

The Sound of the Egyptian Subaltern in 2011 Revolutionary Protest Songs

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“How we might persuade the skeptic, in particular skeptical political scientists, that music matters, that music is politics. Can we show that were it not for music certain things would not happen, certain ideas not conceived, certain grievances not aired, certain injustices not challenged-or left unchallenged.” (Street, 2012: 162). Comprehending Street’s words, it is essential for International Relations (IR) students and scholars to question why we are not introduced to academic works that use music as a source of analysis. Bleiker (2001: 518) underscored that conventional IR’s narrow boundaries legitimized some sources of analysis, such as political speeches and government documents, over others. Through these elitist sources (Grayson, 2015), conventional IR eliminated the politics of representation and political struggles (Bleiker, 2011: 518). This often obliterated the voices of who are subordinated. Correspondingly, Frost (2010: 440) noted that the aesthetic turn emerged as a break from these conventional boundaries and encouraged using non-conventional sources, such as music, to reach what is exterminated. Apprehending to that, Subaltern Studies, within IR, is invested in recovering the unattended subalterns’ voices (Chalcraft, 2008: 376). The subaltern is a group who is subordinated and is at an inferior rank (Spivak, 1988a: 35). Accordingly, in this piece I address in what ways the analysis of music broadens the scope of Subaltern Studies within International Relations.

I argue that the analysis of music broadens its scope in two ways: firstly, by revealing the subaltern’s voice through the inquiry of a non-conventional source, and secondly, through understanding the subaltern, by forging new insights on political events from below. Building up my argument, I divide this piece into 5 sections. Firstly, I examine conventional IR and its narrow boundaries. Secondly, I introduce the aesthetic turn. Thirdly, I present Subaltern Studies within IR. Fourthly, in application of the previous sections, I demonstrate my analysis through the Egyptian January 25th Revolution’s case specifically chosen for two reasons: studies of protests proved to be beneficial for revealing the subaltern’s voice (Cronin, 2008: 2), and Middle East scholars gave little attention to Subaltern Studies (Webber, 1997: 11). Furthermore, I carry primary and secondary analysis by methodologically comparing the contemporary national anthem and two of the most famous protest songs. Finally, I reckon the three limitations to my argument which are: the inability of accessing the voice of the entire subaltern, the possibility of the appropriation of the subaltern’s voice through translation, and the chance of music’s inability of giving the subaltern a voice in other cases.

Conventional International Relations

International Relations (IR), regardless of its various perspectives, endeavors to explain world politics using various tools (Sachleben, 2014: 29). Bleiker (2001: 509) underscored that we have grown accustomed to the discipline’s “conventional” understandings, as it adheres to tools that originate from the search for well-established procedures of inquiry that pertain to reasons and facts. Therefore, this resulted in a narrow understanding of social sciences that managed to dominate much of IR scholarship (Bleiker, 2001: 518). Moore and Shepherd (2010: 299) argued that this is due to the rigid “definitional boundaries” of the legitimate sources of analysis that did not progress much since the beginning of the discipline.

This forged a hierarchy that gave some sources dominance and power over others. Political speeches, government

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documents, and archives are exemplars of these dominant sources (Bleiker, 2001: 518). Therefore, conventional IR perceives people from the parameters of the status quo (Grayson, 2015). This resulted in the erasure of the politics of representation, the location of political struggles (Bleiker, 2001: 518), and suppressed the voices of those who are subordinated.

Apprehending to that, conventional IR insists that popular culture such as music, as another source of analysis, is not really worthy of IR scholarly attention, as it is not deemed to be political (Weldes and Rowley, 2015). IR continues to treat popular culture as a black box of primitivism and irrationalism (Grayson, 2015). Therefore, it is commonly rare to find the mentioning of music in most works of contemporary political theory (Street, 2012: 140). I underscore here how music is considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy in legitimate sources of analysis. As a young IR aspiring scholar, it strikes me that I have barely been introduced to any scholarly work that bridges music with IR. Street (2012: 149) stated that music has been greatly marginalized by the relegation of the writers who represent this non-conventional tradition. The writers who define the modern era such as Hobbes and Marx mostly neglected the subject of music in IR and didn't consider it to be useful to our political accounts (Street, 2012: 141). Finally, Street (2012: 143) underscored that only those who break up from the discipline's conventional boundaries will be able to allow a place for music in IR analysis.

Aesthetic turn

Addressing the aforementioned shortcomings of conventional IR and its narrow boundaries, the aesthetic turn emerged (Moore and Shepherd, 2010: 299). Rather than focusing on reasons and facts, the turn advocates using new sources of analysis that capture emotions and representations to widen the scope of IR (Moore and Shepherd, 2010: 299). Frost (2010: 433) highlighted that it encourages using other interpretive and reflective sources that have been denigrated by the conventional boundaries that mostly dominated IR. Accordingly, I reckon that unlike conventional IR, it recognizes that domains, other than those existing in the elitist accounts, can be political.

Therefore, the turn legitimized unconventional aesthetic sources and forms of popular culture such as music rather than the reliance on government documents and political speeches for instance (Bleiker, 2001: 526). Accordingly, there has been a rise in studying forms of popular culture, such as music, and it has been beneficial to see IR gaining a significant momentum outside its conventional aspects (Weldes and Rowley, 2015). Using forms of popular culture, as a source of analysis, opened the possibility of perceiving things and people away from the "parameters of the status quo" that has dominated conventional IR scholarship (Grayson, 2015).

Furthermore, the turn acknowledges that conventional IR's narrow boundaries erased the politics of representation and the location of political struggles (Bleiker, 2001: 510). Frost (2010: 440) added that it asserts that using unconventional sources of analysis, which capture representations and emotions, can provide access to the histories of exclusion, political struggles, and sites of resistance. Therefore, through the analysis of music, a new truth is experienced that we cannot ever attain in any other way (Frost, 2010: 435). This opens new spaces for expression in order for the voices of the subordinated to be heard (Reeves, 2014: 394). Correspondingly, I hold that analyzing music can recover the voices of the subordinated, and allow us to perceive what might have not been noted before through new insights on political events from below.

Subaltern Studies

Pertaining to this essay's main argument, one shall question: what in IR is invested in reaching the voices of those who are subordinated in the elitist accounts? Inspired by the Marxist historical practice of the "histories from below" (Altern, 2012: 59), Subaltern Studies emerged in IR to recover the occluded histories of those who are subordinated (Chalcraft, 2008: 376). It has also been influenced by the three exemplars of critical approaches to subordination within the discipline: feminism's repositioning of gender, post-structuralism's method of studying the mode of power, and post-colonialism's anti-Eurocentric currents (Chalcraft, 2008: 376). The term "subaltern", adopted from Gramsci, refers to a very wide range of groups of who are politically, socially, ideologically, or economically subordinated and are at inferior rank expressed in terms of class, gender, age, etc. (Spivak, 1988a: 35). According to Guha and Spivak (1988: vi), the term "subaltern" is implied to be the opposite of the dominant and "elite" groups that are in power.

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As the conventional accounts give its attention to the dominant groups by its long-standing tradition of elitism, Guha (1997: xiv) emphasized that what is eliminated in these accounts is the subordinated people's politics. Therefore, Subaltern Studies focuses on unmasking the insights that are outside these accounts (Webber, 1997: 11). Altern (2012: 61) added that it aims to recover the subaltern's obliterated agency and consciousness. Hence, it informs a discussion that counters the elitist bias that has dominated most of conventional IR's academic work. As it continues the investigation into ways in which the subaltern's voice is silenced, little attention has been given to the analysis of music (Romanow, 2005: 2). Moreover, Spivak (1988b: 307) argued that the subaltern can't speak, and its consciousness is inaccessible as its voice gets destroyed and appropriated when others write about it and enforce their values upon it.

Acknowledging the problems of recovering the subaltern's voice from elitist sources and the appropriation of its voice when others write about it, I take into consideration what the aesthetic turn encourages, and I suggest the analysis of music as an alternative solution. I claim that the analysis of music widens the scope of Subaltern Studies by firstly revealing the voices of the subaltern, and secondly, through understanding the subaltern, by forging new insights on political events from below. Webber (1997: 12) affirmed that if it breaks down from "disciplinary boundaries", it could access new tools to reach the subaltern voices that are not previously attended to. Shimizu (2013: 62) highlighted that music allows the subaltern to demonstrate an ability of analyzing circumstances. Hence, it can reveal its understandings.

Finally, Subaltern Studies emerged in India but also inspired projects such as ones in the Middle East (Chalcraft, 2008: 376). However, Webber (1997: 11) underlined that Middle East scholars attended little attention to Subaltern Studies. This is due to how subaltern groups' perspectives are absent or underrepresented in elitist Middle Eastern archival accounts (Cronin, 2008: 5). As studies of protests proved to be useful, they allow the subaltern's ideas that might remain hidden otherwise to appear (Cronin, 2008: 2). Hence, I examine the contribution of Subaltern Studies to the Middle East to scrutinize and demonstrate my main argument in the case of the Egyptian 25th of January Revolution.

The Egyptian 25 January 2011 Revolution

Building up on the previous sections, I illustrate my main argument through scrutinizing the case of Egypt's 25th of January Revolution. I conduct primary and secondary analysis by methodologically comparing the lyrics of the contemporary national anthem, as an elitist account, and protest songs, as the voices of the subaltern, respectively. The two protest songs that will be analyzed are: "Izzay?" ("How?"), which was the first official song to be nationally and internationally associated with the revolution (Mostafa, 2012: 653), and "Sout el Huriyya" ("Voice of freedom"), which was immensely used in the protests (Metwaly, 2011). As an Egyptian native Arabic speaker, I translated these songs and the national anthem and acknowledge here my positionality.

On the 25th of January 2011, Egyptians protested for 18 days to end authoritarianism, political corruption, and injustices (Bates, 2012). The protesters had three demands: bread, freedom, and social justice (Valassopoulos and Mostafa, 2014: 639). Despite how President Mubarak's regime was thought to be foolproof, protesters were able to overthrow this authoritative regime (El-Ghobashy, 2011: 3). I underline here, to be revisited later, that this is the existing conventional insight on the revolution. Woltering (2013: 290) noted that the subordinated Egyptians, who were never considered as political actors, expressed their demands by protesting. Apprehending to the aforementioned definitions of the "subaltern" and "elite" in the previous section, I claim that the protesters were the subaltern, while President Mubarak and his regime were the ruling elite. Spivak (1988a: 41) noted that despite how the subaltern is a heterogeneous subject its commonality is resistance to elite domination. Thus, the subaltern, in this case, encompassed different groups such as women, workers, youth, unemployed people, middle class, Copts, etc. whom were all voicing out their collective struggle (Kandil, 2012; Delgado, 2015; Nkroti10, 2013).

Highlighting the role of protest music in the revolution, Mostafa (2012: 272) stated that the revolution's success was achieved not only through organization, but also by the internationally heard protest songs. Hence, it was perceived as a productive site for political engagement that aided in the revolution's success (Valassopoulos and Mostafa, 2014: 640). However, it is noteworthy to note that these accounts focused on how music expressed the revolutionary

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demands and attended very little attention to the subaltern's understandings and feelings channeled in them. Ghannam (2012: 32) affirmed that we have little knowledge on the thoughts and feelings of the protesting Egyptians. Therefore, to capture these unattended emotions and understandings, I analyze and compare the contemporary Egyptian national anthem and protest songs respectively.

The contemporary Egyptian national anthem was officially adopted in 1979 and has been the national anthem hitherto (Mustafa, 2015: 183). Mustafa (2015: 180) highlighted that national anthems reflect the ruling elite's ideology, and aim to get people to implement it. They also conceptualize how the people should perceive the country (Mustafa, 2015: 180). Anderson (1991: 132,145) argues that nations are conceived in language and are "imagined communities"; thus, national anthems echo this. Accordingly, the Egyptian national anthem reflects the ruling elite's perceptions and imaginations on the Egyptian community, and speaks in the name of the subaltern. As Guha (1997: xiv) noted what is left unnoted in any elitist account is the politics of the people and their representation.

Attending to analyze it, "Egypt, noble are your children. Loyal, and guardians of the reins"(Al-Qady, 1878), the country-people dualism is captured in these lyrics and is based on loyalty and love (Mustafa, 2015: 190). "My homeland, my homeland, my homeland, you have my love and my heart" (Al-Qady, 1878), crystallizes the centrality of Egypt where loyal citizens should do nothing but love it no matter what happens (Mustafa, 2015: 190). Jorgensen (1990: 25) highlighted that states announce themselves and their images in national anthems. Therefore, I hold that to further crystallize the centrality of this image "Egypt! mother of all lands, you are my hope and my ambition, and above all people"(Al-Qady, 1878), conveys how people are expected to perceive Egypt to be superior to them. McDonald (2013: 28) underlined that nationalistic music is an effective mean in fostering a national sentiment that serves a political agenda. Correspondingly, the anthemglorified patriotism in which the people should only serve to protect and love the country and only rebel against the enemy (Mustafa, 2015: 190). Loyalty is glorified that any immediate criticism to this narrative will be interpreted as unpatriotic (Bloom, 2011: 58). Which I note, further subsidized the subaltern's subordination and lack of representation of the people's politics.

Attending to analyze protest music contrarily, Spivak (2005: 477) noted that the non-recognition of the subaltern's understandings by the elite is a problem of infrastructure's inadequacy for the subaltern's voice to be heard. This was evident in the national anthem, as it spoke in the name of the subaltern obliterating its own understandings. Therefore, for the subaltern to be heard, it has to put its differences aside and establish an infrastructure that enables the recognition of its agency and consciousness (Spivak, 2005: 483). I hold that protest music was the way to channel that. The first song that will be analyzed is "Izzay?" ("How?"), and the second is "Sout El-Huriyya" ("Voice of Freedom").

In the first song, "How can you accept for me, when I deeply love your name, I can't find a reason to love you, and my sincerity doesn't even count"(Nagy, 2011), the protesters here questioned how could they continue to love Egypt when she still hindered them from feeling safe and free (Blair, 2011). Unlike what the national anthem conveys, I highlight here that the subaltern, speaking for itself, voiced out how it didn't have the same love relationship with Egypt. Music as Shimizu (2013: 74) puts it "is a world where the subaltern can represent the deepest feelings"; hence, I hold that the subaltern articulated its dissent and blame to what Egypt is doing to it. "How can you leave me this weak, why aren't you standing by my side?" (Nagy, 2011), enunciated its anger regarding Egypt's assistance of its weakness and subordination. Moreover, "I swear by your name, to keep changing you till you accept me the way I am"(Nagy, 2011), Blair (2011) underlined that it communicated its unhappiness about the situation Egypt was in, and insisted on changing it to the way it imagines it to be. Unlike the national anthem, Valassopoulos and Mostafa (2014: 646) noted that protest songs expressed the protestors' capacity to resist, break from dominant ideologies, and articulate its ability in creating a new alternative.

In the second song, "I went out and said that I was not coming back, and wrote with my own blood in each street, our weapon was our dreams, in each street of my country, the voice of freedom is calling" (Eid, 2011), the lyrics captured the protestors' sense of hope and the belief that they finally have a role and can propagate a change (Valassopoulos and Mostafa, 2014: 643). Therefore, unlike the national anthem, Rosenthal (2001: 18) noted that music vocalizes ideas about defining the world and oneself. McDonald (2013: 31) stated that music demarcates the boundaries of a discursive field in which the idea of the self was engaged against the dominant order. Accordingly, I highlight that

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these lyrics: "The most important thing is to get our rights, And to write our own story with our blood" (Eid, 2011), demonstrate how it finally sees itself getting the chance of writing its story through the revolution in the way that it imagines.

Successively, these songs did not only provide a counter ideology to the elitist national anthem, but as McDonald (2013: 31) highlighted music guides the participants through a network of shared meanings that fostered their own agency and consciousness. I hold that the analysis of music by Subaltern Studies in this case unmasks the subaltern's rejection and pain of invisibility, its contradiction to the elitist narrative, and the realization of its agency in changing its country. As Cronin (2008: 4) asserted, popular protest discourse is an attempt by the powerless to negotiate the terms of change using the tools available to them. Thus, music serves as rebellion and resistance to being silenced (Fischlin, 2003: 10). In both songs, I reckon that the subaltern reimagined loyalty and patriotism where unlike what the national anthem prescribed, it could criticize the elitist narrative, blame its own country, and aim for a change, and still be patriotic and loyal. Shalaby (2015: 176) highlighted that protest songs until now provide a surge of patriotism for Egyptians who protested and others who could not join but believed in the revolution. The inquiry of music uncovered the protestors' voice of despair, anger, and reorientation from obedience (LeVine, 2012: 795). Moreover, music exposed what was unable to be voiced out before, and made who sing hear itself doing so (Rosenthal, 2001: 13). Therefore, I demonstrated that examining music broadens Subaltern Studies scope firstly by revealing the subaltern's voice through the analysis of a nonconventional source in which the subaltern spoke for itself.

Accordingly, I hold that revealing the subaltern's voice, as antecedently illustrated, also widens Subaltern Studies scope by generating a new insight, that supplement existing ones, on political events such as the Egyptian revolution from below. For instance, the subaltern in this case revolted because it demanded justice, equality, freedom, and ending authoritarianism as existing accounts provide; but it also did because it reimagined Egypt and its relationship with it differently than what the elites imagined. According to Ludden (2002: 13), a liberated imagined community can only come to its own in the subaltern's language, which historians can endeavor to recuperate. Here music was a medium that expressed the view on Egypt from below where Egypt was configured, critiqued, and reimagined (Mostafa, 2012: 263). Protest music managed to register understandings that could have been lost or unnoticed (LeVine, 2012: 795). As the subaltern doesn't want to be only heard but also understood (Shimizu, 2013: 66), understanding the subaltern subsidizes understanding a new insight on political events such as the Egyptian Revolution from below. Finally, maybe the subaltern cannot speak as others write about it, but the subaltern can sing here as it speaks for itself.

Limitations

Even though I illustrated that the inquiry of music reveals the voice of the subaltern, I acknowledge that there are three main limitations that I deem necessary to be considered in any further research. Firstly, I cannot generalize and claim access to the entire subaltern's voice through music. Spivak (2005: 479) noted that the dominant group that exercises the subaltern function of hegemony speaks in the name of its entirety. Therefore, acknowledging the hierarchy amongst the subaltern, we must recognize that even the subaltern that can sing is not the entire subaltern. I underline that for instance in the case of the Revolution it was the dominant group amongst the subaltern who had the capability of going to the Square. Kandil (2012: 147) affirmed that the subordinated middle class was at the forefront of the demonstrations when many peasants for instance hesitated.

Secondly, I acknowledge that non-native language speakers might still appropriate the subaltern's voice as the songs are subject to translation. Romanow (2005: 10) noted that the lyrics must be heard in the language it is sung in, thus the subaltern's voice might be silenced again through the transplantation. There is an inability of westerners to speak about and understand the other without enforcing their values upon it (Chattopadhyay and Sarkar, 2005: 360). Such as in this case, if the protest songs are translated by non-native Arabic speakers.

Thirdly, I profess the chance of music's inability of giving the subaltern a voice in other cases. As Shimizu (2013: 73) highlighted rather than assuming a universality of a practice, we should take a practice to reveal a real condition in this world instead. Therefore, I am not claiming that music has the power to give a voice to all subaltern subjects, but

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we could analyze how music gave some of the Egyptian subaltern a chance to speak for itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argued in this essay that the analysis of music widens Subaltern Studies' scope in two ways: firstly, by recovering the unattended voice to the subaltern through the inquiry of a non-conventional source, and secondly by understanding new insights on political events from below. Building up my argument, I divided the essay into 5 sections. In the first, I examined Conventional IR's narrow boundaries that gave dominance to elitist sources of analysis such as government speeches that obliterated the marginalized voices. In the second, I introduced the aesthetic turn, which encourages using nonconventional sources such as music to capture what has been obliterated. In the third, I introduced Subaltern Studies in IR as it's invested in recovering the voices of who are subordinated. Recognizing the difficulties of recovering the subaltern's voice from conventional elitist sources and the erasure of its voice when others write about it, I took into consideration what the aesthetic turn advocates and suggested the analysis of music as an alternative source. In the fourth, I scrutinized my argument in the case of the Egyptian Revolution by methodologically comparing the contemporary Egyptian national anthem with two protest songs "Izzay" ("How?") and "Sout El-Huriyya" ("Voice of Freedom"). I illustrated how the analysis of music broadened the scope of Subaltern studies by revealing the Egyptian subaltern's voice and by understanding a new insight on the revolution from below. In the fifth, I acknowledged that there are 3 limitations to my argument which were: the inability of asserting access to the entire subaltern's voice, the prospect of losing the subaltern's voice through translation, and the chance of music's incapability of revealing the subaltern's voice in other cases. Finally, for further research it would be thought provoking if we use other non-conventional sources with Subaltern Studies to examine in what other ways they can be useful.

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