal*(if something happened to her parents)..... because I do not have any other *support systems* that helps me in anything “ S.5
- “I am worried that If I got older that this. ... my health will get worse and ..... no one will help me” S.6
- “*somehow I have to help myself*” S.6
- “I cannot guarantee that anything will last” S.7

- “who will support me in anything. . . . . No one. . . . . no one at all” S.7
- “I have fears about the future” S.8
- “I am afraid of everything” S.8
- “I am afraid that I won’t be able to live in Egypt on my own” S.8
- “and I am afraid that he (her father) will disappear from my view completely” S.8

This condensed list indicates a psychic wound that underlies her chains of significations. The list also shows another important feature of our discussion so far. The significations of the hysteric, the obsessive and the wound are intertwined. That is, the lack in God, depending on herself, and the psychic wound are three intertwined significations. Sawsan’s case can thus be summarized as follows: In her symbolic order the only Other that transcends her current traumatic context is the Cairo Muslims’ God. Hence Sawsan prays to this transcendental Other. However, this Other is lacking so she has to rely on herself. But she is also lacking, so she has to get a degree to compensate for her lack. But how could a degree compensate her lack to overcome her traumatic context? Getting a degree would enable her to leave Egypt (the traumatic context) and move to a western country. In the west there is a potent Other and the possibility of developing a hysteric flow that could heal her wound. But before she reaches the shores of her potent Other, the wound is still aching, and the obsession flow can only offer temporary relief for the pains of her wound. Meanwhile, Sawsan’s political agency was paralyzed.

Sawsan’s case bring us to important conclusions. One, the development of a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other seems essential in reproducing political agency in a politically traumatic context. Two, forfeiting the reproduction of a subject’s agency that was already produced and enacted in a previous context is a very difficult choice, paralyzed agency is a psychic wound that needs to be healed. Three, although the obsessive flow of significations maintains the subject’s flow of desire in the traumatic context, it cannot replace the hysteric flow in healing the cut of the traumatic event.

In the next chapter I will bring together key findings from the discussion of the three cases to elaborate on the conditions and the qualifiers of the above concluding statements. I will also bring together key elements of the method of analysis used in the three cases to outline ignorance analysis as an analytical tool for researching the production of political agency.

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed three empirical cases of the re-production of political agency in the politically traumatic context of Egypt. Yasser provided the case of a subject engaged in a struggle to reproduce his political agency, while Maya provided the case of someone who had successfully re-produced political agency, and finally Sawsan's case resembled a reproduction process paralyzed by the politically traumatic context. I also discussed aspects of Victor Frankl's autobiography as an historical case of the successful reproduction of political agency in one of modern history's well documented political traumas. Across these cases, I used ignorance analysis as an analytical tool to help me understand nuances in different subjects' reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

In this final chapter I extract key conclusions from this investigation. I will start by outlining the analytical tool as it was used and developed throughout this research. Then I will present four conclusions regarding the topic of this research, i.e., the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts. Hence, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first takes ignorance analysis and reports its development during the research as an analytical tool potentially useful for other, similar research topics. The second section highlights four key findings that resulted from applying ignorance analysis to investigate the reproduction of political agency of the three cases presented in this thesis.

#### **1- Ignorance Analysis.**

Throughout the empirical cases I performed a specific type of analysis, i.e., ignorance analysis. In chapters two and three I introduced the theoretical ground for ignorance analysis, then in the four analysis chapters, I pointed to additional developments in this method which occurred as I applied it to actual data. In this section I bring together these developments and outline ignorance analysis as it developed within the theoretical and empirical investigations of this research.



Ignorance analysis is a tool for examining specific aspects of a subject's production of ignorance. In chapters one and two I discussed how, within the Lacanian literature, the subject develops a symbolic order that transforms the subject's Real, that is: the subject develops a symbolic order that forecloses the part of the subject's context within which the subject's agency cannot be rendered possible. Hence the production of ignorance is an essential part of the development of a symbolic order – and therefore agency. I also discussed how ignorance can be understood as the process which brings the subject to not-know what it had already known. In examining the production of ignorance in my participants' speech I focused on the subject's association to Lacanian Others. Hence ignorance analysis in this thesis is developed as an analytical tool that examines the subject's associations to different types of Others as they appear in the flows of significations within the speech of the subject during an interview. In my application of ignorance analysis, I identified four different types of significations of Others and three different types of flows of significations towards those Others. I will outline these two key aspects of ignorance analysis below: in section 1.1, I outline four different significations of Others that appeared in participant's speech, and in section 1.2, I outline three different types of flows of significations that associate the subject to those Others as they appeared in my participants' speech.

### **1.1 Significations of Others**

The Other is a specific discursive structure that appears in participants' speech as a name or a signifier with a particular, albeit temporary, type of signification. That is, the big Other is a signifier which is signified with an agency able to deal with that part of the subject's Real in which the subject cannot render its agency possible (Žižek, 1989, 1996, 2000; Hook, 2008; Salecl, 1988). In other words, to detect a big Other in speech there needs to be a signifier that is signified with agency to do the things that no small other (subjects) can ever do. In the cases discussed in this thesis, the signifiers People, God, and the State were signified with agency beyond the agency of any subject. After significations of big Others were detected in the participants' speech, I identified further significations that were specifically associated with those Others. That is, within my participants' speech I identified four

possible significations that could be associated to already signified Others. In other words, the Other could be further signified as a:

- I. Transcendental or non-Transcendental Other
- II. Big or Bigger Other
- III. Sexuated or Asexuated Other
- IV. Antagonistic or empowering Other.

Below I elaborate on each of these four significations of Others.

### *I. The Transcendental and the Non-Transcendental Others*

In ignorance analysis I identified the transcendental Other as that Other with a signification of agency that transcended the subject's traumatic context. An example of this was Maya's signification of People as well as Yasser and Sawsan's significations of God; in all these cases the Others were signified with an agency that transcended the Egyptian context.

By contrast, the non-transcendental Other was an Other with an agency which, although beyond the agency of any subject, did not transcend the subject's traumatic context. The example of this was in Yasser's significations of the Egyptian People and similarly in Sawsan's signification of People. They signify the agency of People in Egypt to be within Egypt, both associated agency to People that did not transcend the Egyptian context. Similarly, Sawsan's signification of the People in the West associated agency to Western-People that did not transcend the western context. Hence, ignorance analysis can identify the signification of a non-transcendental big Other when an Other is signified with an agency that is tied to a local context. Whereas a signification of a transcendental Other will be identified when it is signified with an agency that transcends the subject's local context.

### *II. The big and the bigger Others*

Using ignorance analysis, I explored whether there was a signification of hierarchy among the big Others that appeared in participants' speech. That is, when a big Other was signified to have a bigger Other, i.e., when there was a signification of an

Other for the Other. The signification of a bigger Other appeared when the participant's speech signified a bigger Other with agency that dealt with the impossibility the big Other could not deal with. An example of this was in Maya's significations of human rights advocacy groups: they were signified as big Others, but they were also signified to draw their agency from People as a bigger Other for these organizations. Hence, in Maya's speech People was not only signified as a big Other but it was also signified as a bigger Other for big Others. Hence, using ignorance analysis, I was able to identify whether or not there was a hierarchy in the significations of big Others within a participants' speech which led to a signification of bigger Other.

### III. *The Sexuated and the Asexuated Others*

The sexuated Other is a further signification of some bigger Others. The sexuated Other is signified as the bigger Other of a pair of exclusive and mutual big Others, where one of those two Others is identified with lack and the second Other is identified with an excess (a phallus) to fulfil the lack of the first Other. An example of this was the signification of People in the cases of Yasser and Maya: People were signified to be the bigger Other of two Others: one was the People as the general public who lacked awareness, compared with People as the non-governmental organizations (for Yasser) and the human rights advocacy groups (for Maya) who were educated and had the right awareness (i.e., possessed the phallus). The sexuation of the Other further associates a condition to the deployment of the bigger Other's agency (i.e., the People's agency) – an intercourse between the Other identified with lack and the Other identified with phallus. That is, the People's agency as bigger Other was conditioned on the intercourse between the People as the public who lacked awareness and the People as organizations who had critical awareness. Hence in ignorance analysis I identify significations of sexuated Others when participants conditioned the agency of a bigger Other on an intercourse between two mutually exclusive sub-groups (Others) that were a part of that bigger Other.

#### *IV. The Antagonistic and the Empowering Other*

The antagonistic Other appeared in Maya's case and proved productive in the reproduction of her political agency. Maya named the 'State' as an antagonistic Other: she associated it with an agency that was responsible for the antagonistic conditions in her socio-political context. On the other hand, she associated with History (as big Other) an agency of empowerment, an agency that moved People in progressive directions. Maya's signification of the State was different than the cases of Yasser and Sawsan, for Maya the State was not expected to play any empowering role, hence she was not surprised when the State created conditions that were hostile to the reproduction of her agency. On the contrary, for Maya this was what the State was supposed to do. Hence her signification of the State was not that of an Other that was supposed to empower the subjects but failed, rather, the State was an Other with agency aimed at preventing the subject from fully reproducing its own agency. In ignorance analysis, I identify such a signification of the Other as an antagonistic Other. In chapter seven, I discussed how signifying an antagonistic Other was instrumental to Maya's reproduction of political agency in her traumatic context.

These four significations are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary they were often combined in an association to one specific Other. For example, in the case of Maya, People were signified as a bigger transcendental Other sexuated into two sub-categories: the People who lacked awareness and the human rights advocacy groups (also part of People) who had awareness (i.e. phallus); in other words, a masculine Other. People as bigger Other was further signified with subcategories of several masculine groups with different types of excess (phallus): the state (signified as an antagonistic masculine Other part of the Peoples' agency), the capitalists (also signified as an antagonistic masculine Other), and the human rights advocacy groups (signified as an empowering masculine Other). In Maya's case I discussed how such significations led to a signification of conflict between the antagonistic masculine Others and the empowering masculine Others. I also showed how such signification of conflict played an important role in the reproduction of Maya's political agency.

Sawsan's case provided another example of how these four categories combined. In Sawsan's case People were signified with a local context as the Egyptian-People, i.e., a non-transcendental Other. This non transcendental Other was further sexuated, i.e., there were Egyptian-People as the Public who needed to be educated (i.e. a lacking), and there were Egyptian-People as education Organizations which were supposed to provide critical education (the phallus). However, Sawsan also signified that, because of the failure of the education system, the Egyptian Public (the lacking Other) was never going to be educated leading to a signification of the Egyptian People with a permanent lack, i.e., a signification of impotent sexuated non-transcendental Other. On the other hand, Sawsan also signified People in the west as, like the Egyptian People, a bigger Other that was sexuated, but it was satisfied by a potent education System. In Sawsan's speech, People in the west were signified with potent education Institutions (signified as empowering masculine Other with phallus) that educated and brought awareness to the Public (which lacked education). In this way, in the end, the People in the west can overcome their lack while the People in Egypt cannot; this might explain Sawsan's focus on finding a way to move to the west, to the sexuated non-transcendental Other who can.

Introducing these four categories of signification of Others allowed me to use ignorance analysis to examine the different roles the Other can play in the production of the subject's ignorance, and therefore also the reproduction of the subject's agency. The second key element in ignorance analysis is the flows of significations that are linked to these different significations of Others.

## 1.2 The Flows of Significations associated to Others.

The Lacanian Other is a compounded structural concept. In ignorance analysis I utilized three Lacanian concepts that relate the Other to different subject positions, namely: the hysteric, the obsessive, and the pervert subject positions. These three concepts allowed me to identify three different flows of significations in my participants' speech that were linked to the Other. In this section I summarize how I characterized each of these flows within my research and outline three types of flows of significations which relate the subject to the Lacanian Other, namely:

- I. The hysteric flow of significations
- II. The erotic flow of significations
- III. The obsessive flow of significations

### *I. The hysteric flow of significations*

In chapters 2 and 8 I discussed how the Lacanian Other is a structural necessity which the subject uses to deal with its Real. That is, the subject uses various Others and associates them with significations of higher agency to which it may delegate the parts of its context the subject cannot render its agency possible (Fink, 1999, 2004, 1997; Zizek, 1989, 1996, 2000; Hook, 2008; Salecl, 1988). From this perspective the subject needs to signify the Other with an agency powerful enough to deal with their own impossibility; hence the Other's agency is signified as powerful beyond any possible agency of subjects (or in Lacanian terms: the Other's agency is an agency beyond the agency of any small others). I have linked this perspective of the Other to a type of flow of significations that appear in participants' speech and called it the hysteric flow of significations. Hence the hysteric flow of significations is the flow of significations where the subject associates events in its context to the powerful agency of the Other.

For example, not only Maya did signify the People as a transcendental sexuated Other, but she also developed flows of significations that associated events within the revolution to the agency of People as a sexuated transcendental Other. For instance, she associated the success of a famous demonstration known as the 'Mohamed Mahmoud revolt' to the agency of the People as Other (Interview M2).

Hence, there are two layers of significations which ignorance analysis is interested in: one is the signification of different types of Others, which was outlined in the previous section, and the second, the flows of significations that relate the subject to these signified Others. In Maya's case the first layer of ignorance analysis identified her signification of 'People' as a transcendental sexuated Other, and the second layer of ignorance analysis identified a hysteric flow of signification towards People in her speech. Whereas in Sawsan's case there was an absence of any hysteric flow of significations towards People, which she signified as non-transcendental sexuated Other.

The use of the term hysteric in naming this type of flow of signification is intentional; it links this particular flow of significations to the Lacanian hysteric mode of subjectivity. This refers to a psychical dynamic in which the subject ultimately aims to offer itself as an object of desire for Others with powerful agencies (Gessert, 2014; Fink, 1999). Hence the name suggests that the hysteric flow of significations is a flow of significations that is derived (at least partially) by the hysteric psyche dynamic; a largely unconscious dynamic. However, ignorance analysis does not aim to identify unconscious dynamics leading to a particular flow of significations within a participant's speech; I believe this would be beyond the scope of social research and be better left to therapy rooms. Although ignorance analysis draws theoretically from the Freudian/Lacanian psychodynamics' ontology, empirically it is limited to identifying different types of flows of significations within participants' speech. It makes no attempt to identify the unconscious dynamics that are at play in the production of the participant's speech.

In this section I outlined the hysteric flow of significations as it appeared in my participants' speech, and the theoretical background that informs the identification of such a flow of significations. Now I move on to outline two more flows of significations that I identified within the ignorance analysis of my participants' speech.

## II. *The erotic flow of significations*

The second type of flow of significations associated to the Other that is identified in ignorance analysis is the erotic flow of signification. In identifying this flow I have used another Lacanian concept related to the big Other: the Other is always Lacking (Žižek, 1989). Although it is essential for the subject to endow the Other with a powerful agency, as discussed in the hysteric flow, it is also essential to signify the Other as Lacking. There are two different and seemingly opposing significations related to the Other: Lack and Powerful agency of the Other. These two significations have the potential to negate each other. That is, if too much lack is signified it may negate the powerful agency of the Other, and if too much powerful agency is signified it may negate the possibility of signifying lack in the Other. Hence, to maintain both significations in relation to the Other, the subject is pushed to develop a discursive strategy to strike a delicate balance to maintain both significations in relation to Others. I have identified a type of flow of significations that signifies the lack in the Other without contradicting its powerful agency and called it the erotic flow of significations. In chapter three I identified the erotic flow of significations to be those flows that condition the deployment of the agency of the bigger Others on specific performances at the levels of the big Others. I also identified erotic flows of significations to be those that condition the agency of big Others on specific performances at small others (subjects) level. Hence the erotic flow of significations achieves two aims: it signifies the lack in the Other without negating its powerful agency, *and* it opens a symbolic space for the subject's agency within the agency of the Other.

A good example of this flow of signification was outlined in Maya's case. She developed a hysteric flow of significations that associated the successes in the revolution to the People's (Other's) powerful agency; yet at the same time she developed an erotic flow of significations where the People's agency was conditioned on the Public having critical awareness, a condition that was then transferred to the performance of organizations and groups within the People, like the human rights organization she worked in. These groups had to do their work, i.e., propagating critical awareness among the masses, in order for the People's powerful agency to be deployed. Furthermore, Maya conditioned the agency of the human



rights organization on the performance of herself and her colleagues within the organization. They had to do their work properly, i.e., in a chain of causality: the human rights workers needed to gain critical awareness and learn how to propagate it properly in order for the organization to be effective in propagating awareness among the masses; this would lead to the People's powerful agency being developed and deployed to change the conditions of everyone, as in the revolution. This flow of significations is a good example of the erotic flow of significations, which simultaneously identifies the lack in the Other and immediately displaces it away from the Other and on to different subjects/objects. In this dynamic some aspects of the work of small others and certain objects within the context of the subject gain high erotic value as they temporarily take the place of the Other.

Like the hysteric flow of significations, there are Lacanian psychodynamics that inform the identification of such flows of signification, and they may be associated with the production of the erotic flow of significations; for example, the repression and/or disavowal of the Other's Lack. However, as mentioned before, and despite such identifications being derived from a theoretical perspective about unconscious dynamics, ignorance analysis does not aim to identify the psychical dynamics driving a particular flow of significations in a participant's speech, it focuses only on the identification of flows of significations within the participants' speech associated to different significations of Others.

### *III. The obsessive flow of significations*

The third flow associated with the Other is the obsessive flow of significations. In identifying the obsessive flow of significations in ignorance analysis I used a third Lacanian concept: the subject of the Lacking Other is also Lacking (Žižek, 1989; Fink, 1999). This concept is linked to the obsessive structure within Lacanian dynamics of the psyche (Fink, 1999). But again, ignorance analysis examines the flow of significations in participants' speech rather than the psychodynamics at play in the production of that speech. Hence, I identified the obsessive flow of significations as the flow of significations where the subject associated its own agency or lack of agency to an object or a small other. Unlike the two previous flows of significations, this flow of signification is indirectly linked to the Other. A good

example of this is outlined in the case of Sawsan: her obsessive flow towards studying in the west was signified in relation to her attempt to fill her lack so that she might become an object of desire to the western People (signified as a non-transcendental empowering Other).

These three flows of significations do not function independently of each other. On the contrary the three flows function at the same symbolic space associating the subject to the Others in their context. They may complement each other to develop a symbolic space where the subject's agency can be rendered possible, or they may contradict each other and shrink the symbolic space where the subject's agency might be rendered possible. Diagram 4 (below) captures this relation between the three flows:

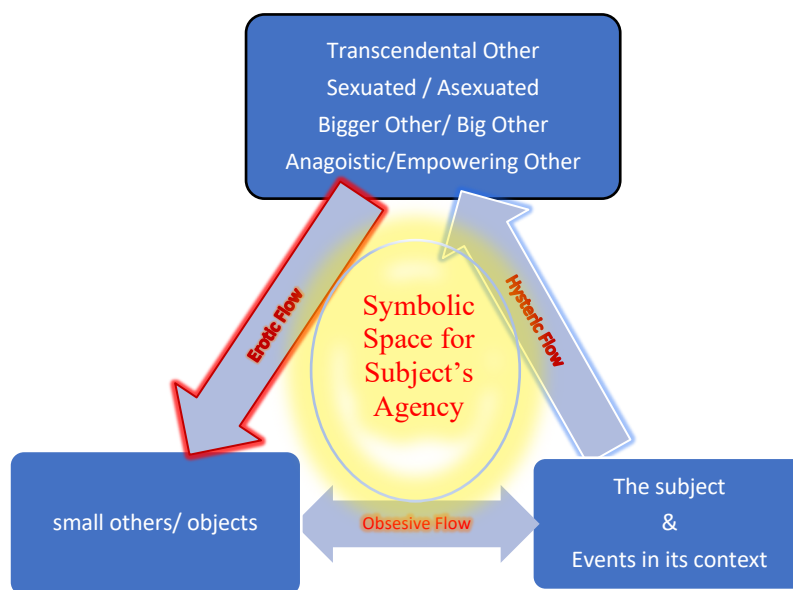


Diagram 4. Ignorance Analysis

To recap, diagram 4 (above) shows the two layers of significations that ignorance analysis identified within the speech of participants. The first layer was the significations of different types of Others, and the second layer identified the flows of signification relating the subject to these Others. Ignorance analysis then looks at how these identified significations are interlinked to enlarge (or shrink) the symbolic

space in which the subject can render its political agency possible. The application of this analytical tool to the three cases enabled my investigation to reveal important nuances in understanding the reproduction of political agency in a politically traumatic context. In the next section I go on to outline key conclusions that this investigation reached regarding the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts.

## **2- Conditions for the Reproduction of Political Agency in a Traumatic Context**

The three participants discussed in this thesis all lived through three different socio-political contexts in ten years during their adult lives. Let me briefly recall and name these three phases of the Egyptian political upheavals. The first phase was the last few years of Mubarak's rule during which the government allowed non-governmental organizations to play a wider role in the development of local communities (Abdelrahman,2014; De Smet,2015). During this phase, political activists with varying interests found different opportunities to engage in developing their local communities to different degrees and with varying degrees of engagement. This phase provided a socio-political context that was conducive to the development of political agency for those who desired to engage in developing local communities. For these reasons I called this phase of the Egyptian upheavals 'the politically developing phase'.

The second phase of the upheavals was the few years following the 2011 uprising and the successful ousting of Mubarak. This was a time of ecstasy for political activists; throughout the country they were hailed as heroes of Egypt. I call this second phase, 'the politically actualizing phase'. Then finally came the third and current phase which is – as already outlined – the politically traumatic context. This final phase began after the military coup when the military returned to rule the country with measures more oppressive than those of the Mubarak era. The discussion of the three cases revealed that the conditions for the reproduction of political agency was different in these three different phases, where my participants had to deal with different socio-political context in each phase. In the following I

summarize the conditions of the reproduction of political agency as it was revealed in relation to these different socio-political phases/contexts.

In Sawzan's and Yasser's cases, I have discussed how, during the politically actualizing phase, they successfully developed their political agency relying on a hysteric flow of significations towards the Egyptian People which they both signified as a non-transcendental Other. During the politically actualizing phase there was strong popular support for freedom, democracy, and active citizenship. This was a big change in Egypt after seventy years of military dictatorships and it was widely seen as a big achievement for the Egyptian People. Hence, for Yasser and Sawzan, it was easy to associate these big achievements in their context to the agency of the Egyptian People. Their cases therefore show that, in a socio-political condition such as this, it is possible to create a strong hysteric flow of significations towards a non-transcendental Other.

Yasser and Sawzan also had another symbolic development during the politically actualization phase. I have discussed how, during this phase of the upheavals, both signified a Lack in the discourse of the Egyptian Muslims' God. Signifying the Lack in the religious discourse is akin to signifying the Lack in the Egyptian Muslim God as a transcendental Other. This signification of Lack hindered their abilities to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards the Egyptian Muslim God as a transcendental Other. However, missing a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other did not constitute a problem in maintaining their political agency in the politically actualizing phase, because there was an alternative strong hysteric flow of significations towards the Egyptian People as non-transcendent Other. But when the socio-political context changed the conditions for the reproduction of political agency also changed.

Both cases demonstrated that, in the traumatic context, developing a hysteric flow of significations towards a non-transcendental was absent. This might be understandable because the hysteric flow towards a non-transcendental Other is developed by associating local events to the agency of the local Other and, in a traumatic context, positive local events that might be associated to the agency of the non-transcendental Other are rare. In this way, the hysteric flow of significations

towards the non-transcendental (local) Other is disrupted in a politically traumatic context. For Yasser and Sawsan this seemed to constitute a serious problem in the reproduction of their political agency in the traumatic context, because in the previous, politically actualizing phase, they had already signified the Lack in the Egyptian Muslims God, so they had already compromised their ability to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards the Egyptian Muslims God. Their speech therefore reflected a struggle to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards God as a transcendental Other.

Let me highlight a conclusion here.

Conclusion one:

The reproduction of political agency in a politically actualizing context may rely on a hysteric flow of significations towards non-transcendental Others. However, in traumatic contexts, the hysteric flows of significations towards non-transcendental Others can be suspended, hence in traumatic contexts the reproduction of political agency cannot rely on a hysteric flow of significations towards non-transcendental Others.

Maya's case provided several important contrasts to Sawsan's and Yasser's. The first difference was that Maya signified the Egyptian People as a transcendental Other. To do this she drew on a Marxist discursive strategy that showed how one might discursively signify People as a transcendental Other, i.e., an Other with agency beyond local / national geo-political contexts. Hence, when the socio-political context in Egypt became politically traumatic, Maya was still able to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards the Egyptian People despite the scarcity of local events she could associate to the agency of the Egyptian People as Other. When People is signified as a transcendental Other, events beyond the local context may be associated to People, so when the local context offers no successful events to associate to the agency of People, events in the global context may be associated to People allowing a hysteric flow of significations to develop even when the local context is politically traumatic.

In chapter seven I showed how Maya was able to utilize another Marxist discursive strategy to signify the state as an antagonistic Other and therefore to reproduce her political agency in the traumatic context. Maya's speech showed compound layers of significations associated to People as transcendental sexuated *Bigger* Other. Within People Maya signified the state as a masculine antagonistic *big* Other which belonged to the People. I discussed how Maya drew this signification from a brilliant Marxist discursive strategy which sexuated the People and signified rivalry between multiple Masculine Others. Such significations further enabled Maya to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards People despite the politically traumatic context she was living in.

There was another symbolic advantage that appeared in Maya's speech, and that was particularly helpful in her reproduction of political agency in the traumatic context. Maya had a prolonged experience of school bullying that began when she was very young. As discussed in her case, one of the discursive techniques Maya had used to successfully overcome that bullying context was the development of a strong hysteric relation towards the Egyptian-Muslims' God and Maya seemed to have hung on to this hysteric relation throughout the different phases of the Egyptian political upheavals. During the Political actualizing phase Maya reported how she was pressured by her peers and the overall political situation to forfeit her hysteric relation to the Egyptian Muslims God. However, Maya showed how she used the religious discursive field to be able to maintain her hysteric relation to the Egyptian-Muslims' God. Hence, when the traumatic context emerged, Maya had already maintained the significations of two transcendental Others: People and God within her symbolic order. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, she also had a rich reservoir of discursive techniques drawn from the Marxist discourse and the Sufi discourse she was highly exposed to. Hence, when the traumatic context evolved, she was able to draw on those rich discursive techniques to develop a hysteric flow of significations toward transcendental others and successfully reproduce her political agency.

Contrasting Maya's case to Sawsan and Yasser cases, lead to the following conclusion.

### Conclusion two

When reproducing political agency in traumatic contexts, the development of hysteric flows of significations towards a transcendental Other(s) facilitate the process while a lack of hysteric flow constitutes an obstacle in the process.

This research goes a step further and shows some of the conditions that facilitate the production of a hysteric flow of significations towards transcendental Others in politically traumatic contexts. The next section highlights conclusions in this regard.

### **The Hysteric flow and the fragility of Ignorance**

The Egyptian context gives this study a special perspective. In a short space of time my participants had to respond to three different socio-political processes and their contexts (outlined above): the developing political context, the actualizing political context, and the politically traumatic context. The fast changes between these socio-political contexts revealed important conditions for the reproduction of a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other.

During the politically actualizing phase of the Egyptian upheavals Yasser and Sawsan used the empowering socio-political conditions to develop their inherited Egyptian ignorance. As discussed in both cases, during this phase, they signified Lack in the Egyptian Muslims' God while both repressed the Lack in People as a non-transcendental Other. As already discussed, although this symbolic position enriched their political agency in the politically actualized context, this choice of discursive strategy left them vulnerable when the context abruptly changed and became politically traumatic. Their symbolic order had only God signified as a transcendental Other, and both had associated a signification of Lack into the discourse of God. Hence, when the politically traumatic context ensued, they had trouble developing a hysteric flow of significations towards God, as a transcendental Other.

Let us recall here Žižek's characterization of the Other as a structural necessity and an empty signifier (1989, 1999). As an empty signifier, the Other is a very fragile discursive structure. Hence, the flows of significations tied to the other/empty signifier need to be carefully managed to protect it from damage. Anthropologist, Becker (1997) has shown that human cultures throughout history have developed their own symbolic orders and developed different ways of defending their symbolic orders, by, for example, positing social prohibitions over tabooed topics. The Other is an essential pillar of the symbolic order, its fragility means it requires vigilant protection. In my investigation, the rapid swing from a politically actualized context to a politically traumatic context constituted a risk to Yasser and Sawsan's symbolic orders. The political actualization context seduced them into risking signifying Lack in God's discourse before the fast switch to a politically traumatic context left them with insufficient time to develop their traditional Egyptian ignorance, specifically their significations and relations to transcendental Others. This was why, when Yasser and Sawsan found themselves faced with a politically traumatic context, they needed to recover their association to transcendental Others before they could reproduce their agency in the new traumatic context. However, the recovery of a previous signification of a transcendental Other proved to be very difficult process. Sawsan's speech indicated that she realized the difficulty of developing a hysteric state with a transcendental Other that she had already directly signified as Lacking in its discourse. For this reason, she chose to find a way to leave the Egyptian context all together. Yasser also showed that he recognized a need to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other, like the Egyptian-Muslims God, and he also recognized that would not be able to do this through the discourse of the Other, i.e., through the religious discourse, as he had previously signified its Lack. He therefore chose an alternative route to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards God as a transcendental Other, a route that did not depend on the discourse of the Other. Yasser opted to fall in Love with a religious woman in the hope that, through this hysteric love-relation, he would be able to develop a hysteric flow of significations towards God as a transcendental Other. Both cases showed an important characteristic of ignorance, that is: once the subject directly signifies Lack in an Other, it is very difficult to re-establish a hysteric flow of significations towards this Other. These two cases show the fragility



of the Other as a discursive structure; all it took to lose the structural functionality of the Other was to directly signify its Lack.

It is important here to recall Lacan's distinction between the Lack with a capital L and the lack with a small l. The Lack (with a capital L) is a Lack that is constitutive of the Other, i.e., Lack reveals the constitution of the Other as an empty signifier, as an imposition of the subject, as an imposed cause for its existence as a subject with agency. However, lack (with a small l), is a lack in the Other that does not reveal the constitution of the Other as an empty signifier (Žižek, 1989; Fink, 2004). Repression and disavowing are psychological dynamics that transform the potential significations of Lack into a signification of lack (Fink, 1999). An example of this can be found in the case of Maya: when she signified People with the need of awareness, this was a signification of lack (with a small l). Identifying a small lack (i.e., People need awareness) repressed any thought of the capital Lack in People, that is: it repressed the thought of People as an empty signifier without any political agency. Hence the need for awareness is a lack that represses the thought of People as an empty signifier without any political agency. In this way, the signification of small lack actually maintains the functionality of the Other in the subject's ignorance and its role in the reproduction of the subject's agency; while at the same time, the signification of small lack protects the Other by repressing the significations of the debilitating capital Lack in the Other.

Maya's discursive strategy shows how she further transferred this signification of (small) lack from the level of bigger Other to the level of big Others then to small others; that is, lack was transferred from the People to the human rights organizations to the actions of herself and her colleagues working in these organizations. As discussed in the development of an erotic flow of significations, this erotic flow of significations repressed (or disavowed) the Lack while maintaining a small lack and it further transferred it to small others and objects within the subject level. Hence the fulfilment of the Other's lack becomes conditioned by the actions of small others — the subject and its peers. The erotic flow of significations is an example of a discursive strategy that protects the fragility of the significations of Others while creating a symbolic space for the subject to develop its agency based on the agency of the Other.

In contrast to Maya's speech, both Yasser's and Sawsan's speech lacked an erotic flow of significations associated to Others, or any similar discursive strategy that would have protected the fragility of the significations of Other. Yasser and Sawsan's cases showed that once the subject associates a Lack directly to an Other (without any repression that would transform the Lack into lack) it become very hard to re-develop any hysteric flow towards that Other. This also explains Maya's laborious efforts to find a discursive strategy that repressed the Lack in the Egyptian-Muslims' God. In her case, I discussed how a discursive strategy like this was one of the factors that helped her in the reproduction of her political agency in the current traumatic context. This brings us to a summative premise about the condition for the reproduction of a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other and a conclusion about the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts:

#### Premise

Since the Other is a fragile discursive necessity and it needs to be discursively defended, the reproduction of political agency that is based on a particular Other requires the subject to develop a flow of significations that represses or disavows potential significations of Lack in that Other.

#### Conclusion three

The erotic flow of significations is an example of a discursive strategy that allows the subject to repress or disavow significations of Lack in the Other while maintaining a signification of lack. The erotic flow of significations provides the subject with two discursive advantages: it enables the subject to develop and maintain a hysteric flow of significations (by repressing/disavowing Lack), and it provides the subject with a signification of differed-lack which complements the hysteric flow of significations in creating a symbolic space for the subject to reproduce its political agency based on the agency of the Other over the traumatic context (as in Diagram 4, above).

This conclusion indicates an important limitation to my research. My investigation did not fully examine the role the repression or disavowal of Lack played in binding both the erotic and the hysteric flows of significations. In other words, I did not

examine the intra-dynamics between the development of the hysteric and the erotic flows. Examining the role of repressing and disavowing Lack may reveal how both flows can contradict or complement each other to develop smaller or larger symbolic spaces for the subject to reproduce its agency, as suggested by diagram 4, above.

There is a final conclusion to be drawn from this investigation. The empirical and the theoretical discussions so far indicate an interdependent relation between the ignorance of the individual subject and the ignorance of the local community where the subject lives. This interdependency is indicated in the contrast between the case of Maya and the cases of Yasser and Sawsan. Maya's discursive strategy, throughout the three phases of the Egyptian socio-political upheaval seemed to retain a degree of coherence between her ignorance and the ignorance of the wider Egyptian community she lived in. Let me recall some points from the cases and the theory discussed so far to build a conclusion about the relation between subject ignorance and community ignorance.

Ignorance as discussed in this thesis is a type of a discourse of the Other, it is significations of the Other, about the Other, towards the Other, from the Other, etc. In chapters four and eight, I discussed Žižek's (2003) and Dolar's (1993) concepts of belief in the Other, they showed that belief is not produced in a direct relation between the subject and the Other; rather, it is mediated by a third and is produced through a chain of deferrals of meaning where there is a third party assumed to believe within a chain of people who claim the belief in the Other through that a continuously differed belief of a third party. In other words, the development of a hysteric state towards an Other needs a chain of believers, a community (or a group) that exhibits a social performance organized around the discourse of that Other, for example: prayers in a church or mosque, a political party's activity, structured learning in an institution, etc. Hence, although the discourse of the Other is necessary for a hysteric state, is not sufficient on its own to reach a hysteric state towards the Other (i.e., not enough to believe). According to Žižek, the subject needs to cultivate this discourse of ignorance in a group performance in order to develop a hysteric state towards the Other. Similarly, the subject's production of hysteric flows of significations needs to be cultivated in a social performance of a

hysteric group or community. This reveals one side of the relation between the subject's ignorance and the community's ignorance, but there is also a flip side to this idea. I also discussed Zizek's (1989,1996,2002b) discussion about the role of the Other in facilitating the interaction between subjects in society. The abyss of a neighbour (as a small other) is mediated through the discourse of the Other (like the Christian injunction love thy neighbour). It is as if, for smooth social functioning, the community needs the subject to believe in the Other. Hence the interdependency: the subject needs the community to develop its own belief in the Other and the community needs the subject's belief in the Other for its smooth social functioning. The point here can be stated as: the subject needs a hysteric relation to the Other that the community is organized around to be able to function in that community and develop its political agency within this community.

Let me recall a few empirical incidents in the cases discussed to highlight this relation. In Yasser's case I discussed how he needed a social space to cultivate his ignorance about the Egyptian Muslims' God. However due to his previous significations of Lack in the discourse of God, he expressed a reluctance to participate in any group practices based on a religious discourse. I also discussed how this reluctance impaired his ability to develop a hysteric state, hence a hysteric flow of significations towards the transcendental Other. This was one factor contributing to his choice of an alternative route (not based on religious discourse) to develop his hysteric relations towards the transcendental (through falling in love with a religious woman). In the case of Sawsan, she saw herself as unable to live in Egyptian society without her father's influence; a perception of personal inability that was followed by the military coup. I discussed how this expression of her inability was quite different to her description of herself before the military coup where, without relying on her father's position, she was engaged in community development in Egypt. Sawsan's perception of her subject's lack may be linked to one empirical and one theoretical point.

First, empirically, Sawsan's case revealed how she had a discourse of the Other that was not-compatible with the general Egyptian-Muslims' discourse of the Other. Recalling that, during the politically actualizing context, Sawsan had signified Lack in the discourse of the Egyptian-Muslims' God which put her ignorance structure in

odds with the wider Egyptian-Muslim community who in general rejected any significations of Lack in the discourse of its God. Second, theoretically, I have discussed the fragility of the Other as a discursive structure and its need for protection against significations of Lack. This protection is not only performed by individuals, but Becker (1997) also showed how taboos are a form of discursive protection against significations of Lack in the Other. The intensity and scope of the social prohibitions that aim to protect the fragility of the Other varies depending on the socio-political context. In traumatic contexts, when the community at large mostly needs transcendental Others to reproduce their subjects' agencies, prohibitions that aim to protect the cultural transcendental Other and its discourse tend to be highly enforced by the community members themselves. Whereas in politically actualized contexts (like the three years following the successful revolution in Egypt) these social prohibitions tend to be least enforced. These two points may explain Sawsan's emerging feeling of inability to live in Egypt without her father's influence.

Sawsan's and Yasser's cases reveal a fundamental point regarding the reproduction of ignorance and its relation to political agency. That is, if the subject feels unable to function socially within a particular community – perhaps due to the incompatibility of the subject's own ignorance structure and the community ignorance's structure, and the community's own prohibitions to protect its ignorance in traumatic context – then there will not be sufficient social space for that subject to develop political agency within the community living in the traumatic context.

This brings us to another premise and a final conclusion.

### Premise

The development of a hysteric flow of significations towards a transcendental Other is best cultivated within the hysteric performance of a group or a community towards the transcendental Other.

### Conclusion four

In politically traumatic contexts, the reproduction of political agency within a particular community is facilitated by the subject's development of a hysteric flows of significations towards transcendental Others that are grounded in, or at least compatible with, the ignorance structure of that community.

The four conclusions outlined above establish a particular link between the reproduction of political agency in traumatic contexts and the hysteric flows of significations towards a transcendental Other. They also further highlight key psychosocial conditions for developing hysteric flows of significations to transcendental Others which enable the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

In conclusion, this research highlighted ignorance as a human capacity that is important to consider in examining how political agency may be restored in traumatic conditions. This research also outlined ignorance analysis as one possible method to examine the production of ignorance and how it may relate to the reproduction of political agency in politically traumatic contexts. Finally, by applying ignorance analysis on the three cases presented in this thesis, I have identified four particular discursive conditions for the re-production of political agency in politically traumatic contexts.

**Appendix A**  
**UCL Ethics Application and Approval**



## Ethics Application Form: Student Research

All research activity conducted under the auspices of the Institute by staff, students or visitors, where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants are required to gain ethical approval before starting. *This includes preliminary and pilot studies.* Please answer all relevant questions responses in terms that can be understood by a lay person and note your form may be returned if incomplete.

For further support and guidance please see accompanying guidelines and the Ethics Review Procedures for Student Research <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentethics/> or contact your supervisor or [researchethics@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ioe.ac.uk).

**Before completing this form you will need to discuss your proposal fully with your supervisor(s).**

**Please attach all supporting documents and letters.**

*For all Psychology students, this form should be completed with reference to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics and Code of Ethics and Conduct.*

### Section 1 Project details

a.	Project title	An account of Lack and the desire for change among the Egyptian youth	
b.	Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678)	Mohamed Elshirazy, ELS 13115832	
c.	Supervisor/Personal Tutor	Claudia Lapping and Jenny Parkes	
d.	Department	Culture Communication and Media	
e.	Course category (Tick one)	PhD/MPhil	EdD
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		MRes	DEdPsy
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		MTeach	MA/MSc
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	ITE		
	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Diploma (state which)		
	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Other (state which)		
	<input type="checkbox"/>		
f.	Course/module title		



g.	<b>If applicable</b> , state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.	N/A
h.	Intended research start date	
i.	Intended research end date	
j.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in <i>If research to be conducted abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> and submit a completed travel insurance form to Serena Ezra (<a href="mailto:s.ezra@ucl.ac.uk">s.ezra@ucl.ac.uk</a>) in UCL Finance (see guidelines). This form can be found here (you will need your UCL login details available): <a href="https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/secure/fin_acc/insurance.htm">https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/secure/fin_acc/insurance.htm</a></i>	
k.	Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	External Committee Name:
	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ⇒ <i>go to Section 2</i>	Date of Approval:
<b>If yes:</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.</li> <li>– Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Note:</b> Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the <a href="#">National Research Ethics Service</a> (NRES) or <a href="#">Social Care Research Ethics Committee</a> (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.</p>		

## Section 2 Project summary

### Research methods (tick all that apply)

Please attach questionnaires, visual methods and schedules for interviews (even in draft form).

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interviews<br><input type="checkbox"/> Focus groups<br><input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaires<br><input type="checkbox"/> Action research<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Observation<br><input type="checkbox"/> Literature review | <input type="checkbox"/> Controlled trial/other intervention study<br><input type="checkbox"/> Use of personal records<br><input type="checkbox"/> Systematic review ⇒ <i>if only method used go to Section 5.</i><br><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary data analysis ⇒ <i>if secondary analysis used go to Section 6.</i><br><input type="checkbox"/> Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups<br><input type="checkbox"/> Other, give details: |
|---|---|

**Please provide an overview of your research.** This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, your method of data collection (e.g., observations, interviews,

questionnaires, etc.) and kind of questions that will be asked, reporting and dissemination (typically 300-500 words).

...

Egypt is going through a unique time. The Arab spring and its aftermath events disrupted the normalized course of development for young Egyptians. Most analysts consider the Arab youth as the key social category leading the uprising of the Arab spring. Murphy (2012) conceptualized the Arab youth as a social category that share two main characteristics; first they share a narrative of exclusion, marginalization and alienation; second the Arab youth share a sense of aspiration for a better life. She also emphasized that the Arab youth cannot be categorized by age or economic conditions.

The Aftermath events constitute serious challenges to youth identity formation (subjugation) process. Initially the Arab spring posed a strong and critical re-evaluation of the authority of state, the limits of individual freedom and human rights; then the critical spirit extended to question the authority of parents, family, church, mosque, and god. In a Lacanian Terminology, these are conceptualized as symbolic Other(s); and from this perspective the current Egyptian youth discourse can be understood as a discourse dominated by questioning the lack and the power of symbolic Others(s) in their lives. Lacan Looks at the relation to those symbolic Other(s) as an essential element in formulating one's own identity (subjectivity). Moreover he sees the psychological dynamics of an individual as formulated by the way she deals with the lack of the symbolic Other(s) in her life.

Beneath the apparent political/economical struggle of the Arab spring there are critical psychosocial dynamics taking place. The youth struggle to shape a new identity (subjectivity) amidst unsettled social norms is one of them. Grounding my research in Lacanian framework and the larger Egyptian youth struggle, my research is investigating the psychosocial dynamics of the Egyptian youth in the aftermath of the Arab spring.

The research is exploring two questions:

-How do Egyptian youth maintain their relations to symbolic Others in moments of Lack?

-How do different maintenance dynamics affect their desire for change?

I use maintenance dynamics here to refer to the following psychodynamic processes: 1- attachment to a Fantasy 2- investing one self in a discourse 3- foreclosure 4- disavowal 5- repression.

In my research I will investigate how these psychodynamic processes affect the desire of participants in the study to make change in their lives or their environment.

### **Overview of Method:**

The empirical part of my research will consist of interviews with six Egyptian youth. Each will be interviewed six times over six weeks. In addition I will observe their current social media interaction, and past interaction during key events, such as the uprising of 2011, the referendum in 2012, parliament and presidential elections, etc.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I will divide the data collection process into two stages: the early stage, and the final stage. In the early stage I will interview two participants with the aim of developing and refining my methodology. I will investigate the following questions in addition to my main research questions:

- Is this design safe enough to explore such sensitive issues with participants? And how can it be improved to provide a safer and more supportive environment for the participants?

-Will this design produce the type of data that allows me to investigate the participant's desires, fantasies, experience of lack, and relation to symbolic Others? And how can it be improved to produce richer data for the purpose of my investigation?

- How useful it is to interrogate the link between the participant's individual fantasy and a shared social fantasy within the public discourse?

I will incorporate the insights of the early stage to improve my interviewing techniques for the final stage. If the early stage investigation results in a major change in the research design I will submit a new ethical approval application before proceeding to the final stage.

### **Sampling**

My sample will consist of six Egyptians aged between 20 and 35 who can be characterized by Murphy's above description of Arab youth. I will invite participants from the Egyptian youth living in the UK. Based in Leicester, I have had the opportunity to get to know several groups of Egyptian youth living in UK. One group is formed through the University library café, and the students union Starbucks. These are mostly postgraduate students on government scholarships, and their partners; their friends from other universities sometimes join as well. Intersecting with this group is a larger group that meet in the events organised by Arab students and the Islamic Society of the university of Leicester and De Montfort university. In addition the local Mosques in Leicester organised Ramadan social events where I got to know a large group of Egyptian Educators who came to train in the UK for three months. They informed me that this training programme will continue in Leicester University in the next academic year; where three groups of Egyptian teachers will come for training. Each group is about 30, and each will spend one term in Leicester. Outside the university there are also two cafes/restaurants that are popular hangouts for Egyptian youth who are settled in the UK. These groups will constitute the main sites from which I will recruit participants.

I will choose my participants in an ongoing process, to ensure that they have a minimum contact with each other, and the least regular contact with me (outside the project). The main selection criterion is that candidates are characterized by Murphy's above definition of Arab youth; other criteria are not relevant as my research investigates the psychodynamics of the youth in relation to the Egyptian social context.

### **Research Design**

Following are the six research steps I am planning to do with participants.

#### 1-The introductory meeting

In this meeting I will introduce my research project, what the interviews may involve, the participant's rights in this process. I will explain the risks and sensitivities of the research

and ask participants to sign a consent form. I will give them time to discuss any issue related to the research process or the access to their social media material.

## 2- The Biographic narrative interview

In this session I will ask participants one general open question to elicit their life story, then after the participant fully finishes their narration I will then ask “internal narrative questions” (Breckner and Rup, 2002) to explore elements of the life story that the participant has mentioned. The follow up questions are meant to only evoke further narration and support the recollection process. This type of method does not assume any advance knowledge of categories about the research participant and topic; it allows for new and complex categories to emerge from the participants’ narratives.

## 3- Free association interview

The second interview session will be a week after the first, and I will use the free association narrative interview developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). In this session I will pick up on some of the salient moments that emerge from the first interview regarding the participant’s way of dealing with lack. This session will also pick up on salient personal events that may appear on their past social media interactions. I will ask open questions to elicit participant narratives about moments of financial pressure, social pressure, or institutional pressure. I will also ask about stories of idealized others, those whom successfully cope with those types of pressures, and idealized moments in the participant’s own biography.

## 4- Reflections on pieces of public discourse

Based on the previous two interviews and the observation of the participant’s past social media interaction, I will identify public discourse material to present to participants to reflect on. I will look for videos, songs, or texts available in the public domain that seem to be supporting or contradicting the participant’s narrative. I will then use their reflection as a catalyst for further free associations.

In this session I will use Lapping (2011) method where she produced a free association interview facilitated by a reflection around a text to probe into the unconscious dynamics of participants.

#### 5- Free association interview about social and political change

This will be the forth and the final main interview; it will be a free association narrative interview about the main political incidents that took place in the last three years in Egypt. The narrative will be elicited around a number of open questions such as the following: If you could write a story (selected from a choice of main events from last three years) what would the story say? Can you tell me about personal incidents or conversations that you had around each of the key moments in the last three years? What kinds of stories/scenarios about the future of Egypt in your opinion depict the future you anticipate? and What kind of change would you like to see happening in other people, politics, family, yourself?

#### 6- Optional one or two sessions to close the process

At a later stage which will be agreed upon with each participant, I will offer participants the option to have one or two extra sessions to share some of the insights that emerges from the past four interviews. In those sessions I will share with the participant some of my initial analysis and invite him/her to share any insights that emerge during the interviews especially around the method and the analysis.

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#### References:

- Breckner, R. and Rupp, S. (2002) 'Discovering biographies in changing social worlds: the biographical-interpretive method', in Chamberlayne, P., Rustin, M., & Wengraf, T. (2002). *Biography and social exclusion in Europe*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.

Lapping, C. (2011). *Psychoanalysis in social research: Shifting theories and reframing concepts*. London: Routledge.

Murphy, E.C.(2012) ‘ Problematizing Arab Youth: Generational Narrative of Systematic Failure’, *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(1): 5-22

### Section 3 Participants

Please answer the following questions giving full details where necessary. Text boxes will expand for your responses.

a. Will your research involve human participants? Yes  No  ⇒ go to Section 4

b. Who are the participants (i.e. what sorts of people will be involved)? Tick all that apply.

Early years/pre-school

Ages 5-11

Ages 12-16

Young people aged 17-18

Unknown – specify below

Adults *please specify below*

Other – specify below

**NB:** Ensure that you check the **guidelines** (Section 1) carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES).

Egyptian youth in UK

c. If participants are under the responsibility of others (such as parents, teachers or medical staff) how do you intend to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?

**(Please attach approach letters or details of permission procedures – see Section 9 Attachments.)**

d. How will participants be recruited (identified and approached)?

Through personal contacts

e. Describe the process you will use to inform participants about what you are doing.

I will have an introductory meeting with each and a consent form, which will have a description of the project.

f. How will you obtain the consent of participants? Will this be written? How will it be made clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any time?

*See the guidelines for information on opt-in and opt-out procedures. Please note that the method of consent should be appropriate to the research and fully explained.*

	Participant will discuss (negotiate) and sign a consent form in the introductory meeting. In addition they will be reminded before the beginning of each meeting of their right to withdraw at any time.
g.	<p><b>Studies involving questionnaires:</b> Will participants be given the option of omitting questions they do not wish to answer?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	If <b>NO</b> please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
h.	<p><b>Studies involving observation:</b> Confirm whether participants will be asked for their informed consent to be observed.</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	If <b>NO</b> read the guidelines (Ethical Issues section) and explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
i.	<p>Might participants experience anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment as a result of your study?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>If <b>yes</b> what steps will you take to explain and minimise this? I will provide two types of support to participants. Both are outlined in section eight</p> <p>If <b>not</b>, explain how you can be sure that no discomfort or embarrassment will arise?</p>
j.	<p>Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants (deception) in any way?</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>
	If <b>YES</b> please provide further details below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
k.	<p>Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?</p> <p>Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
	If <b>NO</b> please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
l.	Will participants be given information about the findings of your study? (This could be a brief summary of your findings in general; it is not the same as an individual debriefing.)



Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
If <b>no</b> , why not?

#### Section 4 Security-sensitive material

Only complete if applicable

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

a.	Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
c.	Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>			

#### Section 5 Systematic review of research

Only complete if applicable

a.	Will you be collecting any new data from participants?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will you be analysing any secondary data?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> *	No <input type="checkbox"/>
* Give further details in <b>Section 8 Ethical Issues</b>			
<i>If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) and if you have answered <b>No</b> to both questions, please go to <b>Section 10 Attachments</b>.</i>			

#### Section 6 Secondary data analysis Complete for all secondary analysis

a.	Name of dataset/s	
b.	Owner of dataset/s	
c.	Are the data in the public domain?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?</i> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No* <input type="checkbox"/>
d.	Are the data anonymised?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>Do you plan to anonymise the data?</i> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No* <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>Do you plan to use individual level data?</i> Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
		<i>Will you be linking data to individuals?</i> Yes* <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

e.	Are the data sensitive ( <a href="#">DPA 1998 definition</a> )?	Yes* <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
f.	Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
g.	<b>If no</b> , was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>
h.	<b>If no</b> , was data collected prior to ethics approval process?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No* <input type="checkbox"/>

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments**.

## Section 7 Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a.	Confirm that all personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA 1998). (See the Guidelines and the Institute's Data Protection & Records Management Policy for more detail.)	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
b.	Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> * No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

\* If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with the DPA 1998 and state what these arrangements are below.

c.	Who will have access to the data and personal information, including advisory/consultation groups and during transcription? My self only
----	--

### During the research

d.	Where will the data be stored? on my laptop and backed in an external hard disk
e.	Will mobile devices such as USB storage and laptops be used? Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> * No <input type="checkbox"/> * If yes, state what mobile devices: Lap top * If yes, will they be encrypted?: No

### After the research

f.	Where will the data be stored? External Hard Disk
g.	How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format? For five years and it will be encrypted
h.	Will data be archived for use by other researchers? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> * No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> * If yes, please provide details.

## Section 8 Ethical issues

Are there particular features of the proposed work which may raise ethical concerns or add to the complexity of ethical decision making? If so, please outline how you will deal with these.

It is important that you demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of your research. You should then demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address. Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply.

*Ethical concerns may include, but not be limited to, the following areas:*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Methods</li> <li>- Sampling</li> <li>- Recruitment</li> <li>- Gatekeepers</li> <li>- Informed consent</li> <li>- Potentially vulnerable participants</li> <li>- Safeguarding/child protection</li> <li>- Sensitive topics</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International research</li> <li>- Risks to participants and/or researchers</li> <li>- Confidentiality/Anonymity</li> <li>- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality</li> <li>- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)</li> <li>- Reporting</li> <li>- Dissemination and use of findings</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

Risks:

Below I will address the possible risks that may occur during my research process

1- Distressed feelings.

Exploring times of pressure, associated fantasies, and relations to symbolic Others has the potential to evoke unsettling feelings. I will inform the participants of such risk at the beginning of my research and I will remind them at the start of each session that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage of the process without giving any reasons. During the sessions I will be observant of participants' emotional responses. I will give them time to express themselves; and if I notice accumulation of stress following a thread of narration I will be extra gentle in exploring this area and if necessary I will make a judgment to delay perusing it for another session, or stop discussing it all together. This obviously will depend on each participant's particular response.

In addition I will provide them with numbers to the university counselling services. In addition to the university counselling services I will provide them with the number for an Egyptian counsellor for participants who may feel the need to talk to someone from the same background. The counsellor, Mahmoud Salem, is a friend of mine and he volunteered to give participants of this research three counselling sessions free of charge. If any participant uses Mahmoud counselling services she/he will be obviously entitled to confidentiality, Mahmoud will not share with me any information participants discuss with him during counselling.

2- Risking personal privacy

The interviews are likely to include sharing some personal information that participants probably will not want shared out side the interview. Participants' sensitivity to this risk

might increase in cases where they are aware that we have common acquaintances. I will make sure that the participants know their right for confidentiality and anonymity and that I will not share any information with anyone they know. In addition, their name will not appear in any documentation of the research and the information they share during the process will not be discussed with any one who might recognize them through their narrative.

### 3- Institutional retribution

In the current political atmosphere in Egypt many people are concerned that they may be punished for expressing their political opinions; students especially may worry about losing their scholarships or negative affects on their career progress. Anonymity here is critical. The participant name will not appear on the transcript or any research document. Also any information or personal details in the transcript that may reveal the identity of the participant will be altered.

### 4- Participants' fantasy projections

Attentively listening to someone may elicit fantasies of intimacy and closeness with some participants. Gender and class differences could also elicit common fantasies or cultural stereotyping. Gender and class projections work both ways that is between the researcher and participants. To manage participant's projection of fantasies into the process, clear boundaries need to be set, a time limit for each interview will be set, I will also avoid any extended discussions of personal or intimate issues outside the interview. If they feel a need to talk more to someone about personal issues raised in the interviews I will refer them to the counselling options discussed in the first point. For participants whom I share a friendship prior to the research I will limit the interaction with them during the research to the interviews, that is to avoid confusing the friendship with the researcher identity.

### 5- My own fantasies

As in the above point, there is always the risk that my own fantasies will be projected on the participant or the data. Self-reflection and keeping a journal of my feelings and thoughts after each session will help interrogate my own desire within the process. More importantly I will use the supervision meetings to discuss my involvement in the research and use the insights of my supervisors to further interrogate the dynamics of my own desire within the research.

### 6. Time

It is important to respect the participants' time by starting and finishing the interviews on the agreed time. However I will also consider the Egyptian culture in handling time; I may need to allow a bit more time before the beginning and after ending the session. As sharp start or ending of sessions may be negatively interpreted among Egyptians.

## Section 9 Further information

Outline any other information you feel relevant to this submission, using a separate sheet or attachments if necessary.

--

### Section 10 Attachments Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached

a.	Information sheets and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research, including approach letters	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
b.	Consent form	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	<b><i>If applicable:</i></b>		
c.	The proposal for the project	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
d.	Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
e.	Full risk assessment	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

### Section 11 Declaration

Yes	No		
I have read, understood and will abide by the following set of guidelines.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
BPS <input type="checkbox"/>	BERA <input type="checkbox"/>	BSA <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other (please state) <input type="checkbox"/>
I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:</b>			
The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.			
Name	Mohamed Elshirazy		
Date	30/6/2015		

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor.

## Notes and references

### Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2009) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*, and (2014) *Code of Human Research Ethics*

or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2011) *Ethical Guidelines*

or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2002) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the Institute of Education <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/ethics/>.

### Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) ). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE. Further information can be found at [http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentInformation/documents/DBS\\_Guidance\\_1415.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/studentInformation/documents/DBS_Guidance_1415.pdf)

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

### Further references

The [www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk) website is very useful for assisting you to think through the ethical issues arising from your project.

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

### Departmental use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, you may refer the application to the Research Ethics and Governance Administrator (via [researchethics@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@ioe.ac.uk)) so that it can be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A Research Ethics Committee Chair, ethics representatives in your department and the research ethics coordinator can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the Research Ethics Committee.

*Also see 'when to pass a student ethics review up to the Research Ethics Committee':*  
<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/policiesProcedures/42253.html>

#### Reviewer 1

Supervisor name

Supervisor comments

Supervisor signature

#### Reviewer 2

Advisory committee/course team member name

John Gray

Advisory committee/course team member comments

I think almost all the relevant ethical issues have been considered. In addition, to guaranteeing anonymity to individuals, I think – given the potential sensitivity of the kind of data that will be generated and the possible negative consequences for informants should they be identified – that the research site (i.e. Leicester) also has to be anonymised.

Advisory committee/course team member signature



#### Decision

Date decision was made		
Decision	Approved	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Referred back to applicant and supervisor	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Referred to REC for review	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Recording</b>	Recorded in the student information system	<input type="checkbox"/>

Once completed and approved, please send this form and associated documents to the relevant programme administrator to record on the student information system and to securely store.

Further guidance on ethical issues can be found on the IOE website at <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/ethics/> and [www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk)



**Appendix B**  
**Participant's Information and Consent Sheet**

## Consent Form

Project Title: The maintenance dynamics of Egyptian youth and the relation to symbolic  
Other(s)  
Researcher: Mohamed Elshirazy  
Supervisors: Claudia Lapping and Jenny Parkes  
Institution: UCL Institute of Education  
Contact details: melshirazy@ioe.ac.uk

### Informed Consent

This form gives you an overview of the project and outlines the interview process that you are asked to participate in. It also highlights the possible risks involved in the process. The purpose of this form is to inform your decision regarding participating in this research. It is important to assess if participation in such research process will be harmful to you in any way. In addition to the information available in this form, the researcher will be happy to answer any questions to assist you in this decision.

The researcher will contact you again in a week time to ask if you will be willing to participate.

### Project Overview

This project investigates how Egyptian youth living in the UK deal with difficult moments in their lives, that is: moments of financial pressure, social pressure, institutional pressure, or personal pressure. The project will explore the psychological dynamics the youth utilize to go through those difficult times. The research also examines the effect of those dynamics on the youth desire to make changes in their lives and/or their environment.

The main research method used is interviews with participants; in addition analysis of participants' interaction on social media may be used if participants allows the researcher access.

### Participation

Participation in this research will involve your consent on the following:

#### 1- Time commitment

The research will involve four main interviews spread over four weeks; each session will take one hour. In addition two optional sessions at a later time to be agreed upon with each participant, those sessions are offered for participants to discuss some of the ideas and insights that emerged during the research process and for the researcher to share his initial analysis with participants.

#### 2- Free association interviews

The interviews will involve you talking about stories from your life. In particular you will be talking about some of the difficult moments you passed by in your life. This will include

talking about your thoughts, feelings, actions, and your perception of the incidents and people that formulate those important moments.

### 3- Recording of the sessions

The sessions will be audio recorded. The recorded material will then be transcribed. You and information related to your identity (your home town, university, etc.) will be anonymous through out the transcript. The audio files will be safely stored until the end of research, during which no one other than the researcher will have access to listen to it.

### 4- Sharing information

The researcher will be the only one who has access to the whole transcript; however, extracts of it may be used in seminars or presentations to the researcher's supervisor and other researchers.

### 5- Data analysis and feedback

In addition to the four main interviews, I will invite you to attend two additional sessions designed for sharing the initial analysis of data with you and getting your feedback on the analysis and the research process. However you may opt not to attend those sessions.

### 6- Social media interaction

It will be very helpful to the research if you give the permission to use the data on your Facebook timeline, twitter account, or other social media. However, this is a supplementary part of the research and you may opt not to give the researcher access to it.

Please note that you will have the right to withdraw from the research process at any stage without giving any reasons. Your consent to the above does not affect your right to withdraw at any time.

## **Risks**

The researcher has identified the following possible risks associated with involving in this research and below he outlines how he will deal with them.

### 1- Emotional distress

Talking about difficult times, and recalling the feelings, thoughts, and incidents related to difficult times may result into a distressing feeling. If you are particularly vulnerable to such emotional distress it may be advisable not to participate in the research. You also have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage if you do not feel comfortable enough to continue with the interviews. In addition the researcher will provide you with details of both the university counselling services and an external free counsellor service to help you deal with difficulties that may rise during the interviews.

### 2- Sensitivity of the information

All information shared during this research will be considered sensitive information. The researcher will make sure that your identity is concealed in this research. You and any information that may identify you will be anonymised throughout the research process and in any related publications or presentations. The researcher will not share any extracts or

information from the interviews with any individual that may identify you through this information.

Finally I think participation in this research may give you a space to reflect about key psycho-social dynamics in your life, and I hope it will be a very enriching experience for you. If you agree on participation in this research please complete and sign the form below. Please feel free to contact the researcher if you need more information or would like to discuss any aspect of the research.

Thank you,  
Mohamed Elshirazy (melshirazy@ioe.ac.uk)

**CONSENT**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. Once you have read the information provided and are happy to continue, please read and sign the following statement.

I consent to the following:

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1. Participation in four interviews   | YES / NO |
| 2. Possible participation in two feedback interviews  | YES / NO |
| 3. Audio recording and transcription of these recordings  | YES / NO |
| 4. Analysis of the interviews by the researcher   | YES / NO |
| 5. Use of anonymised extracts of transcripts or audio data at meetings or seminars with other researchers | YES / NO |
| 6. Use of data on my social media account(s)  | YES / NO |
| 8. I understand that it is possible that the interviews may involve talking about sensitive issues        |          |
| 7. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw at any time.          | YES / NO |

NAME:.....

SIGNATURE:

.....

DATE:

.....

Contact Details / Email Address:

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